

## THE TEMPTATION OF ABSOLUTE TRUTH

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One of the many lessons we can learn from C.S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters* is that it is through our most noble sentiments that we are most vulnerable to temptation. Screwtape's advice to his nephew is to work on his patient's good feelings and keep them thoroughly *abstract* to encourage him to pray devoutly for his mother, but to forget all about her rheumatism. Similarly, Screwtape warns his nephew not to be too optimistic about the hate likely to be generated at the outbreak of war. He gloomily remarks that for all the patient's hate of the Germans at a distance, he will be certain to give a cup of tea to the first wounded German airman who turns up at the back door. In this case it is the hate which is abstract and the love which is concrete, just the opposite of what the devil works for and so often succeeds in achieving – love in the abstract, but hate, or at least indifference, in the concrete.

The fact that the first, most tragic, and most fatal temptation which mankind succumbed to was not a temptation to be ignorant and mistaken, but, on the contrary, to possess knowledge and truth, should warn us that our intellectual life, with our love of truth and the search for knowledge, may be the happiest hunting ground for the devil. This is all the more lamentable because, since the devil makes his own use of our noble sentiments, it is often by appeal to the intellectual apostolate that he gets his results. Our university chaplains are only too well aware of that bulk of students who show little interest in learning, no signs of ever wanting to read and think, but only a keen desire to possess the truth. What such students need is a

meditation on the deadly sin of sloth, which should include a meditation not only on their own mental inertia but, in St Thomas' expression, on their *tristitia de bono spirituali* – their sadness in the face of spiritual good. Instead, they *are* given the truth in pamphlets or in various courses, as though truth came in ready-to-assemble kits. Humility and intellectual effort are both enemies of the devil. The smugness which comes with this sort of 'possession of the truth' extinguishes humility, and, while it excuses past laziness, it puts a stop to further thinking. For when such students find that their views are criticized and that their immature arguments fail, they are more likely to throw the blame on their opponents for persecuting them, rather than on themselves for being inadequate.

While there is a great need for a wide survey of this kind of spiritual poverty, I should like to turn to one, perhaps one of the worst, of our sins in the intellectual field, that of spiritual pride. One is likely to fall into this sin by identifying absolute truth with what one personally thinks to be true. Before I do this, however, we should consider that opposite virtue of humility, which should follow from the very nature of philosophical activity.

It is obvious that the fact that I consider my views to be true does not mean that they *are* true. However, not only is it my obligation to say what I think to be the case, but I do not know what else I should or even could say. It may be suggested – pointlessly – that I should say what is objectively true and not what I subjectively think to be true. The suggestion is pointless because if I thought my views to be true merely subjectively, I would not entertain them; it is precisely because I think that they are objectively true that I do in fact hold them. It may also be suggested, equally unhelpfully, that if there existed a system of philosophy which contained the truth and nothing but the truth, then we should teach that system and not the views that we personally consider to be true. Since some people think that such a system

does indeed exist, let us consider why this suggestion does not enable us to say something other than what each of us considers to be true.

While the study and better and better understanding of such a system can have no end, it must begin somewhere. It is an integral part of the understanding of a philosophical proposition to see what its implications are, what it amounts to and what is the significance of its truth or falsity. Moreover, while philosophical problems themselves are permanent they are expressed in an impermanent idiom and are phrased in a way that can be understood only in the context of those problems with which our philosopher was concerned. No one can understand his predecessors without either returning into their intellectual milieu or re-thinking their thoughts in our contemporary idioms. It is this never-ending process of understanding, interpreting and re-thinking which is called the study of philosophy, and the process is the same whether the works of the philosopher we study contain all the truth or not. There is no short cut to truth. We cannot first have the truth and then see what it amounts to, for if we want to find out how things are, we have to go through this process of thinking. And it is not the case that only false philosophers have to be studied in this fashion or that only in their case do we ever need to change our minds as to what their propositions really amount to. Now each time we change our minds, we do so because we realize that our notions were mistaken, and we can realize this only in the light of a new and better understanding of the problems involved. But of course our belief that our new understanding is a better one is no guarantee that it is the right one. Each of our many changes of mind is the same in this respect, that each time we change our mind it is because we come to a new understanding, but without having any guarantee that this is the last time we shall ever change our minds. It must be remembered that the existence of a 'true philosophy' is quite compatible with none of us actually having the truth, and we cannot just appeal to that philosophy to vindicate our views, but have to use our own arguments and our own understanding of how things are.

Not that anyone who is fascinated by finding out how things are would ever wish never to change his mind. Indeed, the occasions when one is compelled to change one's mind after coming to a better understanding of a problem offer some of the greatest delights of philosophy. After a time one even looks forward to these occasions. In philosophy the difference between a master and a student is not that the one has the truth while the other has not, or that the one already knows that  $x$  is the case while the other still mistakenly thinks that  $y$  is. The difference between them cannot be determined by reference to which of them has the truth, but by seeing which of them is more at home in this never-ending process of understanding and re-thinking. For the master cannot look back over his career and point to the time before which he was mistaken and after which he had the truth. He would never have gone through any of his changes of mind unless he had thought at the time that he was changing from a mistaken view to a correct one. A master may, however, be able to look back on his life and point to the time when his philosophising taught him to respect truth so much that he never again confused *the* truth with *his own* or *with anyone else's* views.

If, on the other hand, we do not believe in objective truth, then, of course, no one need ever change his mind, and then what each of us thinks is simply what each of us thinks, and there is no point in assuming that anyone could ever be mistaken. In that case, the only means of persuasion left for us would be force or threat, propaganda or advertisement. But these can never change our *minds*, only our publicly-observable behaviour. Even advertisement and propaganda can change only our un-thought-out opinions and not those views for which we have reasons. Force or advertisement can make us change our shirts but not our minds. Perhaps this is why philosophers who widely disagree with each other speak up with almost one voice when an authority suggests to them that they should teach the truth and not what they think to be the case. One does not know what else is requested here but to

accept another person's views without being convinced that they are right, and this amounts to abandoning objective for subjective truth.

The virtue that follows from the very nature of philosophical activity is that humility which would never allow one to confuse objective or absolute truth with one's own views. The respect we learn is not only for truth, but for other human beings as rational beings. The secret of our free will is that we do not simply respond automatically to outside stimuli, but with regard to what we think to be the case. If we want to treat each other as human beings, then we should change another person's ways by trying to change what he thinks to be the case. This can be done only by reasoning, and only in this way can we bring about a responsible human act.

While browsing in the Vatican Museum recently I came across a few pages of St Thomas' manuscripts. It was delightful to see how he crossed out lines and whole paragraphs and wrote between the lines and on the margins. The immense hard thinking that went into his monumental work is one of the greatest treasures that the Catholic Church possesses on the human level. Although the Church naturally does not claim that the works of Aquinas contain the truth and nothing but the truth, I worked on the assumption that there could be such a system to show that even on this extreme assumption not one of *us* can claim to have the truth. Yet this great treasure can at the same time present the greatest temptation to spiritual pride. We must be very careful about this because, like other temptations, it appeals to our noblest sentiments. Screwtape knows enough psychology to realize that we would not listen to him if he asked us to persevere in our own ideas as if they were the truth. More probably he would give the following instructions to his nephew:

Make your patient think that he has a higher vocation than to teach what he thinks to be the case. His vocation should be to teach the absolute truth. Don't worry if he has pledged himself to humility because you can misuse this virtue too. Make him think of himself merely as a humble instrument through which

the absolute truth will speak. If you want to pay attention to details you could make him accept, but only on the authority of Aquinas, that argument from authority is the weakest argument. He will not suspect that he attributes infallibility to himself, because his own humble self disappears from his consciousness. Perfection of his mind for him will be only the perfection of an instrument, and he will look on other minds, too, as instruments that should reproduce truth. What better results could we expect than that rational beings should be treated as machines, as we have achieved in communist countries where people cannot say what they think to be the case, but are forced to have the truth. Do not worry, however, that absolute truth will really speak to the world this way. You know very well that truth is not an entity that speaks, for it is an attribute of statements, and attributes do not speak. As long as he loves truth in the abstract he will neglect to work in the concrete to make statements that are true. Just make him slip from 'I believe in truth' to 'I have the truth' and then he will neither have it nor believe in it.

If we put it bluntly like this, the temptation sounds childish. But we must not underestimate its force. For it is difficult to grasp that a belief in objective truth requires us to have an *open* mind which is ready to change, and that to be a master is not to know certain propositions, but to know what arguments require and what others do not require us to change our minds, and, above all, not to let our minds be changed by anything else but by arguments. It is similarly difficult to grasp that if we believe in the perennial nature of philosophical problems, then we should deal with our contemporary philosophical problems in our contemporary idioms. For if our problems are perennial, these problems cannot possibly be new. Only if we assume that problems can go out of date and yet for some curious reason the old problems are more relevant to our lives than the new ones, can we shut our minds to contemporary philosophy.

Contemporary philosophy is more concerned with teaching the methods of finding out how things are rather than actually telling us how things are. Many people find this irritating; many think it futile or trivial; but what I have been trying to say is that

if we paid more attention to the methods of attaining the truth, we might benefit not only intellectually but spiritually.