Evolution, Knowledge and Revelation

Being the Hulsean Lectures delivered before the University of Cambridge, 1923–24

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PREFACE

Since writing these lectures I have read Giovanni Gentile’s work on *The Theory of Mind as Pure Act*. Had I done so earlier they might never have been written.

To arrive at the essentials of a metaphysic after many years of rather blundering search, and then, a month after laying down the pen, to find that another, far better equipped and with far greater mastery, has presented already a closely parallel system worked out in detail, is at once an encouragement and a disappointment.

Yet I do not regret what I have written, nor intend to suppress it. Though the conclusions are often similar or identical, the thought is totally different, and totally uninfluenced by Gentile. It is perhaps permissible to dwell a little on this, for the plain reason that to arrive at the same result by different roads is to strengthen the conclusion, even though the method of one approach depends on high technical excellence, of the other on a rough approximation. Professor Gentile’s work needs no bush; but I cannot hope the same of my own: therefore a brief statement of it may be pardoned.

A main conclusion of the present work is that you cannot find Reality in Being, neither can you find it in Becoming. The only thing that *is* is Personality, yet personality never simply *is*, but always is *becoming*. And pure Becoming is as unreal as pure Being. Being is substantiated in Becoming:
Becoming is substantiated in Being. Reality is thus the process of a Being which without process would not be. You cannot conceive of Personality, either of God or man, as transcendent or as immanent: the two are inseparable correlatives, which together make up Reality. Thus an essential factor of Reality is relation, without which neither Being nor Becoming could exist.

So stated, *mutatis mutandis* this is almost exactly the theory of Gentile, as I understand it. In his own words “An idealistic conception aims at conceiving the absolute, the whole, as an idea, and is therefore intrinsically absolute idealism. But absolute it cannot be unless the idea coincides with the act of knowing it, because...were the idea not the act itself through which it is known, it would leave something outside itself, and the idealism would then no longer be absolute” (*op. cit.* trs. Wildon Carr, p. 254). But, to my shame, I had read no word of Gentile; knew no more than the existence of his work; until I had completed these lectures a month ago.

The germ of my own theory will be found in *Evolution and the Need of Atonement* (1912), in the doctrine there stated of the freedom of Personality and its identity in God and man, making interpenetration possible. The problems of Immanence and Transcendence, and of the nature of Personality, are considerably developed in *Evolution and Spiritual Life* and *Evolution and the Doctrine of the Trinity* (1915, 1918), stress being there laid upon the experience of inter-
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Penetration as determining the Reality of Personal Being. In *Beauty and the Beast* (1920), a book mainly concerned with Aesthetic, the connection of relation as essential to Reality is set forth, and a distinction drawn between the one-sided, or purely subject-object relation, and the reciprocal or subject-subject relation. In the latter the otherness or objectiveness of the second subject is eliminated in interpenetration, though the self-identity is retained. Finally in the present lectures Reality, substantiated in reciprocal relationship, is examined, for the purpose of constructing a Theory of Knowledge; which theory suggests that Knowledge is essentially the process of experiencing by an ego which cannot be isolated from its experience: we cannot abstract, eliminating the ego, and the unique individuality of its every experience, and yet arrive at Reality.

*The Theory of Knowledge as Pure Act* was published in 1916, and only translated in 1922, so that the earlier parts of my work, which determined the later, were necessarily independent of it; and even the latest, these lectures, were so in fact. This is said with no wish to claim priority or merit: to do so would be both untrue and absurd. But to emphasise the independence seems to me justified, since it gives force to the conclusions, if not to the reasoning.

Professor Gentile’s method is severely technical and exact, my own lacks these qualities; 

1 Jotted down as notes in 1920–21, written in 1922, and re-written in the present form in August 1923.
while he starts from pure Mind, I start from Mind’s undeveloped beginnings in the creature; while he writes as a student of Philosophy, I write as a student of Evolution; he appeals for hearing to the expert in philosophy, I to some who, with no technical training, are interested in the philosophy of Christianity and in the concept of Progress. From this difference of standpoint results a frequent variance in detail, even though the conclusions may bear a close family resemblance, in spite of not unimportant differences. It seemed best, however, to leave my argument as it stood, recognising that in places it may prove unable to bear the stricter scrutiny of so critical a mind as that of Professor Gentile; yet at the same time to add an Appendix in which some of the arguments could be examined in the light of his work.

I cannot hope that this last is adequately done. *The Theory of Mind as Pure Act* is not easily grasped in detail, and my acquaintance with it is of so short standing that I dare not expect to escape the risk of misrepresentations, and even positive blunders. If there are such, I can only crave the writer’s pardon.

I wish gratefully to acknowledge my indebtedness to my wife for preparing the Synopsis, and for other help.

S. A. McD.

WINTON.

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SYNOPSIS

I

LIVING AND THINKING

These lectures aim at establishing a Theory of Knowledge based on the facts of Evolution and in sympathy with the spiritual interpretation of Nature by the best metaphysical systems.

Inquiry into the Biblical conception of the meaning of Knowledge

(a) Isaiah, Hosea and Psalmist all identify knowledge with “the fear of the Lord” or with “righteousness”.

(b) Later writers, e.g. the author of Job, speak with a less certain voice.

(c) But, when Jewish thought had recovered from the shock of the impact of Greek ideas, the old Jewish identification of knowledge with “the fear of the Lord” emerged triumphant.

(d) The conception of the Immanence of God is latent in the Book of Wisdom, and also the corollary that all knowledge is of value.

(e) Christ preached the doctrine that the knowledge of God is an immediate knowledge of the spirit, not an intellectual knowledge of the mind.

And that knowledge is the living of a life.

Essentially a life lived in relation with other lives, with God and with men.

Christ also showed the inadequacy of the old Jewish belief in a merely Transcendent God, and emphasised the fact of His Immanence.

(f) St Paul laid stress on the difference between “wisdom which is foolishness” by which he meant abstract intellectual knowledge, and “wisdom unto salvation,” direct immediate knowledge of God and His Will, gained by living a life in fellowship with Him.
The teaching of the Bible leads to the truths that ultimate Reality is God and man in relation, and that Knowledge is the living of a life, and can be summed up in the Revelation “God is Love”.

Inquiry into the conception of the meaning of knowledge based on study of the facts of Evolution

Evolution signifies the triumph of the living organism over its determined environment and the emergence of an increasing freedom in successful organisms.

In short, progress from the lower to the higher.

Till self-conscious man is evolved, able to control his individual destiny in considerable measure.

And to re-act in a greater degree to the Whole Environment than any other creature as his activities become more spiritual.

Till at last he becomes conscious of Beauty, which urges him to create.

But different men give a very different account of Reality, when asked to explain what they mean when they say “I know”.

There are two distinct meanings of to know:

1. Knowing about things, a one-sided activity; and
2. The mutual knowledge and understanding obtaining between two people who know each other.

And similarly two distinct meanings in which to love is used:

1. To describe a one-sided activity, akin to the apprehension of beauty, and
2. To describe mutual love.

The above distinctions are of great importance to our theory, as is also the fact that man’s judgments on the nature of Revelation are deductions from experience like his judgments on material phenomena.

Christian doctrine includes many of the great classic antinomies of philosophy, e.g. Christians believe in God as Transcendent and yet Immanent, as Being and yet Becoming.
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It is the aim of these lectures to suggest a line of thought that may point towards the solution of some of the famous antinomies: for we shall find that Freedom expresses itself by Self-limitation, that Unity is saved from nothingness by Multiplicity, that Transcendence establishes itself perpetually in Immanence, and that Good is only good where Evil is possible.

KNOWING AND LOVING

To formulate a successful theory of knowledge it is necessary clearly to define the equivocal expressions “to know” and “to love.”

All the different uses have factors in common, they postulate a sentient being as subject, and they make a judgment on the experience of that being.

In saying “I know” nothing definite is postulated about the thing known except that it has been in some way or other experienced by a subject.

We can only judge of an animal’s knowledge by precarious analogy.

The scientific method seems to lead to a dilemma: either we must describe all reactions to environment on the part of living creatures as “response to stimulus,” from the reactions of the humblest forms of life, to the complex activities of a man’s thought, or we must say that there is “knowledge” all the way down.

The first position is untenable if the theory of evolution be accepted, for it neglects the element of contingency, freedom or unrest in the organism, which underlies the process.

The second position poses us with the difficulty of who knows in the lower stages, or what pronoun can be applied to the lower organism.

Considerations arising from the study of knowledge of things

A memory is involved.

An image is always involved, not merely a perception.

A logical or theoretical process is involved including a judgment on the relations of the object known.
Nothing can be known except in its relations with the subject and with other things.

Knowledge about things, non-reciprocal knowledge, is always directed to ends of practical utility.

The thing-in-itself does not exist for us apart from its relations, though we may speculate on its being as an isolated Real.

When we say we know a thing it is the relations of the thing that we know, not itself as abstract nominative of the verb “to be”.

Four facts emerge as we consider this type of knowledge:

1. This knowledge is of inestimable value in practical life.
2. Knowledge acquired by the various logical processes of concept-formation, judgment and inference, acting upon a simple sensation or perception is knowledge of or about a thing, not direct contact with the thing itself.
3. Logical reasoning, dealing with generalised ideas, or concepts, must necessarily remove us from Reality as it eliminates the two essentials—the individual knower and the individual object known.
4. Rational knowledge is directed towards acquaintance with environment, and is cast in a form that makes it easy for one individual to share his discoveries with others by the elimination of particulars in the formation of concepts and pseudo-concepts such as those of Science.

Thus Evolution advances by adaptive reaction to the environment, which with the dawn of consciousness eventually becomes knowledge of the environment.

Considerations arising from the study of knowledge of another person: mutual or reciprocal knowledge.

Reciprocal knowledge is very different in quality from one-sided knowledge of things.

Knowledge of a man and love of him are closely related and ultimately become interchangeable terms.

Mutual knowledge between two friends depends on the revelation of each to the other, a creative act.

Perfect love implies complete interpenetration between two persons.

Knowledge is the road to love.
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### III

#### THE KNOWN AND THE LOVED

We have shown how unsatisfactory an instrument is Logic for the attempt to approach Reality, from its very nature and purpose, since the generalisations of Logic remove us from the individual and concrete; and we must now try to show that there is a second type of knowledge, differing fundamentally from intellectual knowledge, which yet may condition man’s approach to Reality.

The second type of knowledge is knowledge of persons and is, ultimately, Love.

The problem of Appearance and Reality constantly confronts us as we study the two kinds of knowledge, and the possibility suggests itself that knowledge of things may lead us to Appearance, knowledge of persons to Reality.

But no relegation of matter to mere Appearance satisfies the biologist.

We will assume that Reality is inseparable from centres of experience and thus from the living of a life, and finally from Love.

Love is active interpenetration of two personalities without loss of self-identity.

If two people know each other, and also love each other, they can compare their knowledge on the intellectual plane and each receive confirmation of his experience, which process affords a kind of critique.
This second type of knowledge is well described as "the expression of an intuition of mutual relation." It is throughout immediate, wherein it differs completely from intellectual knowledge.

The first starting-point of all knowledge, the intuition, is immediate, but in order to think about the intuition we at once abstract and universalise it and so lose touch with Reality.

There are two senses also in which love is used:

(a) Mutual love between two persons, and (b) One-sided love as when a man says he loves the sea or colour or a person who does not return his love.

This second (b) is closely allied to Beauty.

The vision of Beauty proclaims man's refusal to be content with Appearance.

A man's awareness of Beauty always issues in a creative act.

In (a) mutual love we experience and know Reality in a timeless immediacy full of peace and satisfaction.

In (b) we strive to approach Reality and are baffled.

One-sided love differs from Beauty only in the nature of its object.

The truth that to know a person becomes eventually coincident with to love him emerges as we summarise our discussion.

Both are ultimately the living of a life, an actual experience which, in being experienced, is, we claim, Reality itself.

In this essay we make the assumptions (the arguments for which are set forth elsewhere) that the Real is the manifestation of Personal Being and that the Personality of God and the Personality of man differ in degree only.

Reality, then, implies the living of a related existence.

God is, because He empties His being into becoming, perpetually denying mere self-existence.

Arguments about God founded on logical concepts must remove us from Reality: God is not a sum of concepts but a living Person Who experiences and can be experienced.

God perpetually creates other beings to share His Perfect Experience.
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But the only way in which creatures could learn truly to love their Creator, is for them to be set in a determined environment in which to achieve their own freedom, and to learn to love without compulsion.

The problem of the nature of this environment presents itself. Is it Appearance or Reality?

It is the expression of the self-limitation of God.

Appearance is the creation of the human intellect, as it makes concepts and reasons about them and thus abstracts from Reality, which is an experienced relation.

Evolution is the history of this developing experience.

The human intellect with its generalisations serves a most useful biological purpose in helping men to master their environment and to grow.

Also it helps men to compare their experiences and so affords a critique.

Immediate knowledge teaches us that things are only Real in process of being experienced.

For Absolute Reality you need the direct relation of personal centres of experience in the actual process of experiencing that reciprocal relation.

REVELATION AND REALITY

The theory of knowledge developed in these lectures is based on the fact of evolution in the animal kingdom and in man.

In the course of evolution man developed an instrument, logic, designed to help him in his struggle to master his environment.

But the intellect, through logic, created an illusion, Appearance.

Reality is always an experience, a life, and reaches its fullest height in the experience of love.

But even love becomes an Appearance if reasoned about, since it is only Real while being experienced.

Yet the arguments of reason, and the comparisons of different individual experiences, do help to form a critique.
Further, the old Sophist difficulty does not trouble us, because the Reality is a reciprocal experience (which is conditioned ultimately by the nature of Personality, and is grounded in the Personality of God).

The old problem of the “thing-in-itself” disappears, for if you remove all the relations and attributes of a thing there is nothing left.

Reality is an experience, not a thing, least of all a “thing-in-itself”.

The relation of personal beings is essentially a self-revelation, as is also in a lesser degree the creative action of all living creatures.

No man can know another without the other having definitely made a movement of self-revelation towards him; each must in fact reveal himself to the other, before mutual knowledge and mutual love can be established.

The self-revelation of a person who desires to be known by another, is also the movement of that person to know the other. It is the offer of love.

When we say that God revealed Himself to the prophets we mean that they sought and found Him.

To the prophet God is first revealed in His universe and in the love and aspirations of men.

God reveals Himself all the time to all men, and makes an offer of His love, and in so far as they go out to meet Him His purpose is fulfilled, and the self-revelation and love become mutual.

Both God and man contribute to the environment, adding to Reality.

Revelation is seen to be absolutely necessary to an evolutionary philosophy of religion.

Summary of the argument and comparison of its conclusions with the teaching of Christ (in which it finds full confirmation).

APPENDIX A. The Theory of Mind as Pure Act

APPENDIX B. Intrinsic and Extrinsic Limitation