

# ARTICLES

## RATIONALISM, EMPIRICISM AND CHRISTIANISM AS PHILOSOPHICAL SYSTEMS FOR ARRIVING AT TRUTH

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Two philosophical systems — rationalism and empiricism — established as methods for arriving at truth have vied for favor during the past 2500 years. Sense perception is the ultimate authority in empiricism. Reasoning is mainly inductive and knowledge is conceived of as probable but not certain.<sup>1</sup> Rationalism, on the other hand, maintains that there is a special domain of knowledge acquired by means of a capacity called reason and this knowledge is inaccessible through sense perceptions. Reality transcends observable phenomena and empirically obtained knowledge is only a poor substitute for the reality obtainable by mental vision alone. In rationalism mathematics is considered the ideal form of knowledge and reason is the ultimate authority. Reasoning is deductive and knowledge is conceived of as certain.<sup>2</sup>

According to the internationally known science philosopher Hans Reichenbach, rationalism is the philosophy of a man dissatisfied with sense experience and who wishes something beyond. It is the emotional bias toward a world of imagination on which religion has thrived.<sup>3</sup> Whether or not his criticism of rationalism as a psychological crutch of philosophers disgruntled with life is valid, his reluctance in placing ultimate authority in human reason is warranted. Never are the conclusions of rationalism superior to the axioms and postulates on which they are based.<sup>4</sup> Fallacious conclusions in rationalism may result from untrue premises, imperfections in language (its ambiguousness),<sup>5</sup> fallible human reasoning ability, and defective human attitudes (prejudices, unfairness etc.). Therefore Ellen G. White cautions against speculative philosophies and exaltation of human reasoning above its true value.<sup>6</sup> Rationalism, she states, idolizes reason and sets aside the Bible while exalting human wisdom as the source of religious truth.<sup>7</sup>

Reason is also recognized as an indispensable tool in empiricism. Reichenbach notes that “Observation informs us about the past and the

present; reason foretells the future.”<sup>8</sup> It has a predictive function. Empiricism retains the methods of rationalism but verifies its conclusions (predictions) by observation. Basic then to the empiricist philosophy are the two assumptions: 1) sense perceptions are a reliable guide to reality and 2) reality is uniform and consistent. If these assumptions are considered self-evident, empiricism — using a combination of sense perception and reason — represents a more efficient method of arriving at truth. The final authority or test of truth resides in the sense perceptions. The reason — with its predictive functions — serves in a subordinate role. That empiricism is probably the superior of the two philosophical systems in at least a pragmatic or utilitarian sense is indicated by the significant advances in communication, transportation, synthetic intelligence, medical science and agriculture that it has nurtured.

### **EMPIRICISM: ITS LIMITATIONS AND FAILURES**

The weaknesses of empiricism are in three directions: 1) its apparent failure to solve moral and ethical questions, 2) the probabilistic nature of knowledge obtained by the empirical approach and 3) from relying on rationalism in dealing with past and future events and in all interpretation.

The success of empiricism has been ambiguous. While this success in improving the physical and material condition of man has been significant, neither directly (through psychology and the social sciences) or indirectly (as a byproduct of its success in the material world) has it made significant advances in improving man’s spiritual (non-material and non-physical) condition (measured in terms of happiness, peace of mind, security, human behavior and interpersonal relations). This may be regarded either as only a temporary failure (advances forthcoming) or as a basic inability of empirical philosophy to tackle this type of problem.

Empiricism contains no absolute statements on the nature of good or bad; therefore empirical conclusions in themselves can only be amoral, always answering questions of “what is?” rather than “what ought to be?”<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless (perhaps unfortunately) scientists commonly use the empirically derived knowledge and the practice (by scientists) of the empirical method as directives for establishing general moral and ethical values.<sup>10,11,12</sup> These efforts always must start with the assumption that the principles of tolerance, fairness, justice and freedom — as practiced by the scientific community — are desirable and good. From this basis they then show that these principles will lead to the improvement of man’s spiritual condition. The failure then is seen not as the failure of empiricism

or of its practice but rather the failure of the governments, the statesmen, and the non-scientific community in general to accept the guiding principles of the scientific community as moral directives in everyday life.<sup>13</sup>

The probabilistic nature of empiricism derives from the two assumptions on which it is based. The uniformity of nature has been regarded as both the basis of the validity of induction (as a method for arriving at truth) and as a conclusion from applying the inductive method. Ordinarily the uniformity of nature is considered self-evident and is then made the axiom on which the validity of inductive reasoning is established.<sup>14</sup> In any case the inductive reasoning of empiricism never leads to certainty. Conclusions can only become more probable.<sup>15</sup>

The uncertainty of empirical knowledge also results from the fallibility of sense perception. That this sense perception is not always a reliable guide to reality is demonstrated easily by the occurrence of optical illusions. Perhaps though, a more serious problem involves the misinterpretation of correctly perceived objects or events. The obvious initial interpretation of sense perceptions are often incorrect. Thus the earth does appear flat, matter does appear continuous and the sun does appear to circle the earth. (In fact, regarding the heliocentric system Galileo states: “I cannot express strongly enough my unbounded admiration for the greatness of mind of these men who conceived and held it to be true..., in violent opposition to the evidence of their senses.”<sup>16</sup>) It is at this stage that the advantage of empiricism is most easily observed, for reinterpretation and verification of sense perception always awaits the next observation — possibly in a form not yet thought of and on instrumentation not yet available. This advantage, though, is ambiguous. Truth is always being approached but never reached. Knowledge is uncertain and theories are unstable. Further observation and improved instrumentation inevitably lead to scientific revolution.<sup>17</sup>

Both in the interpretation of sense perceptions and in the extrapolation of present sense observations to historical or future events (a form of interpretation), empiricism relies on reason and the methods of rationalism. In the realm of interpretation, then, empiricism is liable to the same sources of error that occur in rationalism. Interpretation — though a valid scientific pursuit — must be done with appropriate caution and an awareness of its fallibility.

## **EMPIRICISM: THE SECULARIZATION OF CHRISTIANITY**

The schoolmen of the Middle Ages approached truth via the rationalistic philosophy. This fact, though, hardly warrants Reichenbach's conclusion that rationalism is the philosophy of religion, because Luther, as a religious leader of that time, attacked the rationalistic philosophy of schoolmen.<sup>7</sup> Both philosophical systems are better considered as either areligious — neither supporting nor denying the validity of Christianity — or more likely as religions in themselves — separate from Christianity. Adulteration of Christianity with the false tenets of either of these “religions” might give Christianity the appearance of depending on or based in one of the respective philosophical systems. It may have been rationalism during the Middle Ages but would probably be empiricism today. Pure Christianity, however, belongs to neither philosophical system. It contains elements of both but goes beyond either.

The religious nature and structure of rationalism and empiricism are well-defined. They have their gods (reason and the sense perception of nature) and their laws (laws of logic and laws of nature). The parallels between the nature and structure of empiricism and Christianity are fully developed by the noted contemporary scientific philosopher Karl Popper<sup>23</sup> and C. F. Weizsacker.<sup>18</sup> Weizsacker shows that the religion of scientism (or empiricism, to use our terminology) is a product of the secularization of Christianity. Thus the structure retains the principles of justice, tolerance, honesty, etc. as a basis for the moral action of the scientific community. The concepts of freedom and authority in empiricism<sup>19</sup> are closely allied to but are an adulteration of their Christian counterparts. The function of problems (as unfulfilled expectations) and experience (or experiment) in Christianity find their parallel in empiricism,<sup>23</sup> and the nature of scientific discovery can be considered analogous to the nature of conversion — the discovery of God. The Christian structure of empiricism has thus remained more or less intact, but the purpose has shifted from that of seeking spiritual success to the seeking of material success.

Empiricism is a religion in its own right but has borrowed heavily from Christianity. The validity of its existence depends on whether it has made any additional contributions of its own or whether on the contrary it has merely usurped Christian authority and apostatized.

## **CHRISTIANISM**

Christianism refers to the religious system, tenets and practices of Christians. The basis and uniqueness of Christianity is reconciliation with

God — the reestablishment of a relationship with God. Here the term christianism is specifically used in referring to a third philosophical system. Although this system places value in both reason and sense perception, it maintains that there exists knowledge that is inaccessible to either human reason or sense perception. Truth is arrived at by utilizing special revelation as well as reason and sense perception. Revelation is considered the ideal form of knowledge and the ultimate authority is God.

Revelation is being told what truth is by someone that has special information. Since it is truth direct from the source of all truth, in a sense, it should be the most efficient method of arriving at truth. Nonetheless in christianism as in the previous philosophical systems there are apparent problems. As in empiricism they come from three sources: 1) apparent failure to improve the spiritual condition of man, 2) assumptions on which christianism is based and 3) the nature of truth as conceived by christianism.

Revealed truth is not of such a nature that it can be readily incorporated. Thus it cannot be obtained by the mere memorization of facts or the committing of certain Biblical passages to memory (although this may be necessary). In christianism truth is conceived of as important only as it becomes impressed on the mind and becomes an integral part of the individual and thereby facilitating change. It requires not only an act of revelation on God's part but a creative act or acts on the part of the receiver.

The assumptions of christianism are: 1) that God exists and 2) that His revelations are trustworthy. To observe their parallel structure the two assumptions of empiricism can be stated here as: 1) uniformity in nature exists and 2) the revelation of nature through sense perception is trustworthy. As faith in inductive reasoning leads to verification of the latter set of assumptions, so faith in the revelation of God leads to the verification of the assumptions of christianism. The conclusions in both cases are based on circular reasoning, and they are not considered in either case as logically foolproof. The attempt here is only to show the parallelism (at this one level) of empiricism and christianism. Progress in either system requires an initial act of faith.

Along with empiricism, christianism is confronted with an apparent failure (actually anticipated by christianism) in its attempts to improve the spiritual condition of men. Christianity has claimed too that it had special power and knowledge in this area. As in empiricism, though, this failure is seen not as a failure of christianism but rather the failure of the world community to accept its principles as directives in everyday life. However,

for two reasons, the prognosis for the ultimate success of christianism in areas of moral values and ethics is infinitely more encouraging than it is for empiricism. Christianity provides people with a special power (unavailable in empiricism) for bringing about improvements in their spiritual condition. It also provides an absolute standard of morality. By this provision good and evil in christianism becomes analogous to the true and false of empiricism, thus making the rightness of an action amenable to the experimental method. It is ironic that moral action not amenable to the experimental method in the philosophical system of empiricism (which relies so heavily on the experimental method) becomes experimentally verifiable in christianism (where the ultimate authority is revelation).

While experiment (or experience) does not hold the dominant role in christianism, it does serve important subsidiary functions. Ellen G. White states that the spread of Christianity (in recent times) became most rapid when “Men became dissatisfied with the results of rationalism and realized the necessity of divine revelation and experimental religion.”<sup>21</sup> It is each individual’s personal responsibility to test for himself the trustworthiness of special revelation through experimental knowledge. Further, the correct understanding of revelation can only be approached through the experimental application of the revealed principles to real-life situations. These two applications of the experimental method lead to growth in faith and action respectively.

In christianism the source of knowledge is a triumvirate of reason, sense perception and special revelation. Final authority resides with infallible revelation. Sanctified reason and sense perception are the tools for correctly applying revealed principles.

## **SUMMARY**

Christianism has the potential for success in improving the spiritual condition of man, and, in addition, it provides a matrix within which to develop the concepts of past, present and future material and physical phenomena. Empirical science finds its proper position only within the context of christianism. Here it functions in the capacity of general revelation. The scientific method (in the restricted sense as used by most scientists) is the application of the general philosophy of christianism to the study of natural phenomena. Viewed in this way it becomes meaningless to speak of applying the scientific method to Christianity, since the scientific method is part of christianism, and it has always been inherent (if not always applied because of emphasis on spiritual values) in the philosophy of christianism.

The use of the scientific method in the context of the philosophical system of christianism has advantages over its use in empiricism. The unity of truth makes the position of the scientific method within a system which encompasses all truth the more reasonable and reliable alternative. Further, revelation provides in christianism a source of information (available for use in the scientific method) unavailable in empiricism. In this context revelation is viewed as a precious source of knowledge to be used to its fullest extent in the pursuit of truth and not as a restriction to freedom. Revelation is an authority (similar but not identical to the general authority of Polanyi)<sup>22</sup> providing guidelines for the most fruitful activity.

### ENDNOTES

1. Reichenbach H. 1968. The rise of scientific philosophy. Los Angeles: University of California Press, p 75, 76.
2. Ibid., p 74, 76, 252, 253.
3. Ibid., p 253, 254.
4. Salmon WC. 1963. Logic. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., p 4, 5.
5. Ibid, p 102-104.
6. White EG. 1942. The ministry of healing. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, p 427.
7. White EG. 1950. The great controversy between Christ and Satan. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, p 193.
8. Reichenbach, p 80.
9. Ibid., p 276-302.
10. Simpson GG. 1967. The meaning of evolution. New Haven: Yale University Press, p 29.
11. Bronowski J. 1959. Science and human values. NY: Harper and Row. 94 p.
12. Polanyi M. 1969. Science, faith, and society. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 96 p.
13. Bronowski, p 65-94.
14. Arber A. 1954. The mind and the eye. London: Cambridge University Press, p 83, 84.
15. Salmon, p 53-55.
16. Quoted by: Popper KR. 1963. Science: problems, aims, responsibilities. Federation Proceedings 22:961-972.
17. Kuhn TS. 1970. The structure of scientific revolutions. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 210 p.
18. Weizsacker CF von. 1964. The relevance of science. NY: Harper and Row. 192 p.

19. Polanyi, p 59.
20. Ibid., p 34, 35.
21. White, The great controversy, p 288.
22. Polanyi, p 57.
23. Popper, p 961-972.