

COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

EPISTEMOLOGY AND ETHICS IN THE THOUGHT OF GORDON HADDON CLARK

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## INTRODUCTION

Epistemology is that branch of philosophy which is concerned with questions relating to knowledge. What is truth? How, if at all possible, can it be obtained?

For Gordon H. Clark the answers to such questions are the foundation for advancement in all other areas of study. Before we can speak of the things we claim to know in specific subjects, such as ethics, history, or politics, we must first come to conclusions about the more basic subject of knowledge and answer the question of whether we can know anything at all. In his book A Christian View of Men and Things, Clark writes that epistemology "is the crucial point in philosophy. Whether a political assertion be made, or whether the subject be botany, aesthetics, or Latin grammar, one must always ask, either seriously or in derision, How do you know?...The question, How do you know? may seem simple enough, but the answer virtually controls the whole system of philosophy."<sup>1</sup>

Clark, who was an evangelical Christian of the Reformed tradition, found support in the scriptures for this view of the primacy of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the scriptures put a premium on

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<sup>1</sup>Gordon Haddon Clark, A Christian View of Men and Things (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952) 285.

<sup>2</sup>Gordon Haddon Clark, In Defense of Theology (Milford, Michigan: Mott 1984) 85-86.

truth and the knowledge of God. The word of God itself is said to be truth (John 17:7), and Jesus, in his high priestly prayer, claims that eternal life is to know God, and Jesus Christ, whom God has sent (John 17:3). Thus Clark, in line with the Bible's own emphasis, stresses the fundamentality of epistemology.<sup>3</sup>

For Clark this fundamentality of epistemology is a fact in all areas of philosophy, and particularly, for purposes of this thesis, it is a fact in the area of ethics. As with all other studies, knowledge in the area of morality depends upon one's theory of knowledge in general. Clark maintains that "to be truly valuable a value must first be true. Truth is primary, value secondary."<sup>4</sup> For example, if the Christian theologian maintains that the prescriptive will of God revealed in scripture constitutes moral norms for mankind, then the theologian must to some extent attempt to show that the scriptures are true, that God exists, and that he has revealed his authoritative will to men. If we are not intellectually compelled to believe that the Bible is true, then we will not be compelled to follow its norms. A system of ethics must be constructed upon the foundation of truth.

In this thesis we shall give an exposition of important themes in epistemology and ethics in Clark's thought, with special focus given to this intrinsic relationship between the

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<sup>3</sup>Cf. "Knowledge," Baker's Dictionary of Theology, 1960.

<sup>4</sup>Gordon Clark, "On the Primacy of the Intellect," The Westminster Theological Journal 5 (May 1943): 182-195.



two. Important questions to be considered in this paper include: Is Clark's own view of epistemology adequate? Does his view of epistemology provide a reasonable basis for a system of ethics? How does Clark critique other theories of ethics from his own epistemological standpoint? More specifically, in chapter one we shall give an overview of Clark's reasons for rejecting empiricism and theories of ethics which are grounded in empiricism. In chapter two we shall develop some of the themes which Clark sees as essential to epistemology, and then consider these in relation to ethics. Finally, in chapter three, we shall give a critique of Clark's epistemology, and consider the ramifications in relation to ethics.

## CHAPTER 1

THE FAILURE OF EMPIRICISM, NATURAL THEOLOGY,  
AND EMPIRICAL METHODS OF ETHICS

## THE FAILURE OF EMPIRICISM

In the history of philosophy there have been two prominent methods of epistemology, empiricism and rationalism. The basic principle of empiricism is the proposition that all knowledge is derived ultimately from sensory experience. Rationalism, on the other hand, contends that knowledge is attained apart from sensory experience through the mind or reason alone, in the form of a self-evident innate idea or mental intuition, combined with deduction. Clark's view, as we shall see, has some affinity with rationalism, but his view of empiricism is one of wholesale rejection. In this section we shall consider some of Clark's arguments against empiricism which lead him to conclude that all forms of empiricism ultimately lead to skepticism.

The theory of empiricism is most commonly associated with three British philosophers of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume, and to some extent with the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle.

In the following several paragraphs we shall give a basic sketch of empiricism, and then consider some of Clark's objections.

According to pure empiricism, the mind of man at birth is said to be a tabula rasa, which means a blank piece of slate, or a sheet of white paper with no writing upon it. In more literal terms, this means that the mind of man at birth is completely void of any content; there are no ideas, no intuitions, no structure or form such as logic or the law of contradiction. Being completely empty, whatever contents the mind receives will come from direct experience of the world through the sense organs, in the form of sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell. Clark, in his history of philosophy entitled Thales to Dewey, quotes Locke on this matter:

Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas; how comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer in one word, from experience; in that all our knowledge is founded, and from that it ultimately derives itself.<sup>5</sup>

The basic building blocks of all knowledge are sensations, collected through the body's sense organs, and producing in the blank mind various simple ideas, such as yellow, cold, soft and

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<sup>5</sup>Gordon H. Clark, Thales to Dewey (1957; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 360.



loud.

When these simple ideas are combined with others like them, they form a more complex set of ideas, including ideas of physical objects, such as a tree, a chair, or a desk. The complex idea or perception of a tree, then, is a combination of more simple ideas (immediately derived from sensations), such as green, brown, hardness, and countless others which the sense organs collect and deliver to the mind. When the more complex ideas are formed in the mind, a mental image is made of them, an image which is believed to be an accurate representation of the reality which was sensed in the physical world, and these mental images are stored in the mind or memory to be recalled at will in the act of remembrance. In addition, the combination of mental images forms an even more complex set of ideas called abstract ideas, such as the generic idea of tree or tree-ness, an idea to which all ideas of individual trees must correspond. Abstract ideas also would include ideas of relation in which one object is thought of in comparison to another.

In the aforementioned way the mind becomes a knowing instrument, filled with thoughts of the world around it. Empiricism is an unbroken chain of reasoning, beginning with an empty mind and sensations, moving to perceptions of objects, mental images of those perceptions, and finally, to abstract ideas based on various combinations of mental images. The end result of the chain is knowledge of the physical world, knowledge of abstract concepts, and knowledge even of the laws of logic,

the basic statements of valid reasoning. All knowledge, then, is derived ultimately from sensations corresponding to the external world.

With this overview in mind, we now turn our attention to Clark's opposition to empiricism. As was mentioned earlier, Clark concluded that empiricism does not, and inherently cannot, lead to knowledge. This was a position which he adopted early in his career, and in his many writings he devoted much attention to its refutation. For example, in 1952 Clark wrote that "if all knowledge is based on experience, there is no knowledge."<sup>6</sup> Later, in his book Three types of Religious Philosophy, published in 1973, he states:

Religious authors and the general public still cling tenaciously to sensation. But if they do not meet the skeptical arguments in detail, if they refuse to examine them -- mirages, hallucinations, circumstantial variations, and even Descarte's demon -- if they refuse to face their opponents squarely, skepticism must be adjudged the victor.<sup>7</sup>

Still later, in a debate held at Covenant College, which the author was fortunate to observe in 1983 (shortly before Clark retired as professor of philosophy at that institution), Clark argued that "empiricism ... is an impossible philosophy which a

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<sup>6</sup>Christian View 309.

<sup>7</sup>Gordon H. Clark, Three Types of Religious Philosophy (n.p.: Craig, 1973) 81.



perspicuous Christian will replace with the innate, a priori image of God."<sup>8</sup> What lead Clark to this position on epistemology which can fairly be described as radically anti-empirical? In the next several pages we shall consider a sampling of some of Clark's arguments.

#### ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE TABULA RASA

A major objection which Clark brings against empiricism has to do with the notion of the tabula rasa or blank mind. As we have mentioned, it is essential to empiricism that the mind be void of any a priori forms or mental equipment prior to experience. All of the contents of knowledge, even the laws of logic and the universal abstract concepts of space, time, mathematics and causality, are derived from the impressions of sensations on the blank mind. It is feared that if the mind already knows something prior to experience, if there is some original, innate idea of space, time, causality or logic intrinsic to the mind, then the mind would distort the reality received by the sense organs and we would not know the world as it really is. Thus we would end in skepticism. The mind must bring nothing with it if we are to have an objective knowledge of reality.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Gordon Clark and David Hoover, "A Debate on Apologetics," (Jefferson: Trinity, 1986) tape 1.

<sup>9</sup>Gordon H. Clark, The Philosophy of Gordon H. Clark: A Festschrift, ed. Ronald H. Nash (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968) 30, 57.

Clark challenges the position that the mind is a tabula rasa by showing the impossibility of arriving at certain universal judgments from sense experience alone. In his book Religion, Reason, and Revelation, Clark argues that in order for empiricism to work we must assume certain a priori concepts of the mind; yet these assumptions are the very things which it cannot allow.<sup>10</sup> For example, the very acquisition of individual, separate sensations assumes and presupposes the concept of space. The concept of space is needed at the very beginning of the knowledge chain in empiricism, for space is essential in order to have individuation among sensations and perceptions. Furthermore, the idea of space itself could not have been derived from sensations, since it cannot be seen, heard, or touched. In fact, according to empiricism, the concept of space is arrived at through comparison of known objects, a step which occurs near the end of the knowledge chain. But therein lies the problem. Clark argues:

But if space is learned by comparing houses and tables, we must first be able to perceive the table before we can compare it with a house and learn of space. That is to say, space is an idea of comparison. But if the idea of space cannot be had until after we have compared tables and houses, we cannot produce tables and houses by selecting simple ideas through the use of

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<sup>10</sup>Gordon H. Clark, Religion, Reason, and Revelation, (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961) 57-58.



space.

Empiricism therefore has blundered fatally. It has surreptitiously inserted at the beginning of the learning process an idea of space which does not exist until after the process has well nigh been completed.<sup>11</sup>

For empiricism to work, then, it must assume the concept of space, which is a complex idea, at the very beginning of the knowledge chain, which indicates that space is not a concept derived from sensation, but is in fact an a priori concept which is in the mind before the acquisition of sensation even begins.

A similar argument against the tabula rasa theory has to do with the concept of time. In A Christian View of Men and Things Clark presents the argument of Kant that the concept of time cannot be attained through sensation. Time itself is certainly not a sensation; it has no color, shape, or smell, and hence the mind cannot produce a mental image of it. Furthermore, if it be argued that time is a concept which is abstracted from sensations, in particular abstracted from the fact that sensations appear to come to us in succession, Clark points out that the very notion of succession itself presupposes the idea of time.<sup>12</sup> The concept of succession among sensations is derived from an already existing concept of time, and not vice versa. Hence it would seem that the concept of time, like the concept of space, is an unjustified assumption of empiricism, and if there

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<sup>11</sup>Clark, Religion 58.

<sup>12</sup>Clark, Christian View 306.

be such a thing as time it must be in the mind prior to experience.

A third concept which also seems to be an unjustified assumption of empiricism is that of mathematics. The truths of mathematics are "examples of truths that cannot be derived from experience."<sup>13</sup> Clark argues that mathematics cannot exist without the concept of number and the possibility of counting. Before a person can even begin to count numbers there first must be the concept of a single unit, a one. This concept of a single unit could not have come from experiencing a single object through sensation. Rather, a person must first have the concept of a unit before any object can be recognized as an individual unit. A child must know numbers before he can count objects. "And," he argues, "since numbers are not marbles or anything else sensory, it follows that arithmetic is not abstracted from experience."<sup>14</sup> It seems, then, that the concept of number or a unit must be in the mind prior to experience, and if so, the mind cannot be a tabula rasa.

Three important concepts which are used in empiricism, then, viz., space, time, and number, cannot be derived from the empirical starting point of sensation and a blank mind. They must be assumed before we can even get to sensation. If they are concepts which are assumed before sensation, which for empiricism is the beginning of the knowledge chain, then they must be in the

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<sup>13</sup>Clark, Christian View 306.

<sup>14</sup>Clark, Christian View 307.



mind prior to sensation, and such a mind is certainly not a tabula rasa. If these universal concepts are to be accounted for, it must be done by rejecting the blank mind theory and by granting that the mind must contain at least some a priori concepts or innate ideas. As we shall see later in this paper, Clark also will reject the blank mind theory on the basis of the biblical concept of the image of God.

#### ARGUMENTS AGAINST SENSATION AND PERCEPTION

A second major focus of criticism which Clark brings against empiricism centers around the notion of sensation and perception. For empiricism, sensation and perception are the building blocks of knowledge, and if they can be shown to be unreliable then empiricism has been dealt a powerful blow. In several of his writings Clark maintains that sensation and perception are utterly unreliable, and in consequence empiricism cannot stand.

A series of arguments which Clark brings against sensation deal with the fallible or untrustworthy nature of sensation. In Three types of Religious Philosophy Clark quotes with much approval the arguments against sensation given by the ancient Greek skeptics, Pyrrho, Arcesilaus, and Aenesidemus.<sup>15</sup> One such argument is that sensations do not give us accurate information about the essential, inherent properties of the objects in the external world. No object in nature is ever experienced in utter

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<sup>15</sup>Clark, Three Types 64-66.



isolation. Rather, each object is sensed in relation to other objects, and these relationships by necessity alter the way one perceives the individual object. A rock feels heavier in the air than in the water; a man weighs less on the surface of the moon than on the earth. But which is the real or essential weight of the rock or the man? "No object," writes Clark, "is ever experienced in isolation; but its surroundings change its appearances; therefore we can never know what the object itself is like."<sup>16</sup> An example Clark sometimes used in his classes was that of eating ice cream followed by grapefruit, and than reversing the order and eating the ice cream second. The ice cream has a different taste when eaten after the grape fruit then when eaten before it. But which is the real taste of ice cream? The argument then is that since the perception of any object is affected by its relationship to all other objects, sensation can never tell us what the object is essentially like in and of itself.

Not only do the relationships of objects alter the way they are perceived, but the subjective condition of the person receiving the sensations also can alter perception. Says Clark: "Health, illness, sleep, youth, old age, heat, cold, breathing freely or with difficulty cause the impressions received to vary."<sup>17</sup> The relative health of the sense organs affects perception. When one is in a state of sickness, or drunkenness,

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<sup>16</sup>Clark, Three Types 66.

<sup>17</sup>Clark, Three Types 65.

one perceives an object differently than when in a state of health or sobriety, though in either state one feels certain that what is perceived is reality. But "obviously at any time we may be mistaken, for we do not recognize that we are dreaming, or that we are drunk, or, if we know we are ill, we do not know whether or how much the fever affects our receptivity. Put more simply: illusions while they last are as convincing as allegedly true sensations."<sup>18</sup> Therefore we can never be certain that at any given time we are perceiving an object as it actually is.

A third argument presented as to the untrustworthy nature of sensation and perception is seen by comparing different types of living, sensing animals.<sup>19</sup> The sense organs of various animals differ according to size and complexity. As a result, different animals allegedly perceive objects in different ways. A dog may see objects in black and white, whereas a man might see in color. But what is the essential nature of the object itself? Is it black and white, or does it have color? Or is it possibly neither? We may be able to say how the object appears to us at a given moment, but we cannot assume that our perception is correct whereas that of a different animal is mistaken. With such arguments as these last three Clark concludes that we simply do not know if we are actually perceiving the world as it really is.

Another argument of a different sort which Clark brings

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<sup>18</sup>Clark, Three Types 65-66.

<sup>19</sup>Clark, Three Types 66.



against sensation has to do with the arbitrary way in which sensations are collected or rejected to form the perception of an individual object.<sup>20</sup> Supposedly, at any given time, a person is impressed with a multitude of sensations -- sights, sounds, odors, etc.. From this large number of sensations a few are selected and combined to form a perception of a particular object while others are rejected. For example, Clark says that in order to perceive a dog we must select and combine sensations of black, fuzzy, along with various odors, and reject other sensations as not belonging to the perception of a dog. It is this process of selection and rejection that Clark says is entirely arbitrary and unjustified.<sup>21</sup> There is no objective basis for combining one set of sensations as opposed to another set. Clark asks, "Why is it that we combine the color brown, a somewhat rectangular shape, and the sensation of hardness to make a table, instead of selecting from our many sensations the color pale green, the sound of C sharp, and the smell of freshly baked bread to combine them into the idea of a jobbleycluck?"<sup>22</sup> Since the selection and combination of sensations is arbitrary and involves subjective interpretation on the part of the recipient, it is always possible that an error might be made in this process, resulting in an incorrect perception. This, for Clark, is certainly not a

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<sup>20</sup>Gordon H. Clark, Language And Theology (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980) 134.

<sup>21</sup>Clark, Festschrift 35.

<sup>22</sup>Clark, Religion 57.

good foundation for knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

#### ARGUMENTS AGAINST MENTAL IMAGES

As we have already noted, an essential link in the knowledge chain for empiricism is the theory of mental images. Sensations are combined to produce perceptions of objects, which in turn form images in the mind which can be combined to bring about abstract ideas. According to empiricism, mental images are part of everyone's knowledge apparatus, and are considered to be accurate representations of the actual objects which are perceived through sensation.

An argument which Clark frequently brings against mental images is the simple fact that not everyone has images.<sup>24</sup> Empiricism has blundered in assuming that all people have images. According to Clark, studies have shown that this is certainly not the case. There are supposedly five types of mental images corresponding to each of the five types of sensation; viz., sight, sound, smell, touch and taste. Yet in a survey which Clark himself conducted in one of his philosophy classes over a period of twenty years, he found that over 50% of his students

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<sup>23</sup>Gordon H. Clark, "Apologetics," Contemporary Evangelical Thought, ed. Carl F.H. Henry (Great Neck: Harber-Channel, 1957) 145.

<sup>24</sup>Gordon H. Clark, "The Gordon-Conwell Lectures on Apologetics," (Jefferson: Trinity Foundation, 1981) tape 15.

claimed to have no gustatory or olfactory images, 10-15% claimed to have no auditory images, and about 5% claimed to have no visual images.<sup>25</sup> Clark himself claimed to have fallen into the very small percentage of people who claim to have no mental images whatsoever.<sup>26</sup> The problem for empiricism, then, is that on the one hand mental images are indispensable for rational thought and knowing, yet on the other hand there are a significant number of thinking and knowing people who testify that they do not have such imagery.

Now, if for the sake of argument we should grant the universality of mental images, Clark then raises another problem with this concept, viz., how do we arrive at abstract ideas from mental images. Clark maintains that no empiricist has ever given a valid explanation for how a person develops abstract ideas from images (including Aristotle, who tried to explain this through the use of an analogy). Yet a detailed explanation for the abstraction process needs to be given if the empiricist is to make a convincing case for his theory. In Language and Theology he writes:

The process by which concepts are allegedly abstracted from images is unintelligible. Aristotle simply gives an analogy. It is like an army in rout: one soldier makes a stand, then a second, and so on, until the army is in order again. This analogy is worse than

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<sup>25</sup>Clark, Language 31.

<sup>26</sup>Clark, "Lectures," tape 5.



most. It is unintelligibility raised to an unimaginable power.<sup>27</sup>

The impossibility of showing how we arrive at abstract concepts from mental images leads Clark to conclude that "there are no such things as abstract concepts," in the empirical meaning of the term.<sup>28</sup>

Not only is there the problem of the justification of the process of abstraction, but if we continue, for the sake of argument, to grant the existence of mental images in all people, another problem emerges, having to do with the representational quality of images. It is said that our images provide us with an accurate representation of existing objects. Clark maintains that the representation theory will give us no knowledge of reality whatsoever.<sup>29</sup> In the representation theory we assume that our images resemble some object external to the mind. Unfortunately, there is no way to know, no way to verify, that our images do in fact give us an accurate resemblance to the external cause of the image. "Since the mind," writes Clark, "contains only the picture and never the 'thing,' there is no possibility of knowing whether the representation is similar to the object or not. To recognize a similarity between two things, they must be compared, and hence both must be in the mind."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Clark, Language 135.

<sup>28</sup>Clark, "Lectures," tape 15.

<sup>29</sup>Clark, Language 29.

<sup>30</sup>Clark, Language 29.

The object of knowledge is not reality itself, but a supposed representation of it. We do not know if the so-called external body resembles our images of red, sweet, and hard.<sup>31</sup> The mind has only its images, and whether or not they are faithful images of anything at all we have no way of knowing. It follows for Clark that "empiricism . . . furnishes no knowledge of an external world, finds no evidence for its existence, and confines the mind to the mind, i.e., its sensations."<sup>32</sup>

Clark also points out that the extreme limitations of the representation theory also result in solipsism, the theory that the only thing of which one is aware, or can know, is oneself. We cannot know any objects or individuals external to the mind. We can "know" only our own images and ideas. Says Clark, "Each of us, or rather I alone know only my ideas, and what I call you is only one of my headaches."<sup>33</sup> It further follows, for Clark, that there can be no communication, since it is impossible for two individuals to share the same image, which is the object of knowledge in empiricism.

With such arguments as these, arguments against the blank mind, against sensation and perception, and against abstraction and representation, Clark is compelled to conclude that empiricism results in utter skepticism, and can provide no knowledge of an external world whatsoever.

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<sup>31</sup>Clark, Three Types 67-68.

<sup>32</sup>Clark, Three Types 68.

<sup>33</sup>Clark, Three Types 108.



It also should be noted that for Clark the failure of empiricism implies the failure of science as an attempt to acquire truth about the universe, since science is based on empiricism. In several of his writings, including "Miracles, History, and Natural Law,"<sup>34</sup> "The Nature of the Physical Universe,"<sup>35</sup> and his book The Philosophy of Science and Belief in God,<sup>36</sup> Clark sets forth his criticisms of science, maintaining that scientific laws are never true and never describe the ultimate laws of nature. Science is by no means the "gateway" to knowledge as many people think.<sup>37</sup> In fact, science is "incapable of arriving at any truth whatsoever."<sup>38</sup> But even so, Clark does concede some value to science: The purpose of science is the control, domination, and utilization of nature.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, science can be very useful. It has aided mankind in the control of diseases and has made everyday life increasingly more comfortable. Unfortunately, it has also produced atomic weapons. It is able to manipulate nature, but it never discovers the ultimate realities of nature.

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<sup>34</sup>Gordon H. Clark, "Miracles, History, and Natural Law," The Evangelical Quarterly 12 (1940).

<sup>35</sup>Gordon H. Clark, "The Nature of the Physical Universe," Christian Faith and Modern Theology, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Channel Press, 1964).

<sup>36</sup>Gordon H. Clark, The Philosophy of Science and Belief in God (Jefferson: Trinity, 1987).

<sup>37</sup>Clark, Christian View 216.

<sup>38</sup>Clark, Christian View 216.

<sup>39</sup>Clark, "The Nature of the Physical Universe" 142, and Philosophy of Science 92-93.

To see science in its proper perspective, then, we must view it not as a cognitive endeavor to attain truth, "but as an attempt to utilize nature for our needs and wants."<sup>40</sup>

### THE FAILURE OF NATURAL THEOLOGY

So far we have observed that for Clark empiricism is a theory which ends in skepticism. Science, which arises from empiricism, and which many believe to be man's greatest and most successful attempt at reaching truth about nature, also ends short of the truth. Now just as science, a theory based on empiricism, is held forth as the means for arriving at truth about nature, so too a similar theory, also based on empiricism, is held forth as a means for arriving at truth about God. That theory is called natural theology. Natural theology claims to provide valid proof for the existence of God based on certain "facts" of nature, particularly the "fact" of cause and effect. The classical statement of natural theology is put forth by Thomas Aquinas in his cosmological argument. Since the attempt is to show that God by necessity must exist, one might suppose that Clark, who was an evangelical Christian, would be sympathetic towards it. Nothing could be further from the truth. Based on his anti-empirical foundation, Clark vigorously opposed natural theology throughout the span of his career, maintaining

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<sup>40</sup>Clark, Philosophy of Science 93.



that the cosmological argument is invalid and provides absolutely no truth about God. In this section we shall summarize Clark's refutation of the cosmological argument.

In brief, the cosmological argument of Thomas Aquinas is based on the Aristotelian concept of motion and cause. In this argument motion is defined as the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality, and cause is that which brings about this reduction. For each thing in the universe, its present conditions or qualities are what it is in "actuality," yet it is possible for each thing to change its present qualities, to take on new qualities, and to become something different. This possibility of becoming something different is the "potentiality" of the object. Its present condition is what it actually is; its possible future condition is what it can potentially become.<sup>41</sup> When an object makes a change to what it can potentially become, it has become a new actuality.

Thomas uses the example of wood and fire.<sup>42</sup> Wood by itself is actually cold, but has the potential to become hot. Fire, on the other hand, is actually hot and potentially cold. Motion is the changing of wood from its actual condition (cold) to its potential condition (hot), so that it becomes hot in actuality. Since the fire is already hot, it is the cause of this motion -- it reduces the wood from being only potentially hot to actually hot. Technically speaking, the cause of the motion of any object

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<sup>41</sup>Clark, Three Types 53.

<sup>42</sup>Clark, Three Types 53.



is the potentiality of the object. Since heat is the potentiality of wood, it takes heat to cause wood to become hot in actuality.

With this view of cause and motion in mind, Thomas argues that it is logically impossible for any object to cause its own movement; i.e., an object cannot be potentially what it already is in actuality. That which is actually cold cannot be potentially cold.<sup>43</sup> To make a cold object hot the cause must come from something already hot. "Therefore," says Thomas, "whatever is moved must be moved by another."<sup>44</sup> It also follows that the cause which has done the moving was itself moved by a prior cause, and that cause by a still more prior cause, etc.. Since this chain of cause and effect could not go backwards infinitely, it furthermore follows that there must have been an original "first mover," which itself was never moved. This first mover, concludes Thomas, can be none other than God himself.<sup>45</sup> And so by reasoning from the obvious empirical "facts" of motion and cause, we are to conclude that God of necessity exists. In this way we arrive at the knowledge or truth of God's existence through observation of nature.

One of the most telling blows which Clark delivers against the cosmological argument concerns the idea of causality, and is borrowed from the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776).

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<sup>43</sup>Clark, Three Types 53.

<sup>44</sup>Quoted in Clark, Three Types 53.

<sup>45</sup>Clark, Three Types 53.

As we have noted, the concept of causality is essential to the cosmological argument. Yet, is there really such a thing as cause? Clark would have us wonder. Does our experience (upon which the argument is based) provide us with a knowledge of cause and effect? Hume pointed out that the most our senses could provide us with is an experience of a succession of events in nature.<sup>46</sup> Our sense experience never shows us that there are any necessary causal connections between events in nature. Nature, at best, only shows that one event follows another. We may observe that when wood is placed near fire it becomes hot; we do not observe the fire causing the wood to become hot. The cause is an assumption, not an observation.

Again, to use another example, we may observe a sequence of events in which a ball travels at 90 m.p.h. toward a bat which is in motion. Suddenly, the ball is traveling at a high rate of speed in a new direction. We believe that the motion of the bat caused the new motion and direction of the ball. But we did not observe this cause taking place, we assumed it. In fact, a cause can never be observed, only a sequence of events can be observed according to Hume. Events follow each other in sequence, and it is an assumption, not an empirical "fact," that one event produces another. Therefore, since the concept of causality, as far as empirical observation is concerned, is not based on observation, but is rather an assumption, it follows for Clark that the cosmological argument itself rests upon assumption and

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<sup>46</sup>Clark, Thales 388.



not fact.<sup>47</sup>

Now, if for the sake of argument we allow the empirical reality of Aristotelian causality, a new problem arises, one which Clark also borrows from Hume, viz., just exactly what sort of thing or being is proven to exist from this chain of cause and effect? Thomas had concluded that the first mover, which is moved by no other, is that which "everyone understands to be God."<sup>48</sup> Does the argument really prove the existence of God? In particular, does it prove the existence of the Triune God of the Bible, which is the only God that exists? Hume reasoned that "a body of ten ounces raised in any scale may serve as a proof that the counterbalancing weight exceeds ten ounces; but can never afford a reason that it exceeds a hundred."<sup>49</sup> In the words of Clark: "The cause. . . can never be assumed to be greater than sufficient to produce the observed effects."<sup>50</sup> If the observation of cause and effect is correct, it is nevertheless incorrect to assert that we have proven the existence of an omnipotent God. At best, we could only prove the existence of something with enough power to produce the world as we see it. Since the world is finite, since all causes and effects in it are finite, it would seem an unjustifiable assumption to say that the first mover is more than finite. Omnipotence cannot be concluded

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<sup>47</sup>Clark, Christian View 28.

<sup>48</sup>Quoted in Clark, Three Types 53.

<sup>49</sup>Quoted in Clark, Christian View 27.

<sup>50</sup>Clark, Christian View 27.



from the creation.<sup>51</sup>

According to Clark, not only does the cosmological argument fail to prove the existence of an omnipotent being, but the notion of the God whose existence it does claim to prove is that of a being which is "utterly vague."<sup>52</sup> Certainly, the argument does not prove the existence of the Triune God, existing in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in one substance. At best this argument would prove the existence of some sort of first principle, but not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.<sup>53</sup> Says Clark:

It will not do to prove the existence of some kind of first principle. . . . The important point is to determine what sort of first principle there is. . . . A god who has not created the world, who does not know the future and possibly not even the present and past, a god who cannot speak to men, evokes no enthusiasm from Christian thinkers. What Christianity needs is the Triune God, and Thomas (though in a sense he tries) cannot pass from the first mover to the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.<sup>54</sup>

Thus the cosmological argument fails to prove the existence

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<sup>51</sup>Gordon H. Clark, "Special Divine Revelation as Rational," Revelation and the Bible, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958) 28.

<sup>52</sup>Clark, Defense 27.

<sup>53</sup>Clark, Three Types 56.

<sup>54</sup>Clark, Three Types 56.

of an omnipotent, supernatural, triune, personal God of justice, righteousness, and mercy. In fact, if we carry the argument a step further, perhaps it proves the existence of a devil rather than a god of goodness. When we consider all of the evil and tragedy in the world which we observe, would it not be more reasonable to conclude that the first cause of such a world is essentially an evil being?

Another argument which Clark brings against the cosmological argument concerns the logic of the argument. According to Clark, the argument is circular, assuming the conclusion in one of the premises, and hence it is invalid.<sup>55</sup> One of the problems which Thomas seeks to avoid in the argument is infinite regress. If each effect in the universe is brought about by a prior cause, and that cause by a still more prior cause, then where will this chain of cause and effect stop? If there is no beginning point to this chain of cause and effect, then the chain must go backwards infinitely. But if the chain goes backwards infinitely it never would have started in the first place, and if it never started then there is no cause and effect. To avoid this criticism Thomas says, "But this cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover, and consequently no other mover, seeing that subsequent movers move only inasmuch as they are moved by the first mover; . . ."<sup>56</sup> Clark points out that in this statement Thomas assumes the existence of the first

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<sup>55</sup>Clark, Three Types 55.

<sup>56</sup>Quoted in Clark, Three Types 53.

mover to avoid the problem of the infinite regress, a problem which must be solved if the argument is to be sound, and in so doing he has assumed the very thing which he set out to prove. Thus the argument fails because of its circularity.

With this criticism we conclude the discussion of Clark's view of the cosmological argument and the theology based upon the observation of nature. Although there are a few other points which Clark raises, we have tried to sum up the arguments which seem most important in his thought.

#### THE FAILURE OF EMPIRICAL METHODS OF ETHICS

With the failure of empiricism and natural theology, also comes the failure of various methods of ethics which are grounded in the observation of nature and human experience. In this section we shall develop Clark's objections to two such methods, utilitarianism and hedonism.

Utilitarianism is a theory of ethics which proposes that the final end of moral action must be "the greatest good of the greatest number."<sup>57</sup> In utilitarianism an action is morally right only insofar as it brings about a greater balance of good over evil in the universe as a whole. Utilitarianism is derived from the principle of psychological egoism, which says that it is an observed fact of human existence that every individual by his

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<sup>57</sup>Clark, Christian View 168.



actions seeks to bring about a greater balance of good over evil for himself. John Stuart Mill (1806-1874), in his book Utilitarianism, claims that the only proof given for the fact that man by nature seeks his own good or happiness, indeed, the only proof necessary, is the simple fact that "people actually do desire it."<sup>58</sup> Once the principle of egosim is admitted, Mill maintains that the next logical step is utilitarianism or the general happiness principle. Says Mill:

No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, as far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. This, however, being a fact, we have not only all the proof which the case admits of, but all which it is possible to require, that happiness is a good, that each person's happiness is a good to that person and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons.<sup>59</sup>

Mill's progression seems to run as follows: (1) each man seeks his own happiness; (2) therefore it is morally right to seek one's happiness; (3) since each one desires his own happiness, it follows that general happiness, the happiness of all, is desirable; (4) therefore it is morally right to seek general happiness. In this way utilitarianism becomes the principle by

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<sup>58</sup>John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism (Indianapolis: Bobbs, 1957) 44.

<sup>59</sup>Mill, Utilitarianism 44-45.

which we determine moral obligation.

One objection which Clark raises against utilitarianism has to do with the fact that it bases moral obligation on empirical observation. Utilitarianism claims that we are obligated to seek to bring about good (however the good may be defined) because of the empirical "fact" that this is what we actually do in experience. For instance, we ought to seek pleasure if pleasure is what we do seek in everyday life. But is experience a valid basis for moral duty? Is it valid to assert that because we observe people seeking X they are morally obligated to seek X? "By what process," asks Clark, "may one step from a description of facts to a statement of what ought to be? How can a normative science be generated from a descriptive basis?"<sup>60</sup> It seems clear that there is no valid basis for the jump from descriptive to normative science. Experience might be able to tell me what people do, but it cannot tell me what they ought to do. We cannot validly base our moral obligations on empirical observations of what is actually occurring; we cannot derive a moral "ought" from an observational "is."<sup>61</sup>

A second objection to utilitarianism which Clark raises is the impossibility of making the calculations which are necessary to determine if one action will bring about more good for the world as a whole than all other possible actions. Utilitarianism

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<sup>60</sup>Gordon H. Clark and T. V. Smith, Readings in Ethics (New York: Appleton, 1935) 290-291.

<sup>61</sup>Clark, Christian View 102, 225.

intrinsically implies that there be some method of calculating how each single action will affect all other people. Every possible consequence upon every other person must be weighed in the balance. But is it really possible to make such calculations? It is impossible, first of all, because calculation implies a unit which can be measured, and there is no such thing as a unit of good or evil, pleasure or pain.<sup>62</sup> Secondly, even if we had such a unit, the task of calculation for all other people would be nothing less than "superhuman."<sup>63</sup> Each day important decisions are made, such as how to invest money, how to raise children, what major or occupation a person should pursue. "But how," asks Clark, "could anyone possibly estimate the amounts, the durations, and the intensities of the pleasures to be caused by each of these decisions, not only the pleasures he himself will experience, but the pleasures of all others who will be affected by his action? Is not utilitarian calculation impossible?"<sup>64</sup>

A third major objection to utilitarianism is that it could be used, and indeed has been used, to justify acts of obvious immorality. The deliberate and systematic infliction of pain on certain groups of people has been justified on the assumption that a much greater amount of good or pleasure will result for a

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<sup>62</sup>Gordon H. Clark, "Utilitarianism," Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics, ed. Carl F. H. Henry, (Great Neck: Harbor-Channel, 1957) 691.

<sup>63</sup>Clark, "Utilitarianism," 691.

<sup>64</sup>Clark, Religion 159.



greater number of people. This has been especially seen in the twentieth century in the cases of Hitler and Stalin. Clark writes:

Each of them acknowledged that they were causing pain to some people. But torturing the Jews gave all the Nazis a great deal of pleasure, and starving the Ukrainians to death was lots of fun for the communists. Not only so, but these brutalities would continue to produce tons of pleasure for future generations. The greatest good of the greatest number is a principle for tyrants.<sup>65</sup>

Certainly any method of ethics which can be used to justify such atrocities is more than inadequate.

A second important method of ethics, which is grounded in the observation of human experience, and which Clark also finds to be quite inadequate, is hedonism. Hedonism is the theory which says that the ultimate end of human action is pleasure or the absence of pain. It is commonly combined with utilitarianism, making the basic principle of morality that of bringing about pleasure for the world as a whole. In the words of Mill, the utilitarian-hedonist, "pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends; and . . . all desirable things . . . are desirable either for pleasure inherent in themselves or as a means to the promotion of pleasure and the

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<sup>65</sup>Clark, Festschrift 46.

prevention of pain."<sup>66</sup> Hedonism argues that what is desired as an end is good, and since pleasure alone is desired as an end, it follows that pleasure alone is good and is therefore the object at which action ought to aim. A very basic definition of pleasure given by Henry Sidgwick is "the kind of feeling which we apprehend to be desirable or preferable."<sup>67</sup>

The concept of "pleasure" in hedonism, as it has been developed through the centuries, is generally not to be equated with indulging in purely animalistic desires or sensual stimulations, such as sex, drunkenness, and gluttony. It is true that the ancient Cyrenaic view of pleasure was similar to this. Aristippus (435?-356?), founder of the school at Cyrene, held that immediate sense-pleasure was the highest good. Cyrenaicism emphasized the pleasure of the moment, the "short-term immediately-exhausted physical pleasures,"<sup>68</sup> like eating, drinking, and being merry. But most hedonists have taken a broader view of pleasure similar to the ancient philosopher Epicurus (341-270). Epicurus' emphasis was on "the more fruitful, long-range mental pleasures."<sup>69</sup> For him, "health of body" and "tranquility of mind" are the sum of the blessed

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<sup>66</sup>Mill, Utilitarianism 10-11.

<sup>67</sup>Henry Sidgwick, The Methods of Ethics (New York: Dover, 1966) 128.

<sup>68</sup>Carl F. H. Henry, Christian Personal Ethics (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 31.

<sup>69</sup>Henry, Christian Ethics 33.

life.<sup>70</sup> The pleasant life is one of "sober reasoning, searching out the grounds of every choice and avoidance, and banishing those beliefs through which the greatest tumults take possession of the soul."<sup>71</sup>

One objection which Clark has to hedonism has already been mentioned in the discussion of utilitarianism. It is the objection that one cannot validly say what ought to be, based on what is; one cannot base moral obligation or value on empirical observation or "fact."<sup>72</sup> Hedonism claims that man is governed by pleasure and pain; that man is constituted by nature to seek pleasure and avoid pain. This is the empirical "fact." From this fact it is supposed to follow that man ought to seek pleasure and avoid pain. But even if experience does show that we seek pleasure as the ultimate end, it does not, it cannot, show that we ought to seek pleasure as our end.

Another objection to hedonism, which was also mentioned in the context of utilitarianism, is the problem of calculation. "A method of calculation is necessary to determine in any situation what line of action will in fact produce the greatest amount of pleasure on the whole," writes Clark.<sup>73</sup> In order to choose the right action in a given situation, we must have a consciousness of the feelings of pleasure which that act

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<sup>70</sup>Quoted in Clark and Smith, Readings 89.

<sup>71</sup>Clark, Readings 89.

<sup>72</sup>Clark, Christian View 165-166.

<sup>73</sup>Clark, Christian View 168.



produces, and compare that state of consciousness with (apparently the memories of) other states of consciousness produced by other possible courses of action. Before we choose a course of action, we must know all of the available actions, as well as retain a memory of the pleasures which they produce. Only then, by comparing these states of consciousness, can we choose the action with the highest amount of corresponding pleasure. But is it likely that we will ever have an accurate knowledge of all the actions available to us in a given situation? And is it even possible to have a memory of pleasure or pain at all? Perhaps we might remember that placing one's hand on a hot griddle brings with it much pain. But do we actually have a memory of the pain itself? Do we remember its precise quantity or quality? If we do have such a memory, is the memory so accurate and distinct that we can compare it with other such memories? These considerations lead one to conclude that hedonistic calculations, with their psychological-empirical foundation, are impossible.

Now not only must we question hedonistic calculations, according to Clark, but we must also consider a more basic question: "What is meant by pleasure?"<sup>74</sup> Or, what is to be included under the concept of pleasure? Clark argues that if pleasure is defined strictly as sense pleasure (the Cyrenaic view), then hedonism is implausible, since very few people would agree that the good is limited to such things as "eating roast

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<sup>74</sup>Clark, Christian View 166.

turkey, drinking rum, and sexual indulgence."<sup>75</sup> On the other hand, if we widen the definition of pleasure to include "the pleasure of chess, the pleasure of philosophy, or the pleasures that are at God's right hand for evermore,"<sup>76</sup> then pleasure becomes so broad and vague as to include virtually anything, any agreeable state of consciousness. But this too is problematic because it would justify any action which would produce an agreeable state of consciousness, and few people would agree that every action which brings agreeable feelings is a moral obligation. In fact, it is certain that many actions which bring agreeable feelings are morally wrong. Plato long ago pointed out that some pleasures are good, and some definitely are not good, "so that the pleasant is found to be different from the good";<sup>77</sup> and if pleasure is different from the good, then a higher standard than pleasure alone is needed to determine which pleasures are good and which are not. Because of the difficulty in defining pleasure, and because it identifies pleasure as the supreme value or good, hedonism is a failure.

In addition to the matter of calculations, and the question of what is pleasure, Clark also objects to the fundamental premise of hedonism, that man in fact always seeks pleasure and avoids pain. He writes that "there are too many examples of foolish choices to maintain even the plausibility that everyone

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<sup>75</sup>Clark, Christian View 166.

<sup>76</sup>Clark, Christian View 167.

<sup>77</sup>Quoted in Clark and Smith, Readings 26.

always acts with the motive of obtaining the greatest amount of pleasure."<sup>78</sup> Clark sees evidence for this in the fact "that people desire or will to take bitter medicine, to go to the dentist, and to engage in physical labor."<sup>79</sup> Such activities are desired, yet do not bring immediate pleasure. And if it be argued that these activities are done to avoid future pain or bring future pleasure, he points out that alcoholics often engage in the immediate pleasure of the drink before them, knowing full well that tomorrow they will suffer a greater amount of resulting pain.<sup>80</sup> Thus there is considerable doubt as to whether our sole drive is to gain pleasure and avoid pain, whether immediate or future.

Based on such objections as have been developed in this section, the overall conclusion for Clark is that methods of ethics which are grounded in observation, particularly utilitarianism and hedonism, fail to provide an adequate basis for moral decisions.

#### CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER ONE

In this chapter it has been our intent to set forth Clark's epistemology and ethics from a negative viewpoint, focusing on

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<sup>78</sup>Clark, Christian View 165.

<sup>79</sup>Clark, Christian View 164.

<sup>80</sup>Clark, Christian View 164.



one theory of knowledge which Clark rejects. In particular, we have given an overview, which was by no means exhaustive, of Clark's reasons for rejecting the basic empirical approach to knowledge, and his reasons for rejecting natural theology as an empirical attempt to gain knowledge of God, and certain methods of ethics, which are built upon the foundation of empiricism. To have a balanced view of Clark's epistemology, it is essential to understand why he rejects empiricism and empirically-related theories, for a great part of his writings are devoted to this endeavor. We have not, in this chapter, set out to offer a critique of Clark's specific arguments on these matters. Instead, a critique of Clark's views will come in the third chapter, after the presentation in the second chapter of Clark's epistemology from the positive perspective of what sort of things are essential to epistemology.

## CHAPTER 2

### SOME ESSENTIALS OF EPISTEMOLOGY AND ETHICS IN CLARK'S THOUGHT

In the previous chapter we noted that Clark adamantly opposed any form of empiricism. Before proceeding with the development of some of the important points in Clark's epistemology and ethics, brief mention should be made of Clark's rejection of two other positions on knowledge, skepticism and relativism. For Clark, skepticism, the view that knowledge is unattainable, can be dismissed because it is inherently self-contradictory and hence cannot be true. The contradictory nature of skepticism is made apparent by Clark in the following brief argument:

Skepticism is the position that nothing can be demonstrated. And how, we ask, can you demonstrate that nothing can be demonstrated? The skeptic asserts that nothing can be known. In his haste he said that truth was impossible. And is it true that truth is impossible? For, if no proposition is true, then at least one proposition is true--the proposition, namely, that no proposition is true. If truth is impossible, therefore, it follows that we have already attained it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Clark, Christian View, 30.

Skepticism fortunately fails, then, as well as any philosophical position which implies it.

Equally self-destructive in Clark's thought is the theory of relativism. Relativism is a view which asserts that, although it may be possible to find truth, truth in essence is not absolute but varies with different individuals, times, cultures and circumstances. What is true for one person in one period of time may be false for other persons in other periods of time. Truth in relativism is not the sort of thing which is universal, eternal and unchanging. Clark again notes the inherently contradictory nature of this view. Relativism does not claim to be a theory of absolute truth, yet it asserts that it is absolutely true that truth is not absolute. "Relativism," says Clark, "is always asserted absolutely. If it were not intended to apply generally, it would have no claim to philosophical importance. But if it is asserted universally, then its assertion contradicts what is being asserted. An absolutistic relativism is a self-contradiction. If it is true, it is false."<sup>2</sup> Relativism, then, along with skepticism, must be dispensed with, and truth of an absolute nature is attainable.

#### APRIORISM

One of the chief failures of empiricism was its theory of

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<sup>2</sup>Clark, Christian View 297.



the tabula rasa. Empiricism could not consistently show that the mind at birth had no innate ideas or structures. Some concepts, at least, cannot be derived from sensations, and have to be assumed of the mind from the start. "Adam was created having knowledge," writes Clark. "In the split second of his creation, Adam, before he could rub his eyes and see the sun, had a knowledge of God, and of logic too."<sup>3</sup> That there must be something in the mind a priori is a theme of vital importance in Clark's epistemology:

Man's mind is not initially a blank. It is structured. In fact, an unstructured blank is no mind at all. Nor could any such sheet of white paper extract any universal law of logic from finite experience. No universal and necessary proposition can be deduced from sensory observation. Universality and necessity can only be apriori.<sup>4</sup>

According to Clark, the basic structure of the mind consists of the a priori forms of logic. The laws of logic, in particular, the law of contradiction, are the foundational principles by which the mind thinks. "One cannot write a book or speak a sentence that means anything without using the law of contradiction," writes Clark. "Logic is an innate necessity, not

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<sup>3</sup>Gordon H. Clark, Faith and Saving Faith (Jefferson: Trinity, 1983) 113-114.

<sup>4</sup>Clark, Language 139.

an arbitrary convention that may be discarded at will."<sup>5</sup>

If asked for proof that logic is innate Clark's reply is that "logic cannot be 'explained' or 'proved' or deduced from anything else because it is absolutely and without exception basic."<sup>6</sup> Logic, then, is the self-attesting form of the mind without which we cannot think anything.

Clark finds a biblical basis for his repudiation of the blank mind, and for his assertion that the mind is structured with logic, in the doctrine of the image of God. The book of Genesis tells us that "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."<sup>7</sup> God created man like himself, and man is God's image.<sup>8</sup> This implies that the mind has an a priori structure, for "if Adam is the image of God he could not have had a blank mind for the simple reason that God's mind is not a blank."<sup>9</sup>

Another passage which Clark uses to support this point is Colossians 3:10, which says that the Christian has "put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator."<sup>10</sup> Man was originally created having knowledge.<sup>11</sup> For

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<sup>5</sup>Clark, Religion 150.

<sup>6</sup>Clark, Three Types 27.

<sup>7</sup>Gen. 1:27. C.f., Gen. 1:26; 5:1; 9:6. All biblical quotations are taken from the New International Version.

<sup>8</sup>Clark "Debate" tape 1.

<sup>9</sup>Clark "Debate" tape 1.

<sup>10</sup>Emphasis mine.

Clark this means that "man is rational in the likeness of God's rationality. His mind is structured as Aristotelian logic described it."<sup>12</sup> Both the mind of God and man think according to a pattern, a pattern of logic, which was first described in detail by Aristotle, and can be reduced to the law of contradiction.

In several of his writings Clark proposes a unique translation of the term Logos, in John 1:1, with the term Logic, so that it reads, "In the beginning was the Logic, and the Logic was with God, and the Logic was God."<sup>13</sup> This is done "for the sake of forceful emphasis,"<sup>14</sup> to make the point that "the law of contradiction is not to be taken as an axiom prior to or independent of God. The law is God thinking."<sup>15</sup> Clark also refers to John 1:9 which tells us that the Logos is "the true light that gives light to every man." Logic is the characteristic pattern of God's thinking,<sup>16</sup> as well as of man's, who is his image, and who has been enlightened, or given this logical rationality, by the Logos.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast to empiricism, which could not provide an

<sup>11</sup>Clark "Debate" tape 1.

<sup>12</sup>Clark Language 138.

<sup>13</sup>Clark Festschrift 68.

<sup>14</sup>Clark Festschrift 118.

<sup>15</sup>Clark Festschrift 67.

<sup>16</sup>Clark Festschrift 68.

<sup>17</sup>Clark Defense 87.



objective, universal basis for communication, Clark points out that his view of innate logic does just that:

Communication is possible because all minds have at least some thoughts in common. This is so because God created man a rational spirit, a mind capable of thinking, worshipping, and talking to God. . . .

Language therefore is built upon the laws of logic.<sup>18</sup> Language and communication are possible not only between human beings, but Clark especially makes it clear that it is possible also with God. In fact, the chief purpose of language was for God to reveal truth to man, and for man to pray to God.<sup>19</sup> It is quite clear from Genesis 1 and 2 that Adam was made with a predisposition for communication and enjoyed conversation with God.<sup>20</sup> Innate logic, after the pattern of God's mind, makes it possible for God to reveal his law and the way of salvation to man, and for man to communicate that message to the ends of the earth.

In addition to the fact that man's mind is made to be the image of God, Clark also points out that our minds, unlike God's, have been affected by sin. Clark thoroughly adheres to the doctrine of total depravity and the noetic effects of sin. But he adamantly held to the view that sin does not erase entirely the logical structure of our mind. The laws of logic themselves

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<sup>18</sup>Clark Language 152.

<sup>19</sup>Clark "Special Divine Revelation" 41.

<sup>20</sup>Clark "Debate" tape 1 and Festschrift 81.

are not affected or invalidated by sin. Rather, the effect of sin is such that it causes man to make mistakes in the application of the laws of logic so that man's reasoning is frequently fallacious. Clark argues that before the fall Adam's syllogisms were always valid, but afterward he fell into fallacies. He writes: "Sin had no effect on logic. Logic is the form of God's thought and a valid syllogism is valid even if it is the devil himself who uses it."<sup>21</sup> Because of sin people fall into two sorts of error: (1) they often make invalid inferences; and (2) they often choose false premises.<sup>22</sup> These effects of sin can cause mistakes as mundane as being unable to balance a checkbook, and as profound as having a completely erroneous worldview. But it must be stressed that for Clark the law of contradiction is neither destroyed, nor in any way impaired, by sin. The law itself is not sinful; rather, it is man's violations of the law which are.<sup>23</sup>

It is important to note that although there is some similarity, Clark's view of innate logic is not to be identified with the view of epistemology called rationalism, which is commonly associated with the seventeenth century philosophers Descarte, Leibnitz and Spinoza. Rationalism as a method begins with some innate idea, some "first truth," which "must of

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<sup>21</sup>Gordon H. Clark, The Biblical Doctrine of Man (Jefferson: Trinity, 1984) 74.

<sup>22</sup>Clark Man 74.

<sup>23</sup>Clark, Festschrift 76.

necessity be a self-proving truth, a truth to deny which proves it true,"<sup>24</sup> such as Descarte's cogito ergo sum (I think, therefore I am). Just as "the theorems of geometry are deduced from their axioms," with one or several of these first truths the rationalist attempts to deduce logically an entire system of truth about God and nature.<sup>25</sup> All truths are deduced from the first truth. The whole body of knowledge is derived from reason alone, in contrast to empiricism which starts with sensation.

Clark, in distinction from rationalism, does not contend that the laws of logic, or any other idea, constitute a first truth from which all other truth is derived. Logic is the form of man's mind, the way in which he thinks; it is not the source of truth. Truth, however, is the object of thought, or what man thinks. An entire system of truth cannot be deduced from the law of contradiction, nor from some clear and certain first truth. The history of philosophy has shown that rationalism has failed in this attempt.<sup>26</sup> But if empiricism has failed, and if rationalism cannot deduce all truth from a first truth, then how do we arrive at truth? For Clark, specific truths must come from some other source, a matter which shall be taken up later in this chapter.

Outside of the laws of logic, Clark's writings do not give any lengthy development of other innate ideas or structures of

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<sup>24</sup>Clark, Thales 311.

<sup>25</sup>Clark, Religion, 52.

<sup>26</sup>Clark, Religion 53



the mind. At some points he indicates that there are other such structures. In one place Clark asserts that man has "an innate idea of God."<sup>27</sup> In another he writes that the concepts of "universality and necessity can only be apriori."<sup>28</sup> In his arguments against empiricism he indicated that the concepts of space, time and mathematics are innate. Ronald Nash, in an essay on Clark's epistemology in the Festschrift, said that Clark's writings suggest that the apriori categories of the mind include causality, unity, space, time, substance, truth, and God.<sup>29</sup> Clark, however, did not elucidate his ideas on these other aprioris and only seems to mention them in passing. As far as innate categories are concerned, his emphasis was always on the laws of logic, in particular the law of contradiction, which shows his absolute insistence on this aspect of the image of God.

#### THE NATURE AND SOURCE OF TRUTH

We now turn our attention to Clark's development of the concept of truth focusing on what sort of an entity truth is.

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<sup>27</sup>Clark, Religion 142.

<sup>28</sup>Clark, "Lectures," tape 15 and Language 139.

<sup>29</sup>Nash, Festschrift 143.

Following in the tradition of Augustine,<sup>30</sup> Clark develops several important characteristics of truth. Truth is an entity which must be immutable, eternal, universal and mental or spiritual. First of all, truth cannot change, a point which seems obvious upon reflection. If truth changed with respect to different societies and different ages, then a "truth" could be both true and untrue, which, of course, is a logical contradiction, and hence cannot be the case. "What is true today always has been and always will be true. . . . To speak of truth as changing is a misuse of language and a violation of logic," writes Clark.<sup>31</sup>

Now if we grant the previous point, a little more reflection will show that "the concept of the immutability of truth includes the ideas that it is eternal and universal."<sup>32</sup> If truth does not change, then it does not change with respect to time, and it is thus eternal. And again, if truth does not change, then it does not change with respect to space, and it is thus universal. Truth, then, has always existed, and is not created, but rather discovered, by individual persons of different cultures and different times.<sup>33</sup> Truth transcends the

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<sup>30</sup>Nash in Festschrift 158-161 gives an excellent summary of Clark's view of truth.

<sup>31</sup>Clark, Christian View 319.

<sup>32</sup>Clark, Christian View 61.

<sup>33</sup>Clark, Christian View 321.

finite and mutable mind of man.<sup>34</sup>

Truth is also a mental or spiritual entity. Truth essentially is "a meaning," "a significance," or "a thought."<sup>35</sup> In his book Behaviorism and Christianity,<sup>36</sup> Clark assails the notion that truth and thought can be reduced to a physical-chemical movement or reaction in the brain. For one thing, this would eliminate the possibility of communication, since no two people could have the same thought because no two people have exactly the same physical movements in the brain.<sup>37</sup> Truth cannot be a material object nor the result of a physical process. It must therefore be a spiritual reality.

Another important characteristic of truth in Clark's thought is that it is always in the form of a proposition, meaning that it is always in the form of a statement in which a predicate is either affirmed or denied of a subject. It makes no sense to say that an idea or concept such as "tree," "man," "God," or "dog" is true, for "a noun all by itself is neither true nor false."<sup>38</sup> For Clark, "Nothing can be true in a literal sense of the term except the attribution of a predicate to a subject."<sup>39</sup> Truth is

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<sup>34</sup>Nash, Festschrift 160.

<sup>35</sup>Clark, Christian View 319-320.

<sup>36</sup>Jefferson: Trinity 1982.

<sup>37</sup>Clark, Christian View 319-320.

<sup>38</sup>Clark, Language 97.

<sup>39</sup>Gordon H. Clark, "The Bible as Truth," Bibliotheca Sacra 114 (1957): 157-170.



always a proposition, such as "the dog is brown," or "God is three persons in one substance," and a general term such as "Justification," or "Trinity," is simply a name given to a series of propositions on a particular subject.<sup>40</sup>

Now while each individual truth is in the form of a proposition, when combined with other truths the result must be a logically consistent system of true propositions. This view of truth is sometimes called the coherence theory, for it holds that there is a logical coherence among truths.<sup>41</sup> For Clark it is self-evident that if any "truth" in a proposed theory or system contradicts another "truth" in that same system, then the system is "internally inconsistent," and "the complex must be rejected."<sup>42</sup> Clark writes:

Instead of a series of disconnected propositions, truth will be a rational system, a logically ordered series, somewhat like geometry with its theorems and axioms, its implications and presuppositions. And each will derive its significance from the whole.<sup>43</sup>

Truth is like an intricate jigsaw puzzle, or a "marvelous mosaic," in which all the pieces are interrelated and held together by logical implication. The finite mind of man will not be able to see the puzzle in its entirety, but it is most

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<sup>40</sup>Clark, Language 135.

<sup>41</sup>Nash, Festschrift 138.

<sup>42</sup>Clark, Christian View 30.

<sup>43</sup>Clark, Christian View 24-25.

certainly seen by the omniscient God.<sup>44</sup>

With the preceding definition of truth in mind we come to the most difficult question of how such truth can be attained. Truth is an immutable, eternal, universal, logically consistent set of propositions. Where can it be found? Certainly man, with his finite limitations, could not produce it. The epistemological attempts which begin with man--both empiricism and rationalism--have not succeeded. The source of truth, then, as it has been defined, must be God, for he alone is immutable, eternal, omnipresent and self-consistent. But how can man get to God? Or how can God's truth get to man? Natural theology was unable even to logically demonstrate God's existence. By what method does Clark bring us to God and his eternal truth?

Clark's method for guaranteeing the possession of truth is frequently termed presuppositionalism, for its premise is that all philosophies rely upon certain basic, irreducible presuppositions. Every epistemology has a certain starting-point, an unprovable assumption with which it begins.<sup>45</sup> The sooner this is admitted, the sooner progress can be made in epistemology. "There must be first principles," writes Clark. "A system cannot start unless it starts. The start is first."<sup>46</sup> Any system of philosophy which claims to be free of an assumed starting point is doomed to failure because it cannot escape the

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<sup>44</sup>Clark, Christian View 24.

<sup>45</sup>Clark, Christian View 29.

<sup>46</sup>Clark, Three Types 106.

insurmountable problem of infinite regress.<sup>47</sup> The propositions of any system can be deduced from prior propositions, and these from more prior propositions, but eventually one must come to a proposition which cannot be deduced from anything prior or one's deductions will go on ad infinitum.<sup>48</sup> Empiricism can be traced back to the unproven assumption of the infallibility of sensation. Rationalism can be traced back to some unproven innate idea or first truth, such as "I think." So too, with every other system, there is some starting point, some assumption which cannot be logically demonstrated, out of which flows the entire system.

With this recognition that every system of thought has a starting point comes the acknowledgement that a choice of one's starting point must be made. Although "philosophically minded" people "may be repelled by the notion of choice because it seems to smack of unphilosophical arbitrariness," nevertheless, the choice cannot be escaped.<sup>49</sup> He writes:

Choice. . . is unavoidable because first principles cannot be demonstrated, and though some choices are arbitrary, the philosophical choice has regard to the widest possible consistency. Choice therefore is as legitimate as it is inevitable.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Clark, Three Types 104.

<sup>48</sup>Clark, Defense 31.

<sup>49</sup>Clark, Christian View 33.

<sup>50</sup>Clark, Christian View 33-34.



The philosopher, then, must choose a starting point, not arbitrarily or by "personal whim"; instead, the choice must be "the result of a long course of study to organize one's universe. It is made with a fairly clear consciousness of the implications in many fields of inquiry."<sup>51</sup>

The important question which comes to mind concerns the criteria for choosing a starting point. If every system has a starting point, then there are a great many from which to choose. How does Clark rationally (not by personal whim) determine which starting point will guarantee the system of truth which he desires?

Clark's first and most important criterion for choosing a starting point is called coherence, which, as was mentioned earlier, refers to logical consistency.<sup>52</sup> If truth is logically self-consistent, then any starting-point which contains within itself a logical contradiction must be rejected. The test for self consistency is like the procedure in geometry called reductio ad absurdum. Clark explains:

A thesis has been proposed for examination, for example, that the interior angles of a triangle are greater than 180 degrees. From this assumption a series of deductions is made, until finally it is demonstrated that this thesis implies that a right angle is equal to an obtuse angle. This conclusion is

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<sup>51</sup>Clark, Christian View 33.

<sup>52</sup>Clark, Christian View 31.

absurd or self-contradictory; the logic by which it was deduced from the thesis is valid; therefore the thesis is false.<sup>53</sup>

The same procedure must be applied to philosophical starting-points by tracing out all of the implications to the end in order to discover an inherent contradiction. A very simple example of this can be seen in the philosophy of Logical Positivism. One of the presuppositions of Positivism is that in order for a statement to be true it must be empirically verifiable. It is apparent, however, that this statement itself is a dogmatic assertion which cannot be verified empirically, and hence cannot be true. Positivism fails for lack of coherence. Again, earlier in the chapter it was noted that skepticism implies an inherent self-contradiction. It would therefore follow that any presupposition which implied skepticism could not be true. The incoherence of other systems may not be so obvious, but the same test must be applied to all competing presuppositions. Indeed, a great part of Clark's writings are devoted to that task.

Clark was aware of the possibility that there might be two or more systems which mutually contradict each other, yet which are entirely coherent within themselves. Hence the coherence criterion for choosing a starting point, though necessary, is not a sufficient condition for accepting system as true. Another criterion for making a reasonable choice of one's starting point is necessary. Clark does not give this criterion a specific

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<sup>53</sup>Clark, Christian View 30-31.

label, but perhaps it can best be summed up by saying that no starting point should be chosen unless it can give meaning or significance to life.

This second criterion is not as thoroughly developed by Clark as that of coherence. But by putting together occasional references made to this concept we obtain some idea of what Clark meant by a meaningful life. Clark is dissatisfied with irrationalism because "it cannot assign a purpose, reason, or justification for living."<sup>54</sup> Thus, unless a system can guarantee that there is a rational purpose for living, or that there is a fixed goal towards which history is developing, it must be rejected. An acceptable system must give significance to history; it must guarantee that "human hopes and fears in this life contribute to the quality of a life after death, when two types of men will receive their separate destinies."<sup>55</sup> In addition to having a purpose or goal, a meaningful life will be one in which there are absolute principles of right and wrong, which give us guidance in the everyday situations of life. One of the chief failures of systems which Clark has examined was that "not one of them could give a satisfactory reason for believing one act to be right and another act to be wrong."<sup>56</sup> A system which does not provide an adequate basis for ethics is unacceptable. Finally, a meaningful life is one in which there

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<sup>54</sup>Clark, Three Types 102.

<sup>55</sup>Clark, Christian View 93.

<sup>56</sup>Clark, Christian View 187.



are solutions to the problems of life. This concept is basically undeveloped by Clark, but he does indicate that the system which "can provide plausible solutions to many problems" is preferable to one which "leaves too many questions unanswered."<sup>57</sup> Clark thought of the world as "a very intricate puzzle."<sup>58</sup> The system which can make the most pieces fit together is the one which gives the most meaning to life, and thus is the one to be accepted.

Using these two criteria for selecting a starting point we must make our choice. For Clark the fundamental choice is between a system which presupposes the existence of God and those systems which do not. A large part of Clark's writings were devoted to a reductio ad absurdum on secular, non-theistic systems of thought. Such systems were found to be inadequate on the basis of his criteria. However, if the existence of God is assumed as part of the starting point, then many of the pieces of the puzzle of life fall into place. It is important to note that for Clark God's existence cannot be proven and must be assumed. The only way to get to God is to start with God.

Starting with God, then, we observe that there is a rational basis for truth as Clark has defined it. Non-theistic systems, which must begin with man, are unable to guarantee the existence of immutable, eternal, universal true propositions. It is impossible to arrive at universal judgments on the basis of

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<sup>57</sup>Clark, Christian View 34.

<sup>58</sup>Clark, Christian View 18.

limited experience.<sup>59</sup> But with God such truth is possible since by nature he is an immutable, eternal, and universal being.

In order for his system to be adequate, however, Clark must assume more than the existence of God. He must also assume that God has spoken, that he has revealed his word, his truth, to mankind. Thus his starting point includes the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Put more concisely, Clark's starting point or "axiom" is "the Bible is the Word of God."<sup>60</sup>

With the assumption of God and his revelation in the Bible we have a starting point which can fulfill the criteria previously mentioned. First of all, this starting point meets the test of coherence. God is a logically consistent being, and therefore his word also exemplifies the same consistency. An examination of the Bible shows that it exhibits logical--though not necessarily systematic--organization. The Bible was revealed to man in propositional form and it can be formulated into a system of truth which contains no contradiction. For Clark this systematizing of the propositions of the Bible was best accomplished in the Westminster Confession of Faith.<sup>61</sup> This document shows that there is a logical harmony or coherence within God's word.

Secondly, the presupposition of God and the Bible as his word, more than any other starting point, best meets the

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<sup>59</sup>Clark, Festschrift 93.

<sup>60</sup>Clark, Festschrift 88.

<sup>61</sup>Clark, Religion 24.

criterion of a meaningful life. In Christian View Clark attempts to show how various teachings of scripture offer reasonable solutions to philosophical problems in history, politics, ethics, religion and epistemology. In contrast to other systems, it is argued "that Christianity is self-consistent, that it gives meaning to life and morality, and that it supports the existence of truth and the possibility of knowledge."<sup>62</sup> In another place he writes:

Secular philosophy. . . has been shown to be a failure. Verbal revelation of Scripture solves the problems of epistemology, history, ethics, and religion. It distinguishes truth from error. It preserves intelligibility. It banishes mysticism, emotionalism, and despair. And by it we receive the Reason of God, that is, God himself.<sup>63</sup>

Although Scripture may not give a clear answer to every question which life presents, yet it answers in an adequate way far more questions than secular systems, and it gives an overall significance and purpose to life in general. Therefore, since we must choose, our best choice of a starting point is God and his word.

It must be asserted that for Clark all truth which is available to man is limited to the propositions of scripture and whatever may be validly deduced from them. There is no other

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<sup>62</sup>Clark, Christian View 324.

<sup>63</sup>Clark, Festschrift 122.



source nor any other method by which it can be attained. "Theism bases its knowledge on divinely revealed propositions. They may not give us all truth; they may give us very little truth; but there is no truth at all otherwise."<sup>64</sup> Clark admits that with this starting point there are spheres of life in which we will remain in ignorance, such as zoology or many periods of history, for the Bible does not mention such things. The Bible does not tell us all that there is to know, only what is necessary to know. But there is no better alternative. What little knowledge we do receive from Scripture, therefore, should be received with thanksgiving.<sup>65</sup>

#### THE NATURE OF PERSONS, THOUGHT, AND KNOWING

With this overview of Clark's theory of truth in mind, we turn our attention to the question of what it means to think and know, both for man and God. Simply put, "knowledge means the possession of truth."<sup>66</sup> But what does it mean to be in possession of truth? For Clark all knowing for man takes the form of faith.<sup>67</sup> Following Augustine, Clark speaks of faith as

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<sup>64</sup>Clark, Defense 117.

<sup>65</sup>Clark, Festschrift 63.

<sup>66</sup>Clark, Christian View 323.

<sup>67</sup>Clark, Christian View 324.

an intellectual assent: "Belief is the act of assenting to something understood."<sup>68</sup> The object of faith is always a proposition.<sup>69</sup> One can never simply believe in a thing, such as a tree; rather, one must believe in a statement about the thing, such as "the tree is green." The key to knowledge is in the proposition to which we assent. If the proposition is true, and assent is given to it, then knowledge is in our possession. It is possible to believe a proposition which is untrue, and this, of course, would not constitute knowing. But whenever there is intellectual assent to a true proposition there is an act of knowing.

Several paragraphs earlier the point was made that for Clark truth is of a non-physical, or spiritual, nature. The same is true of the activity of thinking and knowing. Behavioristic theorists, such as Watson, Singer, Ryle and Skinner, have contended that thought is a physical process or motion which occurs in the brain. Clark uses the following words to describe this view:

This language presupposes, though it does not explicitly assert, that the brain, the squeezable moist gray stuff, can think and have emotions. Since the stuff is physical, its activity must be physical motions and chemical changes. Hence the implication is

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<sup>68</sup>Gordon H. Clark, Faith and Saving Faith (Jefferson: Trinity 1983) 51.

<sup>69</sup>Clark, Faith 36.

that thought and emotion are physical and chemical reactions, fundamentally identical to what happens in any test tube. Thinking is a visible--visible in principle--chemical reaction. The motion is thought.<sup>70</sup>

We have already noted that one argument Clark brings against this view is that it makes communication impossible. No two persons could ever have the same thought since they could never share the same brain motion, and hence one thought could never be conveyed from one person to another, which is the essence of communication.<sup>71</sup> It would also follow that this view would make memory impossible, for a person never experiences the exact same physical motion twice and hence never the same thought twice.<sup>72</sup> Thirdly, Clark argues that Behaviorism does not have a reasonable basis for distinguishing between something true and something false. He writes: "If certain brains and muscles perform motions called behaviorism, are they any more true than my brains and muscles whose intricate reaction is called Christianity? Reduce thinking to chemistry and no distinction between truth and error remains. Behaviorism has committed the suicide of self-contradiction."<sup>73</sup> Clark's point could be summed up with an

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<sup>70</sup>Clark, Behaviorism 48.

<sup>71</sup>Gordon H. Clark, "Behaviorism," Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics, ed., Carl F. H. Henry (Great Neck: Harbor-Channel, 1957) 55.

<sup>72</sup>Clark, Behaviorism 71.

<sup>73</sup>Clark, Man 29.



illustration which he borrows from Leibniz: If the brain could be compared to an enlarged grist mill, and we could enter and walk through it, we would see the wheels and pulleys working on one another, but nowhere would we see a thought.<sup>74</sup> This is because thought is essentially a spiritual reality.

In his classes Clark sometimes referred to the scriptures to refute behaviorism and to make the point that thought is a spiritual activity and that man is essentially a spiritual being and not a body.<sup>75</sup> For one thing, he noted that God is essentially a spirit who thinks (John 4:23-24). If man is made in his image, then man too is a spirit (Genesis 2:7) who thinks non-physical thoughts. Clark also cited the fact that Moses was on the mount of transfiguration engaging in a conversation with Christ (which presupposes thought), yet Moses had been dead and buried for 1500 years and his brain had long since decayed (Deuteronomy 34:5-6). This was possible because Moses is an immortal spirit and thought is a function of the spirit. In Philipians 1:20-23 Paul speaks of his desire to depart from his body (which includes his brain), and be present with Christ, which would be a far better state of existence. To be able to enjoy Christ in such a state would again presuppose that Paul could exist and think apart from the body, which implies the spiritual nature of thought. In II Corinthians 12:1-6 Paul

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<sup>74</sup>Clark, Behaviorism 71.

<sup>75</sup>Note that the terms "spirit," "mind," or "soul" are used interchangeably.

recounts an experience he had of being caught up to to the third heaven and hearing "inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell." Of this experience Paul says that he does not know whether it occurred "in the body, or out of the body." Clark argues that this passage shows that man is essentially not a body but a spirit: "Quite obviously the he cannot be the body, for he, Paul, could be either in the body or out of it."<sup>76</sup> Similar passages, such as that of the thief on the cross, could be cited, but the obvious point is that "the mind is the person, and the body is in some sense the person's tool."<sup>77</sup>

With the point having been made that man is a spirit and not a body, we consider, more precisely, just what a spirit or mind is. For Clark the definition of the human spirit can be discovered through a word-study of the Biblical term "heart." Contemporary theologians have made a false distinction between the head and the heart. For them the head refers to the intellect and the heart refers to the emotions of man. In actuality the heart is more equivalent to the English term "self."<sup>78</sup> Based on a word-study of the Old Testament, the term is used as a metaphor to refer to man's intellect, will and emotions, depending on the situation.<sup>79</sup> In fact, the term is used most frequently to mean intellect--at least seventy-five

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<sup>76</sup>Clark, Man 10.

<sup>77</sup>Clark, Behaviorism 35-36.

<sup>78</sup>Clark, Religion 92.

<sup>79</sup>Clark, Faith 66-78.

percent of the time.<sup>80</sup> This indicates a primacy of the intellect: "The preponderance of the intellectual references shows the preponderance of the intellect in the personality."<sup>81</sup> For practical purposes this means that the other two elements, the will and emotions, are to be in subjection to the intellect, or more particularly, to truth.<sup>82</sup>

Although there is this sort of hierarchy between intellect and will and emotion, Clark also argues strongly for the essential unity of the person. The intellect and the will are not to be regarded as two separate faculties, after the manner of faculty psychology. Instead they interpenetrate in a single mental state so that it is difficult and perhaps impossible to separate them in time and in definition.<sup>83</sup> Although we may use the word "intellect," there is in fact no intellect but only intellectual acts. The same is true for will and emotions.<sup>84</sup> Man is not a compound of these three things, but rather these three are separate activities of a single consciousness.

Concerning the question of individuation, Clark identified his view as that of infima species. The theory of individuation concerns the matter of how an individual person or object can be

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<sup>80</sup>Clark, Faith 66.

<sup>81</sup>Gordon H. Clark, "Faith and Reason," Christianity Today February 18, 1957: 8-10; March 4, 1957: 11-15.

<sup>82</sup>Clark, "Faith and Reason," 10.

<sup>83</sup>Clark, "Faith and Reason," 10.

<sup>84</sup>Clark, Religion 94.



identified as such in distinction from all other persons or objects. For Clark a person or an object is not individuated by occupying a certain part of space or by being present for a certain duration of time. Instead, a person or object "is an individual because it has, or is, a complex of qualities which no other individual has."<sup>85</sup> A certain object can be individuated from all other objects because it has a combination of qualities which no other object possesses.

When it comes to human beings, the quality which distinguishes one from another are the thoughts which a person has. He writes: "The Scripture itself reminds us that 'As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.' Cannot we infer that a man is what he thinks?"<sup>86</sup> A man, then, is what he thinks; he is a collection of thoughts, "and no two men have precisely the same combination."<sup>87</sup> More specifically, man always thinks in terms of propositions, for each thought can be reduced to a proposition. This leads Clark to assert that "a person can be identified only by a set of propositions."<sup>88</sup> Clark is forced to admit that his position on individuation--that a man can be defined by a set of propositions--implies that no human person can ever fully know himself, for self-knowledge entails an immediate grasp of every

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<sup>85</sup>Gordon H. Clark, Clark Speaks From The Grave (Jefferson: Trinity, 1986) 67.

<sup>86</sup>Gordon H. Clark, The Trinity (Jefferson: Trinity, 1985) 105.

<sup>87</sup>Clark, Trinity 106.

<sup>88</sup>Clark, Faith 50.

proposition a person will ever think. The same is true of knowledge of others. Only God fully knows himself and others. Although such a view may be uncomfortable, Clark finds support in the scripture which says that "the heart of man is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"<sup>89</sup>

There are several important points to make about Clark's views of the knowledge of God. First of all, as we have already noted, God Himself is the source of all truth. A proposition is true because God decrees or thinks it so.<sup>90</sup> Secondly, in contrast to man's knowledge, God's knowledge is an eternal intuition. On the one hand, man learns (believes truths new to himself) by acquiring true propositions from scripture, and by making valid deductions from such true propositions. But God, on the other hand, never learns. To say so would be a denial of God's omniscience, for it would imply that "he must have previously been ignorant."<sup>91</sup> Instead, all knowledge is immediately and intuitively grasped by God forever without interruption. God does not reason in the sense of one idea passing to another in time. He knows all things at a glance.<sup>92</sup> Thirdly, all truth in God's mind is interrelated by logical (not

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<sup>89</sup>Jeremiah 17:9.

<sup>90</sup>Clark, Festschrift 66.

<sup>91</sup>Gordon H. Clark, Biblical Predestination (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969) 38.

<sup>92</sup>Gordon H. Clark, "Knowledge," Baker's Dictionary of Theology (1960): 314-315.

temporal) succession.<sup>93</sup> He sees every valid deduction from every possible premise. In a certain sense we could say that knowledge in God's mind is an infinite syllogism. Finally, it would follow from what has been said earlier, that God's knowledge can be delivered to man in the form of propositions.<sup>94</sup>

From the previous paragraph it might sound as if God's knowledge is so superior to man's that man could not possibly know something in the same way God does. Many theologians have held such a view, saying that there is a qualitative distinction between God's and man's knowledge. Neo-orthodox theologians, following Kant, stressed the transcendence of God to the point that they maintained that man, who lives in the phenomenal realm, can know nothing of God, who dwells in the noumenal realm. Others, not necessarily neo-orthodox, have maintained that since God knows all things, and man does not, all the specific truths which God knows he must know in a way which is completely different from man. Clark, while not denying that God is a transcendent being who is incomprehensible to man, asserts that man can know at least some of the mind of God, and that in the same way as God does. The knowledge in both God and man is the same in that it can be reduced to propositions, and is interconnected by valid logic. The only difference is that God knows all true propositions and all logical connections, while man knows only some. There is a "quantitative," not a

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<sup>93</sup>Clark, "Knowledge," 315.

<sup>94</sup>Clark, Trinity 80.



"qualitative" difference in their knowledge. In this sense, then, God is incomprehensible: "Man does not and cannot know everything God knows."<sup>95</sup> God knows an infinite number of propositions, while man knows only some.

Yet Clark is quick to stress that the propositions man does know, he knows as God knows. Man's knowledge is univocal to God's. Although God sees all the interconnections between propositions, and man does not, yet man can know a simple proposition, such as "two plus two equals four," exactly as God does. He writes:

This arithmetical proposition is true and the greatest mathematician cannot disprove it. But the mathematician sees this truth in relation to a science of numbers; he understands how this sum contributes to phases of mathematics that the child does not dream of and may never learn; he recognizes that the significance of the proposition depends on its place in the system. But the child in school knows that two and two are four, and this that the child knows is true. Omniscience, even higher mathematics, is not a prerequisite for first grade.<sup>96</sup>

In connection with this idea that what man knows he knows as God knows, is the idea that the relationship between God's and man's mind is one of interpenetration. Clark notes several

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<sup>95</sup>Clark, Trinity 73.

<sup>96</sup>Clark, Christian View 26.

scriptural passages. I Corinthians 2:16 says that the believer has "the mind of Christ." The believer's mind, in part, is the same as Christ's.<sup>97</sup> Philipians 2:12-13 teaches that God is at work in the Christian both to will and to do. This implies that God's mind penetrates the Christian's mind to control his will.<sup>98</sup> But the most significant passage for Clark is Acts 17:28, which says, "in him we live and move and have our being." This means that "human minds in some degree overlap or penetrate each other, and the Divine Mind that encloses or surrounds all others penetrates them completely."<sup>99</sup> This overlapping of minds assures us that the knowledge of man is univocal to the knowledge of God. Of course, though our minds overlap it does not follow that our minds are "coextensive" with God's, for His mind extends infinitely beyond man's.<sup>100</sup>

### ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this section we shall consider some of Clark's themes in epistemology as they apply to ethics.

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<sup>97</sup>Clark, Festschrift 406.

<sup>98</sup>Clark, Christian View 322.

<sup>99</sup>Clark, Christian View 322.

<sup>100</sup>Clark, Festschrift 407.

First of all, we must understand that knowledge is the basis for ethical responsibility. As was discussed earlier in this chapter, an important point in Clark's epistemology is that man has an a priori structure to the mind because he is made in the image of God. Man was created as a rational being, having the innate laws of logic, and capable of attaining knowledge. That man is such a being is of great importance in ethics because, according to Clark, rationality and knowledge are the essential prerequisites for ethical responsibility. The very possibility for doing something right or wrong presupposes rationality or understanding, and because the other animals lack this innate feature they can neither be righteous nor sin.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, not only must there be a rational structure to the mind, but there must also be some actual knowledge in order to do right or wrong. "Responsibility depends on knowledge," he writes.<sup>102</sup> In order for man to be capable of doing right or wrong he must first know what is right or wrong. Clark uses several scriptural passages to support this point, such as John 15:22, where Jesus says, "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin." All people have innate rationality, and even those who do not accept God's written revelation have enough knowledge, through general revelation, to make them responsible and guilty before God (Romans 1:32).<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup>Clark, Festschrift 74.

<sup>102</sup>Clark, Defense 110.



Secondly, just as Clark rejects Rationalism as an approach to epistemology, he also rejects rationalistic theories of ethics. We shall consider two such theories which Clark rejects: Intuitionism, and the ethics of Kant.

Intuitionism is a rationalistic theory of ethics which derives moral norms from "intuitions." Like Descarte's clear and certain first truth, an intuition is an innate cognition, a self-evident truth, attained without syllogistical reasoning, and in need of no other proof than its own existence. Ethical Intuitionism holds that moral principles are of the nature of such an intuition; they are self-evidently true and therefore morally binding.<sup>104</sup>

An example of an early intuitionist is Henry More (1617-1687). More believed that the human mind contains twenty-three "Noemata Moralia," or ethical principles which are immediately true and need not be proven. An example of one of these principles is the following:

What is good is to be chosen; what is evil to be avoided: but the more excellent Good is preferable to the less excellent; and a less Evil is to be borne, that we may avoid a greater.<sup>105</sup>

Another intuitionist, Clarke (1675-1729), believed there were

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<sup>103</sup>Gordon, H. Clark, "Apologetics," Contemporary Evangelical Thought, Ed., Carl F. H. Henry (Great Neck: Harber-Channel, 1957) 158.

<sup>104</sup>Clark, Christian View 177.

<sup>105</sup>Quoted in Clark, Christian View 178.

only four self-evident moral rules: (1) piety to God, (2) equity, (3) benevolence to one's neighbor, and (4) duty to one's self.<sup>106</sup> Other early intuitionists include Cudworth (1617-1688), Reid (1710-1796), and Price (1723-1791). Although they may have disagreed on the number or sort of moral intuitions, they all agreed with the basic notion that our moral principles are self-evident truths.

Now Clark, as we have seen, is certainly not opposed to the notion of an innate concept. He does, however, express two difficulties with Ethical Intuitionism. First of all, for Clark "the ideal in logical systems is to make as few assumptions as possible and to deduce as many theorems as possible."<sup>107</sup> But unfortunately, "the intuitionists from More's time on have been consistently guilty of too great a liberality in ultimate principles."<sup>108</sup> The trouble lies not so much in the concept of an intuition, but in the number of intuitions necessary to make up a reasonable system of ethics. Clark suggests that such a system should have "a single principle, or at most two or three, but certainly not two or three dozen."<sup>109</sup>

The second difficulty with Intuitionism is that of convincing someone that a certain moral principle is indeed self-

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<sup>106</sup>Henry Sidgwick, Outlines of the History of Ethics, (London: Macmillan, 1922) 180.

<sup>107</sup>Clark, Christian View 179.

<sup>108</sup>Clark, Readings in Ethics 229.

<sup>109</sup>Clark, Christian View 179.

evident when that person does not claim to "see" it for himself.<sup>110</sup> In other words, Intuitionism is based entirely on subjectivism. Something which may seem self-evident to one person may not seem so to another. More says that there are twenty-three moral intuitions; for Clarke there are only four. Which of them is right? How are we to know for sure what the real intuitions are? We could look within ourselves for them, but we could be wrong, we could be deceived, and other people might not agree with us. It seems that the subjective nature of Intuitionism makes it an inadequate basis for deducing moral truth-claims. The source of such truth must come from elsewhere.

Henry Sidgwick, the great British ethicist of the nineteenth century, develops this point from a different perspective. On the one hand, if we claim like Henry More that there are many moral principles, we are unlikely to find many people who will agree with us on at least some of those principles. The more intuitions we claim, the less agreement there will be. On the other hand, if we claim that there are only a very few absolute moral principles, we will find that the following is true:

they are of too abstract a nature, and too universal in their scope, to enable us to ascertain by immediate application of them what we ought to do in any particular case; particular duties have still to be determined by some other method.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup>Clark, "Intuition," Dictionary of Ethics 338.

<sup>111</sup>Quoted in Clark and Smith, Readings 354.



A few moral principles are vague generalities, and it is impossible to properly apply them to specific moral situations without some additional moral information or guidance from some other source. Intuitionism, then, must be rejected because of the number, and subjective nature, of moral intuitions.

A second rationalistic approach to ethics which Clark rejects is that of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who in Clark's opinion was "the most important figure in the history of ethics."<sup>112</sup> Similar to Intuitionism, Kant believed that "all moral conceptions have their seat and origin in reason entirely a priori," and that these conceptions are apprehended by "ordinary reason" and "purely speculative activity."<sup>113</sup> Unlike the Intuitionists, Kant reduced all moral judgments to only one basic a priori principle called the Categorical Imperative, which says that universality and logical self-consistency are the necessary and sufficient conditions of a right action.

The essence of the Categorical Imperative is contained in these statements from Kant:

In all cases I must act in such a way that I can at the same time will that my maxim should become a universal law.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup>Clark, Christian View 180.

<sup>113</sup>Quoted in Clark and Smith, Readings 265.

<sup>114</sup>Quoted in Clark and Smith, Readings 261.



Act as if the maxim from which you act were to become through your will a universal law of nature.<sup>115</sup>

An action is morally right only if I can honestly will that every other person in the universe, past, present, and future, should also choose this same course of action. This is the universal character of the Categorical Imperative.

Implicit also in the Imperative is the ingredient of logical consistency. Kant uses the example of promise-keeping or truth-telling to show this. On the one hand, it is logically possible for me to will that everyone keep promises. This makes promise-keeping a moral obligation. But on the other hand, it is logically impossible to will that everyone make false promises, or to will a universal law of lying, because if there were such a law there would be no such thing as promise-keeping, yet the very notion of lying logically depends upon the prior concept of promise-keeping. In the words of Clark, "Truth telling is right, so Kant argued, because everyone can tell the truth without any logical impossibility arising in the total situation, while lying is wrong because it is logically impossible for everyone to tell lies."<sup>116</sup> There can be such a thing as promise-keeping without such a thing as lying, but there can be no lying without there also being promise-keeping. If lying were to be a universal law, then there would be no promise-keeping, yet lying cannot exist without promise-keeping, hence lying cannot logically be willed a

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<sup>115</sup>Quoted in Clark and Smith, Readings 271.

<sup>116</sup>Clark, Christian View 182.



universal law.

One inconsistency with Kant's Categorical Imperative which Clark brings to light is that the Imperative could justify certain actions which are generally held to be morally wrong. An example Clark used was suicide. When a person desires to break a promise, he wants to be an exception; he wants other people to keep their promises, he wants promise-keeping to be universally binding except for himself. The fact that he wants to be an exception makes lying immoral. But such is not the case with suicide. It is entirely possible for suicide to be universally willed without exception. "I may believe," writes Clark, "without contradicting myself, that life is evil, that suicide is the solution, and that everyone ought to commit suicide."<sup>117</sup> According to the Imperative, suicide would be a moral duty for everyone. Yet most people by far, including Kant himself, would agree that suicide is wrong.

A second problem with the Imperative which Clark exposes is that it can give no specific moral guidance in the everyday affairs of life. For example, the ability to will a certain action universally, such as the action of promise-keeping, might give me general guidance such that I know it is wrong to lie and right to keep promises. But the Imperative "never shows what promises are to be made in the first place."<sup>118</sup> Again, the Imperative might tell me that all able adults should earn a

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<sup>117</sup>Clark, Christian View 182-183.

<sup>118</sup>Clark, Christian View 185.



living, since it is possible to will this universally. But it cannot give me any guidance as to a particular way of earning a living. In fact, in a certain sense it condemns all specific ways of earning a living, since it is impossible to will that all able adults have the same job. Clark writes that "this principle cannot justify a young man in deciding to become a stock broker or in choosing the legal profession for a career; for it is impossible that all people should be lawyers or stock brokers."<sup>119</sup> Similarly, the Imperative might tell us that we are obligated to help the poor, since that can be willed universally, but it can give us no guidance as to the institution to which we should donate our money, or what other activities we should be engaged in to fulfill this mandate. An ethical system which cannot give guidance in such everyday moral matters is unacceptable.

The fact that the Imperative would also in some instances make moral obligations out of actions which are generally regarded as amoral is a third criticism which Clark mentions in his discussion of Kant. "Does the fact that it is possible for everyone to throw three grains of salt daily over the left shoulder or to avoid black cats prove that these actions are commanded by the stern voice of duty and must be performed out of reverence for law?" asks Clark.<sup>120</sup> These superstitions, and others like them, such as never walking under ladders, are

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<sup>119</sup>Clark, Christian View 185.

<sup>120</sup>Clark, Christian View 186.

actions which can be universally willed without logical inconsistency. As such, according to the Imperative, they are moral obligations. Yet few, if any, would agree that it is our moral duty to avoid walking under ladders and to throw salt over our shoulder. So the Imperative on the one hand fails to give moral guidance where it is needed, and on the other hand makes moral duties out of trivialities.

A final problem which Clark sees in Kant's Imperative has to do with the concept of motive in relation to moral duty. What should be our motive in doing what is right? For Kant there must be no self-interest involved moral duty. Obedience must be given to the law for the sake of the law alone. Respect for the law is the only legitimate moral motive, and it is "dangerous" to do what is right out of some other motive. If we do our moral duty out of any other motive, then our action may possess "legality" but not true "morality."<sup>121</sup>

The problem with such a view of motive is that it makes true moral conduct impossible. Even the person "with the best will in the world" is unable to do consistently his moral duty out of respect for the law alone. On Kant's view, if a man "loves his wife except from a sense of duty, he loves her unethically."<sup>122</sup> He may have done what is right, but there is no moral worth to his action. But surely there must be more to motive than this "frigid formalism" of Kant. Surely it is good to love one's

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<sup>121</sup>Clark, Christian View 184.

<sup>122</sup>Clark, Christian View 184.

spouse out of affection. Surely there must be some room for self-interest in what we do. For Clark self-interest is a basic fact of human nature and a legitimate motive to moral duty. Self-interest, or egoism, has a biblical foundation in the fact that there are rewards and punishments for our actions. He writes: "Not only will those who meet God's requirements be rewarded with joys unspeakable, but also a conscious desire for those rewards is legitimate motivation."<sup>123</sup>

Now a final point on Clark's epistemology in relation to ethics has to do with the nature and source of truth. In order for moral norms to be binding they must be true; they must be propositions of a universal, immutable, and eternal nature. In both epistemology and ethics, Empiricism and Rationalism have failed to justify such propositions. Relativism is self-refuting and also fails to provide absolute truths. According to Clark, the common source of the failure of the ethical systems which he has examined is their "secularism," or their lack of relating God to ethics.<sup>124</sup> If, however, we begin with God and revelation, we have a reasonable basis for asserting absolute moral norms. Moral norms originate in the authoritative will of God, and are therefore universally and immutably binding on all mankind. "Normative ethics depends on sovereign legislation and omnipotent sanctions," says Clark.<sup>125</sup> Beginning with God, we can be assured

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<sup>123</sup>Clark, Christian View 188.

<sup>124</sup>Clark, Christian View 187.

<sup>125</sup>Clark, "God," Baker's Dictionary of Theology 248.



that there will be divine sanctions for the crimes which go unpunished in this life. With his revelation in the Bible we have absolute moral commands which give us "specific guidance in the actual situations of life."<sup>126</sup> Thus we see that by beginning with the presupposition of God and the Bible we have the possibility for an ethical system which escapes the problems of other systems.

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<sup>126</sup>Clark, Christian View 189.

## CHAPTER 3

### EVALUATION OF CLARK'S EPISTEMOLOGY AND ETHICS

There are many aspects of Clark's philosophy which are plausible. We agree with Clark on the definition and source of truth, and that the mind must have some sort of a priori structure which includes the ability to think according to the laws of logic. We also agree that thought must be of a spiritual nature and man's thoughts univocal to God's. Clark has also effectively shown that all philosophies can be reduced to certain presuppositions or axioms, that a reasonable choice must be made, and that systems of epistemology and ethics which do not begin with theistic presuppositions fail. Clark has pointed out the inherent weaknesses in empiricism, demonstrating its inability to give a justification for knowledge which has logical validity at every point. However, there are a number of significant problems with Clark's philosophy, and we find that we cannot adhere to it in toto. The intent of this chapter is to point out some of these problems. In so doing, the author will survey some of the more significant criticisms which have been made against Clark by various writers in the past twenty-five or so years, and he will add a few additional criticisms of his own.

## PROBLEMS WITH CLARK'S REJECTION OF SENSE-PERCEIVED OBJECTS

Ronald Nash, in his essay entitled "Gordon Clark's theory of Knowledge," suggested that Clark actually had two theories of knowledge, an early theory, and a second theory which was first set forth by Clark in "The Wheaton Lectures" which are found in the *Festschrift*.<sup>1</sup> Nash noted that in the early view, which he finds plausible, Clark allowed for the possibility of acquiring knowledge apart from Scripture, but in the later view, which is "a most implausible position," knowledge is restricted to the propositions of scripture and whatever can be validly deduced from them. For example, in the early theory Nash maintains that Clark would have allowed for a knowledge of mathematics which is not deducible from Scripture. But not so in the later theory. In response to Nash's suggestion, Clark replied that mathematics can indeed be deduced from the "bit of arithmetic" in Scripture, and that Nash failed to provide any quote in which Clark admits to having such a distinction in his epistemology.<sup>2</sup> Although he may have given the impression of having two theories, Clark thinks there is no well-founded basis in his writings for making such a distinction. If there are any changes in his view, Clark says that it is "a greater emphasis on ignorance." "Indeed," writes Clark, "if I have learned anything at all during a lifetime of philosophy, it is the exceedingly great difficulty of

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<sup>1</sup>Nash, "Clark's Theory of Knowledge," *Festschrift* 173-175.

<sup>2</sup>Clark, "Reply To Ronald H. Nash," *Festschrift* 408.



learning anything at all."<sup>3</sup>

It is not difficult to see why Nash suggested an early and a later epistemology in Clark. There are some places in Clark's earlier writings where he gives the impression of having a knowledge of more "men and things" than seems consistent with his view which restricts knowledge to Scripture. However, for purposes of this evaluation, we shall not maintain a distinction between an early and later theory of knowledge, but shall consider Clark's writings as giving one, unified epistemology, albeit with some inconsistencies and refinements, as would be expected considering the vast amount of Clark's writings stretching over fifty years. Without question, then, it must be clear that Clark restricted all knowledge available to man, in his present state of existence, to the propositions of scripture and whatever can be validly deduced from them. There is no knowledge of any "physical" object, no possibility of being epistemologically certain that such an object is actually perceived through the sense organs, and the very existence of such objects is doubtful. This is due to the utter failure of empiricism. We can be epistemologically certain of God's revealed word only. Clark admits that on his view knowledge is limited. However, no epistemology can guarantee omniscience, and a little knowledge is better than none. Furthermore, if a theologian can validly deduce six-hundred pages of theology from

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<sup>3</sup>Clark, "Reply To Nash," Festschrift 414.

Scripture, that certainly is more than just a little knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

Using Clark's own presupposition, the Scriptures, as his basis, Robert L. Reymond of Covenant Seminary formulates a worthy ad hominem argument against Clark's rejection of any sort of sensory experience in knowledge acquisition and his restriction of all knowledge to the Scriptures. The Scriptures themselves, so Reymond argues, presuppose that sense perception is not only possible, but essential to the attainment of knowledge. He writes:

. . . there are scores of biblical passages which teach by inference, if not directly, that sensory experience plays a role in knowledge acquisition (e.g., Matt. 12:3; 19:4; 21:16; 22:32; Mark 12:10; Rom. 10:14). It seems to me, before he will convince many Christians of his position, that Clark must explain satisfactorily (in another way than is virtually universally taken) literally hundreds of passages of Scripture which employ the words "see," "hear," "read," "listen," etc.<sup>5</sup>

What else could the Scripture mean by the use of such terminology except some sort of sensory perception of the "physical" world?

In Language and Theology Clark attempts to answer Reymond's challenge to give a satisfactory explanation for the meaning of

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<sup>4</sup>Clark, "Lectures," tape 16.

<sup>5</sup>Robert L. Reymond, The Justification Of Knowledge, (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976) 114.

such terminology in Scripture apart from a sense-perception meaning. Clark cites some twenty or so passages which use the terminology of seeing and hearing, and maintains that these terms have nothing to do with sensation. For example, two passages are cited which refer to God as hearing (Job 27:9 and Psalm 3:4).

From these Clark concludes the following:

Obviously the verb hear does not designate a sensation, for God has no eardrums to be affected by air vibrations. No sensation is possible in this case. The verse in Job means, of course, that God will not favor the hypocrite by granting his petition. Similarly, Psalm 4:1, with its two instances of the verb hear, has nothing to do with sensation. The language is figurative.<sup>6</sup>

It is interesting that Clark says that the language in these verses is "figurative." In this he is quite correct. But if it is figurative, then must there not also be a "literal" meaning? And what, we ask, is the literal meaning? On the next page Clark writes, "Clearly the verb to see does not always, perhaps not even usually, refer to sensation."<sup>7</sup> Again, this statement is somewhat accurate, but it also most certainly implies the possibility of a literal, sensation, meaning to the term to see. An examination of the passages which Clark cites shows that he has selected passages which clearly use the terminology of seeing

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<sup>6</sup>Clark, Language 146.

<sup>7</sup>Clark, Language 147.



and hearing in a figurative sense.

Now it is quite clear that these terms do bear figurative meanings; they often refer to the understanding of something, as in Gen. 3:5, which says that if Man's eyes are opened he will know good and evil. But this clearly cannot be the case in all of the usages of these terms in the Scriptures, as Clark himself seemed to intimate. A simple perusal of the Gospels shows many instances of the terminology of seeing and hearing which cannot be explained in the "figurative" way which Clark recommends. Referring to the two blind men, Matt. 20:29 says that Jesus touched their eyes and they "received their sight and followed him." The "sight" in this passage cannot simply mean to understand. Matt. 21:19 says that Jesus saw a fig tree; Mark 1:36 says that Simon and his companions went to "look" for Jesus; Mark 2:16 says that the Pharisees saw Jesus eating with sinners and that Jesus heard their accusation; in Mark 5:22 Jairus saw Jesus and fell at his feet; in Mark 6:34 Jesus "saw" a large crowd; in John 3:8 Jesus says that we can "hear" the sound of the wind. Proceeding at random, one can find many such passages referring to seeing and hearing, and others referring to taste, touch, and smell, which cannot be understood in a figurative sense alone; there must be some sort of sensory meaning to these terms, or at least they must refer to a physical, non-spiritual, non-mental reality. Although Clark made a noble attempt to answer Raymond's challenge, he clearly is not able to give an adequate explanation for the many passages which seem to refer to

sensory experience.

The Scriptural argument which Reymond brings against Clark can be carried even further. It would seem that on Clark's restrictive view of knowledge, not only would he be unable to explain many passages which use terms that are usually taken to refer to the sense organs, such as seeing and hearing, but he would also be unable to understand and define a host of terms which are usually taken to refer to physical objects. In Clark's view all knowledge is limited to Scripture; if this is true, then there must be a great many terms which, since the Scripture does not define them, are unknowable and incapable of being understood. In the debate at Covenant College, which was mentioned in Chapter 1 of this thesis, Clark was asked to give his explanation of what Scripture says a tree is. Clark admitted that since the Scripture does not tell us what a tree is, we cannot know what it is. He also admitted that we do not understand the meaning of the terms see, hear, and smell--at least in a literal sense--since the Scripture does not define them.<sup>8</sup> In his replies Clark was quite consistent with his presupposition.

Now consider the ramifications of such a view. With it we know almost nothing at all. There are literally hundreds, probably thousands of terms in Scripture which are undefined and therefore not understood. In Genesis 1 the following terms are used: earth, water, sky, ground, plants, morning, day, bird,

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<sup>8</sup>Clark, "Debate," tape 2.

livestock, fish, seed, breath, food, wild animals, green, number. To our knowledge, the rest of Scripture gives little or no definition of these terms. Therefore, since we have no idea of what they mean, Genesis 1 is utter nonsense. Certainly they mean something to God, but he has unfortunately chosen not to reveal their meanings to us. Again, in Luke 8:26-38, in the story of the healing of the demon-possessed man, the following terms are used: Galilee, lake, ashore, man, town, house, clothes, feet, voice, tombs, hand, herd, pigs, bank, boat. Where do we find definitions to these terms in Scripture? If we have no idea of what they mean, then how can we even begin to understand this passage? These terms refer to physical actualities with which we are familiar, but for Clark we cannot know of physical actualities. On virtually every page of Scripture one will find dozens of such undefined and hence unknowable terms. Clark is more than correct in saying that our knowledge is limited; if we are consistent with his presupposition we find that knowledge is almost non-existent.

Along this same line of thought is a valid objection to Clark's view of knowledge raised by Gilbert Weaver in his dissertation entitled "The Concept of Truth In The Apologetic Systems of Gordon Haddon Clark And Cornelius Van Til." Weaver correctly notes that for Clark the necessary and sufficient condition for knowledge is the mental possession of a true proposition. While it is agreed that truth itself is always of a propositional nature, there must be, however, more to knowledge



than the mere possession of such propositions.<sup>9</sup> An additional element to knowledge must be an understanding of the concepts or terms of the true proposition. Weaver correctly points out that in Clark's view "the terms which make up the proposition actually are unknowable in themselves."<sup>10</sup> He again writes that for Clark "the subject term and the predicate term cannot be known, only their combination into a proposition can."<sup>11</sup>

Here Weaver is on the right track. There must be a correct understanding of the terms of the proposition in order to actually know the proposition, even if the proposition is true. In order to know the proposition "David was the king of Israel," I must understand correctly the meaning of the terms "David," "king," and "Israel." Now Clark could reply that I have not shown that there is more to knowledge than the possession of a true proposition, for the terms themselves are defined and understood by other true propositions. The definition of a term consists of what can be said of it. This reply, however, would fail by infinite regress, because the terms of the propositions which are used to define the terms of the original proposition must themselves be defined by other true propositions, the terms of which must again be defined, and this would go on ad infinitum. To avoid the infinite regress, the definition of the

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<sup>9</sup>Gilbert B. Weaver, "The Concept of Truth In The Apologetic Systems of Gordon Haddon Clark And Cornelius Van Til," diss., Grace Theological Seminary, 1967, 135.

<sup>10</sup>Weaver, "Concept of Truth," 168.

<sup>11</sup>Weaver, "Concept of Truth," 168.

terms would have to be circular. The other alternative, for which we opt, is that there can be a correct understanding of some terms which cannot be reduced to a propositional definition. Hence, there must be more to knowledge than possession of true propositions; there must also be a correct understanding of the concepts of the terms in the propositions. Such concepts may be of physical objects--trees, boats, animals, lakes, pigs, and grass--which cannot be reduced to propositional definitions. To know the proposition "Jesus walked on the Sea of Galilee," we must have an understanding of what it means to walk and of what a sea is. If we do not have such an understanding, although the proposition may be true, we do not know it. Our understanding of the terms "to walk," and "sea," although it can in part, nevertheless cannot exhaustively, be reduced to propositions. In other words, I must have a correct understanding of something for which I am unable to give a complete propositional definition. If I do not have such an understanding, as in Clark's view, then can I know anything at all?

Another argument against Clark's epistemology, based on his utter rejection of sensation and knowledge of the physical world, is set forth by Nash and Mavrodes in the Festschrift, and by Raymond in Justification of Knowledge. If all knowledge is derived from the propositions of Scripture, then we must somehow have access to those propositions, and how else can this be done except through sensation and contact with physical objects? George Mavrodes writes:

Whatever general difficulties or weaknesses infect beliefs which are derived from sense experience must also equally infect beliefs which are derived from the Bible. For sense experience is required for the derivation of such beliefs. Therefore, if Clark is correct in thinking that he cannot get any knowledge from sense perception, then he cannot get any knowledge from the Bible either. . . . The fact is that every consistent epistemology which assigns a role to the Bible in the acquisition of theological knowledge must assign a role of equal scope, and in precisely the same area, to sense perception. For whenever the Bible forms a link in an epistemological chain, then sensory contact with the Bible must form the very next link.<sup>12</sup>

Access to scriptural propositions involves reading; and reading, at least in part, involves sensation or interaction with physical objects. Since Clark did not allow for such activities, it follows that he had no such access, and skepticism is the direct implication.

In response to this criticism, Clark could reply that a word is not a physical sensation, that a Bible is not a collection of black dots on white paper, nor is reading a physical, sensory activity.<sup>13</sup> In this he is partially correct. In the ultimate

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<sup>12</sup>George I. Mavrodes, "Revelation And Epistemology," Festschrift 247.

<sup>13</sup>Clark, Language 131.



sense a word is a non-physical meaning, and the Bible is a collection of such meanings. Yet it must be maintained that those meanings are not arrived at, at least in this present life, apart from physical realities. There is some direct connection, which admittedly cannot be fully explained in valid, logical syllogisms, between those black dots, and the meaning which comes to the mind upon observing them. Clark could complain that his opponents have no right to criticize his position until they can give a complete, valid argument for how the meaning of a word can be derived from sensation. We, for our part, complain that Clark has an equal problem of giving a valid argument for how the meanings of the words of Scripture can be attained apart from sensation and physical reality.

To our mind, Clark did not convincingly show how the Bible can be known without sensation being brought into the picture. The best explanation he offered is that the propositions of Scripture come to us "from God by his impressing us with his truth."<sup>14</sup> Such an answer is certainly vague. We do not deny the divine activity in human knowing; we agree that the Logos enlightens every mind that comes into the world; we agree that God has a direct control over all thoughts which any person thinks. But somehow the divine activity must involve the physical. How do we distinguish, among the thousands of propositions which our minds may entertain in a given day, those which are false and those which are scriptural? How do we know

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<sup>14</sup>Clark, Debate tape 2.

when God is impressing us with his truth? How do I know whether the proposition, "All pregnant women eat pickles and ice cream," which I am currently thinking, is a scriptural proposition being "impressed upon me by God" or not? Clark's position is complete subjectivism. It allows me no way of distinguishing scriptural meanings from other meanings. Furthermore, it seems to imply that to know God's word one must have a direct revelation from God, a position which Clark's theology could never tolerate; or it at least confuses the traditional distinction between revelation and illumination.

A better position is to take literally the Westminster Confession of Faith when it says that God committed his revelation "wholly unto writing" (chapter 1, paragraph 1). The fact that the meanings of the Bible have been inscripturated, or written, is what enables me to distinguish them from other meanings. Somehow, the meanings of scripture are conveyed to me through the physical. David Hoover, former instructor in philosophy at Covenant College, suggests something along these lines. Although God's revelation cannot be reduced to ink molecules on paper, it can be "embodied" in them. God made the world in such a way that thought "can be embodied in symbol sequences."<sup>15</sup> There is, for Hoover, a primitive relation between meaning and physical objects, but the precise nature of this relation cannot be propositionally formulated in a logical

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<sup>15</sup>David P. Hoover, "Persons, Proof, and Knowledge of God," unpublished manuscript, Covenant College, 1983, 306.

progression. Just as Christ, the Word, became flesh, so too human meanings can be physically embodied. Although the term "embodiment" in Hoover's view is somewhat unclear, nevertheless we accept his basic point that there is a relationship between meaning and physical objects which cannot be fully explained.

Several of the above objections to Clark's rejection of sensation and knowledge of a physical world were quite familiar to him. To such objections Clark had a standard reply, viz., that those who argue in favor of sensation commit the petitio principii fallacy, the fallacy of begging the question. For Clark it does no good to argue against his position using such terms as "sensation," or "physical object," or even "tree," since these are the very terms in question. Such terms imply an empirical epistemology which is invalid. One must define one's terms; since the term "sensation" cannot be defined, one has no business using it in an argument to defend sensation-based knowledge. Says Clark against his empirical critics:

They leave their most important term in limbo. They neither define sensation nor do they give any evidence that there is such a thing. Since these critics do not know what a sensation is, they have no means of knowing whether they are sensing an object or not.<sup>16</sup>

All epistemologies which, even in part, make use of sensation, must justify knowledge on that basis; they must show how

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<sup>16</sup>Gordon H. Clark, Clark Speaks From The Grave (Jefferson: Trinity, 1986) 49.



sensation produces perception, how perception produces images, and how images produce abstract ideas. Until such a valid argument is produced, Clark maintains that any use of the term sensation, or any term referring to a physical object, is simply begging the question.

In reply to Clark's petitio principii criticism, we acknowledge an agreement with him on the failure of empiricism to give a valid justification for knowledge. However, from what has been said in this section, it is apparent that Clark's own epistemology is a failure without the admission of the existence of sensation and physical realities which we are capable of beholding and distinguishing. What alternative do we have? We are forced to admit that such realities exist. We maintain that man is capable of distinguishing a physical world of "men and things," even though he is incapable of providing a valid, syllogistic proof for such. Once again, we refer to Hoover on this point: "The mere fact that I cannot logically eliminate Cartesian doubt about whether I see my typewriter before me now does not logically imply that I do not see my typewriter before me, nor does it logically imply that my competence for seeing objects before me is in any way suspect."<sup>17</sup> Again he writes: "our senses can certainly be reliable even though it is principally impossible to prove that they are!"<sup>18</sup> Although we cannot give a valid, formal argument showing how sensation leads

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<sup>17</sup>Hoover, "Persons," 235.

<sup>18</sup>Hoover, "Persons," 235-236.

to cognition, it does not logically follow that we do not perceive physical objects. It is possible to read my Bible without being able to say exhaustively what it means to read; it is possible to see a tree without being able to say exhaustively what a tree is or what seeing is. Clark himself inconsistently conceded this point at the Debate at Covenant: When asked how we can have dominion over creation if we do not know what creation is, he replied that it is possible to till the ground without knowing what the ground is.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Clark's own view of science is impossible unless we admit a cognizance of the physical world, for if science is to be "useful" it must be useful with respect to something physical. The ability to discriminate physical realities is an essential element in epistemology.

Hoover maintains a plausible alternative to Clark's limited view by suggesting that man is a sapio-sentient being, a being created by God with not only a structured mind, but also with the capabilities for accurately sensing the physical world.<sup>20</sup> As part of our fundamental presupposition we must include the existence of spatial-temporal objects made by God, and a noetic endowment which God has placed upon man, which is suited to the world God has made. God has made the physical world, and he has made us in such a way that we can accurately perceive it. Raymond has pointed out that a noetic structure which involves

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<sup>19</sup>Clark, "Debate," tape 2.

<sup>20</sup>Hoover, "Debate," tape 1.

sense perception is in many places implied in Scripture. Thus, although we cannot give the logical justification Clark demands for sense perception, it is nevertheless both reasonable and imperative that we presuppose our created ability to perceive the physical world. In this way we escape the problems in Clark's position.

#### PROBLEMS WITH CLARK'S DEFINITION AND KNOWLEDGE OF PERSONS

One of the most common areas of criticism of Clark's philosophy centers around his theory of what a person is, and how, if at all, individual persons can be known. As was developed in the previous chapter, for Clark an individual person must ultimately be reduced to the set of propositions which that person thinks, whether the person be God, or man. Thoughts, or propositions, are what make the man, and they individuate him from all others. It was pointed out to Clark, and he readily agreed, that his view of persons made knowledge of oneself, and possibly of others, impossible on at least two grounds: (1) it is impossible to deduce myself from Scripture, and since all knowledge comes from Scripture, I cannot know "myself," and (2) the definition of a person consists of all the propositions which the person will ever think, and since I cannot at any given moment know all of those propositions, I again cannot know



"myself." Reymond speaks to this point:

. . . a forty-year-old man, who in the providence of God is going to live to the age of eighty years, is not yet a knowable person, except to God. In fact, the life history of a person includes his state in a future world as well. Consequently, since all the "returns" (propositions) are not in, it follows that Robert L. Reymond is unknowable to himself and to everyone else except God.<sup>21</sup>

Clark was willing to maintain the impossibility of self-knowledge for two reasons. First of all, he believed the Scripture supported this idea. For example, Psalm 139:6 teaches that a complete knowledge of oneself is "too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain," and Jeremiah 17:9 says that "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" For Clark this Scriptural fact is obvious upon reflection:

Did Peter know himself when he said, "Although all shall be offended, yet will not I"? Did Dr. X, who as a young man strenuously championed the inerrancy of Scripture and later asserted that Paul did not speak the truth in his epistles, know himself? Did Mr. Y, a good seminary student, know that he would die an alcoholic? Did Dr. Z, a most faithful servant of the Lord for many years, know that he would be a suicide?

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<sup>21</sup>Reymond, Justification 110.

Who can know himself? Maybe God is merciful in not revealing that knowledge to us.<sup>22</sup>

Secondly, Clark believed that he had to adhere to the propositional definition of persons (which, he thought, made self-knowledge impossible) in order to avoid asserting that in part man consists of an unknowable substance, or Ich an Sich. Clark had no tolerance for the notion of substance since the history of philosophy has shown it to be an entirely meaningless concept. For him it is much better to follow the suggestion of Leibniz that the ego, the self, is a complex definition which involves the life history of the individual; at least this way, although the individual cannot know himself, he can be known by God.<sup>23</sup>

Against Clark's position we wish to affirm that a person must be more than a collection of propositions, and that a limited knowledge of individuals, including of one's self, is possible to attain in our present state of existence. First of all, Clark's identification of the individual with propositions is not scriptural, for the Scripture clearly portrays man as having characteristics which cannot be reduced to propositions. Reformed theologians would agree that the Bible speaks of man as a thinking, willing, and feeling individual. Even Clark, although he is somewhat hesitant to attribute emotions to the nature of man, would agree with the intellectual and volitional

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<sup>22</sup>Clark, Language 150.

<sup>23</sup>Clark, Festschrift 412.



aspects of human nature. How, we ask, can thinking be reduced to propositions? Even if we grant that thoughts are of a propositional nature, there still must be an entity which thinks those thoughts. Can a thought think? Of course it is absurd to say that thoughts, that propositions, think! They are the object of thinking. Thinking itself is an activity which involves the contemplation of thoughts; it is not a proposition. The intellectual nature of man by definition is a mind thinking thoughts; the definition includes, but must be more than, propositions. So too with volitions. While it is true that the choices which an individual makes could be described by propositions, nevertheless the actual making of those choices is not a set of propositions. It too is an activity; but a proposition is not an activity. A person is a dynamic, thinking, willing individual; he is more than a stagnant set of propositions.

Of course, Clark could reply, "Is it not impossible to know the thinker apart from the thoughts? Is it not impossible to know that which wills apart from the choices themselves?" At this point, however, we are not arguing for how a person is known, but for what a person actually is. And Clark's identification of persons and propositions is scripturally inadequate. We realize that in taking the above position we are setting forth the concept of substance which Clark sought to avoid. A person is a thinking, willing substance or essence. We also admit that this concept cannot be wholly defined. However,

a complete view of persons according to the Scripture necessitates the concept. A "person" must include an essence which thinks and wills, an essence which was created by God and is known by God. This essence is not something which can be proven by logical deduction; it is a self-authenticating aspect of human existence. As Hoover writes, ". . . our language for talking about persons conceptually requires that a person be the sort of entity that can remain numerically the same even though many different things are successively predicated of it."<sup>24</sup> The orthodox definition of the Trinity applies this concept to God, when it says that God is three persons in one divine substance. The concept seems unavoidable.

Now while on the one hand, from the ontological standpoint, we disagree with Clark on the subject of substance by maintaining that a person is more than his thoughts, on the other hand we find some plausibility to the notion that the thinking and willing person is known by his thoughts and actions. How else could a person be known by man? The essence of a person is consistently displayed by his thoughts and actions, which can be described in propositional facts, and when we know a person's thoughts and actions we are in contact with his essence. The knowledge of a person's thoughts and actions, at least this side of the grave, is equivalent to knowing the person. John Frame, in a recently published book, argues against this point by maintaining that although knowing facts about a person is part of

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<sup>24</sup>Hoover, "Persons," 290.



what it means to know a person, nevertheless knowing persons includes more; it includes being "involved" with a person either as a friend or enemy. He writes:

A political scientist may know many facts about the president of the United States without being able to say that he "knows" the president. The White House gardener may know far fewer facts and yet be able to say that he knows the president quite well.<sup>25</sup>

At this point we prefer to follow Clark rather than Frame. Unfortunately, the term "know" is used in other than an epistemological sense in everyday language. When the gardener says he "knows" the president he simply means that he has personally met the president. However, in his personal interaction with the president the gardener has acquired some, perhaps many, facts about the president's thoughts and actions, and in this sense he epistemologically knows the president. By the same token we maintain that although the political scientist has never met the president, yet insofar as he has acquired facts about the president's thoughts and actions, he too, in an epistemological sense, knows the president. Certainly Frame is right in stating that in Scripture "knowing" often means "loving" or "befriending," but it would seem that in such instances the term "knowing" is being used in a figurative sense, and not in an epistemological sense, unless, of course, the loving and

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<sup>25</sup>John M. Frame, The Doctrine Of The Knowledge Of God (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987) 46.



befriending involves acquiring facts about the person's thoughts and actions. In fact, personal acquaintance, although itself not knowing, is an important means for coming to know someone.

It should be pointed out that while our position that the knowing of a person is achieved by acquiring facts about his thoughts and actions is similar to Clark's, nevertheless, we do not agree that a person is individuated by what can be predicated of him. Individuation involves more than the set of propositions about the person. Since our view allows for the cognizance of physical objects, we maintain that in part man is also individuated by his physical body. This, of course, is not allowed in Clark's deficient position on discernment of the physical. We would also maintain that from the divine perspective man is individuated by his essence as well as by his thoughts.

We have noted that for Clark self-knowledge and knowledge of other persons is impossible in this life. A person is the entire set of propositions which can be predicated of him, and since he cannot know the entire set, he cannot know himself or anyone else. Consider the ramifications of this position. It means that Clark first and foremost could not know God, since he most certainly cannot know God's entire set of propositions. If we cannot know ourselves, then we also cannot even know if we are human; we cannot distinguish ourselves from a fish. If we cannot know God, if we cannot distinguish ourselves from a fish, is it possible to know if we are Christians? It would seem not.

Certainly self-knowledge and knowledge of others is possible. First of all, in the previous section it was seen that knowledge must be more than the propositions of Scripture and whatever can be deduced from them. Hence we avoid the insurmountable problem of having to deduce ourselves and others from Scripture. Secondly, the passages which Clark cites do not prove that all self-knowledge or knowledge of others is impossible. They simply point out that an exhaustive knowledge is impossible. It is entirely possible to know myself in part, for when Jeremiah says that my heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure, I at least know that my heart is deceitful and beyond cure, and that is real self-knowledge. We agree with David that complete self-knowledge is too lofty to attain. But if I know simply one proposition about myself, one thought which I think, then I know myself. And I can know God without knowing all of God. This follows from Clark's own view of knowledge. Clark maintained that it is not necessary to know everything in order to know anything. If we know but one truth, then we know. I am not able to see all truths in relation to each other, but the few truths I do see constitute knowledge. So too with persons: the few facts we know of persons constitutes knowledge of persons. In addition, by insisting that a person is more than a set of propositions, that a person is also a dynamic, thinking, willing essence, we assert that self-knowledge is an innate part of that individual's created essence. Suffice it to say that at least partial knowledge of persons is possible.

One final criticism which has been made of Clark's philosophy of persons is that it implies a type of pantheism. There is some merit to this point. Consider the following: If all persons, including God, are individuated by the propositions which they think, which ultimately must be the case for Clark, and if the divine mind penetrates and overlaps all human minds, as Clark also believed, then what is left to individuate human minds from God's mind? If the sets of propositions constituting human minds are contained within God's set, and if there is no other principle of individuation, then it would seem that we are all a part of God himself. All the more reason Clark should have opted for the notion of substance in individuation. Problems with Clark's view of persons in relation to ethics will be taken up in a later section.

#### PROBLEMS WITH CLARK'S CRITERIA FOR SELECTING AN AXIOM

Clark has shown that every system of philosophy can be reduced to unproven presuppositions or axioms. The choice of an axiom is unavoidable, and we can only choose one. Therefore our choice must be a reasonable one; the axiom and its deductions must meet certain tests or criteria if it is to be chosen. The criteria are important, for they are what compel us to accept one criteria over the others as true. As elaborated on in the previous chapter, Clark has two criteria, logical coherence, and



the principle of giving meaning to life. These criteria in and of themselves do not make the system true, but they are what influence us to believe the system to be true. In all of this we are in complete agreement with Clark. There are, however, some inconsistencies and problems with these criteria when viewed in the context of Clark's complete epistemology.

First of all, some reflections on the second criteria. It is essential that the system we accept give meaning to life; the system must make sense out of human existence and history; it must provide a rational basis for objective moral norms and should solve the puzzles of life better than the others. This is a necessary criterion for axiom selection. Unfortunately, other aspects of Clark's epistemology will not allow him to have this criterion. Clark wrote a book entitled A Christian View of Men and Things. However, can his view of knowledge give us a world of men and things? With his denial of sense experience, and of the knowledge of an objective physical creation, the second criterion is meaningless. We can neither know the persons in such a world, nor the things. How can his axiom give meaning to a world which cannot be known? How can there be such a thing as morality if persons cannot know themselves or others? Or history? How can we know if there are puzzles to human existence if we cannot know the men and things of human existence? Obviously we cannot. Only if we grant a knowledge of the physical creation, guaranteed by the fact that, as the Scripture implies, God has made us with the ability to discern his world,

can we legitimately lay claim to this essential criteria.

Consistently, Clark is left with only the first criterion, that of logical cohesion. While it is agreed that this, too, is a most essential criterion, we maintain that by itself it is not enough. Gordon Lewis points out that while the lack of logical consistency is certain proof of the falsity of a system-- "contradiction is the surest sign of error"--the presence of logical consistency by itself does not guarantee the truth of a system. Lewis rightly asserts that "coherence with experiential data is necessary to show the truth of a proposed system, however consistent."<sup>26</sup>

Consider some of the ramifications if left with only the consistency criteria. First of all, as John Warwick Montgomery and other philosophers rightly contend, Clark would be obligated to show not only the entire consistency of his own system, but the logical inconsistencies of all competing systems.<sup>27</sup> This, of course, is humanly impossible. Clark might have replied that it is not necessary to examine all systems, since they can be grouped into theistic and non-theistic systems, and all non-theistic systems fail to provide logical cohesion. But this is a generalization of which Clark could never be sure. He must examine them all lest there be some consistent non-theistic system lurking somewhere. Otherwise, to avoid examining all

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<sup>26</sup>Gordon R. Lewis, Testing Christianity's Truth Claims (Chicago: Moody, 1976) 120.

<sup>27</sup>John Warwick Montgomery, "Clark's Philosophy of History," Festschrift 387.



systems, Clark would be forced to use induction; he would have to say that all the non-theistic systems which he has examined are inconsistent, therefore they are all inconsistent. Clark's views could never tolerate such induction.

Secondly, logical coherence alone could never be an adequate criterion for selecting an axiom because it is entirely possible to have two or more consistent systems existing at the same time, but which are mutually exclusive. "On what grounds," asks Gordon Lewis, "does Clark know that there could not be two or more consistent systems? He assumes that only one system could possibly be consistent."<sup>28</sup>

Finally, it is possible to have a completely logically consistent system which is false. Clark was the first to admit that consistency does not guarantee truth. Although a syllogism is perfectly valid, nevertheless, if the premises are not factual, then the syllogism is false. A simple example of this which Clark sometimes used in his classes is as follows:

P1 All the heroes in Homer's Illiad died young.

P2 Alexander was a hero In Homer's Illiad.

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C Therefore Alexander died young.

While the syllogism is valid, it is entirely untrue.

The conclusion of this section, then, is that since Clark does not allow for a knowledge of the physical world of men and

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<sup>28</sup>Lewis, Testing 120. Also Montgomery, "Clark's Philosophy of History," Festschrift, 387.



things, his second criterion, the meaning to life principle, is itself meaningless and useless. He is thus left with only one criterion, logical cohesion, and this we have seen is inadequate by itself.

### PROBLEMS WITH CLARK'S EPISTEMOLOGY IN RELATION TO ETHICS

One of the most important points which Clark made with respect to ethics is that knowledge is the basis for responsibility. How can man be held responsible for keeping God's law unless he first knows what that law is? This indeed is a scriptural truth. However, can Clark's epistemology actually give us the knowledge which is so essential to responsibility? The answer, it seems, is no, and in this section we shall attempt to demonstrate why this is so.

First of all, Clark's position, that all knowledge consists of the propositions of Scripture and whatever can be deduced from them, does not allow for the sort of knowledge of God's law which is described in Romans 2:12-15. Since this is such an important passage on the knowledge of God's law it will be quoted in full:

All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.

(Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.)

Charles Hodge, in his commentary on Romans, gives what we believe is an accurate interpretation of this passage. He writes that Paul's purpose here is to show that "men generally, not some men, but all men, show by their acts that they have a knowledge of right and wrong." The Gentiles "have in their own nature a rule of duty; a knowledge of what is right, and a sense of obligation." Again he writes, "The heathen are not to be judged by a revelation of which they have never heard. But as they enjoy a revelation of the divine character in the works of creation, . . . and of the rule of duty in their own hearts, . . . they are inexcusable."<sup>29</sup> Clearly the passage teaches that there is an innate knowledge of God's law, derived apart from the propositions of God's special revelation, which serves as the basis of moral responsibility for those who have never heard or read the Scriptures.

It is evident that Clark's position would give knowledge of God's law only to those who have access to Scripture, and is, as

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<sup>29</sup>Charles Hodge, Commentary on the Epistle To The Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947; reprinted 1983) 55-58.

Reymond writes, "virtually a denial that men possess at least some knowledge from their natural awareness of divine law and from their conscience (Rom. 2:15)."<sup>30</sup> The implication is that, since the heathen do not have God's revealed word, they are without knowledge of God's law, and therefore have no moral responsibility or duty. This implication certainly does not square with Clark's theology.

We must also ask on other grounds if Clark's epistemology is an adequate basis for morality. The objections regarding Clark's view of persons apply at this point. If, as we have maintained, Clark's position does not allow for self-knowledge or for knowledge of other persons, then an important question should be asked: Is it possible to have moral responsibility without such knowledge? It would seem not. Without knowledge of oneself, and the capability to know and individuate others, it is impossible to act as a moral agent. If I cannot know whether I am human or not, then I cannot know if the divine law even applies to me. If I cannot individuate and know others, then I remain entirely uncertain as to whom my moral obligations apply. How is it possible to love my neighbor if I cannot individuate him? How can I love my neighbor as myself if I cannot know myself?

In the debate at Covenant College such objections were brought before Clark. Clark's reply was that apart from the propositions of Scripture, it is possible for people to have opinions which might be true, although there is no way of knowing

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<sup>30</sup>Reymond, Justification 110.



that such opinions are true. Clark said that he had a vague opinion that he is human, and if so, then he is responsible before God. On the basis of this opinion he tries to meet his responsibility.<sup>31</sup> In saying this is not Clark shifting the basis of moral responsibility from knowledge to opinion? This indeed is the unacceptable import of what he is saying. But knowledge, not opinion, is essential to moral action. It is certainly true that such knowledge will be incomplete, and that mistakes will be made in our struggle to ascertain our moral duty in many specific situations. But if we are left with mere opinion, if we do not have at least some knowledge of who we are, who is our neighbor, and what are the circumstances of the situation, our attempt at being morally responsible is simply a shot in the dark.

A couple of other considerations should be made along these lines. First of all, in his discussion of Kant's ethics, Clark argued in favor of egoism, maintaining that self-interest is a legitimate motive to moral action. There seems to be merit to this point. However, without some self-knowledge how can there even be self-interest? On Clark's view we are stuck with opinion. But if we cannot know that we are human as opposed to some other animal, if we cannot even know that we are a "self," then the concept of self-interest becomes meaningless. We cannot be sure that there is a "self" to which the "interest" applies. Secondly, if a person, as in Clark's definition, can be reduced to a set of propositions, how is murder possible? Or adultery?

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<sup>31</sup>Clark, "Debate," tape 2.

It seems absurd to speak of murdering, or committing adultery with, or in some other way harming a set of propositions. Certainly the Bible makes it quite clear that murder and adultery, as well as other sins, exist partly in our thought life (Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28; 1 John 3:15). But these sins also have physical expressions. In Clark's position sin would be restricted to a person's thought life. Finally, referring to a point made in a previous section, Clark has no understanding of many of the undefined terms used in Scripture. These terms would include "murder," "stealing," and "adultery." It follows that it is impossible to understand, and hence to apply, the ten commandments.

In summary, without major changes Clark's epistemology cannot provide the necessary basis for an adequate theory of ethics.

### CONCLUSION

Clark was most certainly a profound philosopher and a brilliant defender of the faith. Some of his chief contributions to apologetic literature were his polemic writings which showed the complete failure of non-theistic philosophies to provide a logically consistent and meaningful world view. Clark made it obvious that the existence of God and a propositional revelation are indispensable for an adequate explanation of history, ethics,

politics--indeed, life itself. In his epistemology Clark has incorporated many important truths which no epistemology can be without. He has shown the necessity for truth of an eternal, universal, and unchanging nature, and for the fact that moral norms must be based upon such truth. He has shown the failure of empiricism, with its tabula rasa, and entire dependence on sensation, to provide us with such truth, and consequently also the failure of science, natural theology, and systems of ethics which begin with human experience rather than the objective, eternal word of God. He has shown, without question, the need for an a priori structure to the mind, which must include the laws of logic. He has argued effectively for a sort of knowing which is univocal to that of God's knowing.

However, it is our conclusion that Clark's epistemology as it stands is unsatisfactory. We have attempted to show the problems and inconsistencies with Clark's epistemology which arise from his unbending insistence that all knowledge must come from the propositions of Scripture and whatever can be deduced from them, and his unwillingness to admit a knowledge, or even a discernment, of the physical creation of God, or of anything other than propositions. Without such admission, Clark's view approaches skepticism. We submit that epistemology must include the notion that part of the innate structure of man's mind includes a self-attesting knowledge of oneself, and the capability to discern and know, the at least partially physical, world of men and things which is so frequently mentioned in



Scripture. The a priori structure must include these things as well as logic; and in addition, it must include a knowledge of God's law as is so clearly stated in Romans 2, which provides the basis for responsibility. If these factors were included in Clark's epistemology, it would be a much more compelling theory, and would provide a much more plausible basis for a system of ethics.

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