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note e commenti

On Wisdom*

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There is an ancient Greek saying, πολυμαθιη νοον εχειν ου διδασκει "Much learning doesn't teach you sense" —the truth of which is fairly obvious. This, in spite of the fact that you need to have a fair — often, a considerable — amount of intelli-gence in order to be justly counted as having a lot of learning. The Greek word νοος, which I have translated "sense", might be translated "intelligence" but I think "sense" is better because what the author of this maxim was thinking of was obviously that much learning doesn't make you wise. Wisdom is something beyond technical intelligence. You might say: One needs wisdom to know when and how to exercise one's technical intelligence well; and sometimes to know that one needs a particular technical intelligence to deal with some matter, and hasn't got it.

This is of special relevance in considering the topic of the future of higher education. There has developed in this century, if not before, a certain deadly fault in the exercise of the still higher education that some have received. It is connected with the great esteem that accrues to learned and clever people if they leave their mark on a subject. This may be achieved by successfully insisting that a commonly held assumption or opinion is mistaken. No doubt this is sometimes right. That butter is better for one than margarine may be an example. I don't know if some original cardiologist made his name by surprisingly denouncing butter, only that cardiologists tend to be hostile to butter now; and they may be entirely correct. The general field of what may be bad for you is so prominent that it has become rather a joke, but that doesn't mean that a cardiologist's disapproval of French fries as a frequent item of diet is as mistaken as it is likely to be ineffective.

I want, here and now, not to attend to sound and unsound opinions and

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practices in eating and drinking, but to concentrate on a quite different field of possible, or even frequent, misbehaviour. It is that of translations of the Scriptures.

1. The translation and the sense

I have been startled by some things here, in ways which have convinced me that these were cases of misbehaviour. I have heard readings at Mass which have made me jump and think "Can that be right? It doesn't sound like what I've been used to." One time was when I heard a reading from St. Paul's letter to the Galatians, chapter 1, where he said he spent fifteen days seeing Peter in Jerusalem. The reading went on "I did not see any other apostle. I saw James, the brother of the Lord." Hearing this I hurried home to look up the Greek, which seemed to say "I did not see any other apostle 'except' James, the brother of the Lord", which was how I remembered the passage. The Greek is ει μη two words which taken together mean "unless" but which form a very usual way of saying "except" —the way, indeed, that the older translations I looked at take them. Being myself in Jerusalem a few months later, I consulted François Dreyfus O.P., who took me to look at Lagrange's commentary. Here the matter was discussed, Lagrange men- tioning two or three places where it doesn't look as if ει μη meant "except" but concluding that it pretty surely does mean "except" in this text of St. Paul. I wondered why on earth this new translation had been foisted on us, and concluded that what had been at work to start with was the ambition I have mentioned, to make one's name by introducing new and different translations. The particular matter was not of very great importance, but I noted it as an example of the various kinds of things that seem wrong in the readings of the Scriptures that we hear at Mass. The punch line in a story is left out, e.g. some things never read, like what St. Paul wrote about 'Israel according to the flesh' —i.e. the unbelieving Jews who did not join in that formation of the early Church almost entirely by Jews. To this I might add a fault in the English translations which is not new but very old. It is especially noticeable in translations of St. John's Gospel, where it is repeatedly said that the Jews wanted to kill or otherwise get rid of Jesus, that he was warned that the Jews were after him, and so on. These passages are quite incomprehensible when you remember the facts; they make a perverted sense to later, non-Jewish Christians. They'd become intelligible if the word given was ''Judaeans'' (meaning the authorities of the main people living in Judaea) and not "Jews"; the Greek and Latin do not make a difference in the word for "Jews" and the word for "Judaeans" and hence the unintelligible translation in languages that do.

I encountered something much more serious last year. We were discussing what our Lord meant when he said to Pontius Pilate "Those who are of the truth hear my voice". Who were, or are, "those who are of the truth"? I reminded the man who was talking with me of what it says earlier in St. John's Gospel, chapter I verse 9: "That was the true light, that enlightens every man who comes into the

world". My interlocutor said he had not heard of that sentence, and he looked it up in the 'revised version', I in some other text I happened to have with me. In both cases it ran "The true light, which enlightens everyone (or: every man), was coming into the world". That is quite different and destroyed my explanation of what Jesus said to Pilate. I had recourse to the Greek text, and found that there was no question of a variant reading, but that because of a peculiarity of Greek grammar, you could take "coming into the world" as a phrase agreeing with "light". You just could; it was harsh Greek, for reasons I will not bother you with. But I thought "Aha! —the same thing again— someone decided to offer a new translation just because it occurred to him as grammatically possible. I then learned that everyone, from the earliest times, and from Augustine and Jerome and subsequent Christians, including Luther and Calvin, had taken it in the way I was used to — right up to the nineteenth century translation my friend happened to have with him.

This was not a trivial matter at all. It had been anciently thought and taught that in the eighth chapter of the book of Proverbs, where Wisdom speaks, that Wisdom is the Word of the Father, the divine Wisdom, the second Person of the Trinity. This is earnestly argued, for example, in St. Athanasius' writings against the Arians. And, without knowing that fact, I had taken it as true that here was a case of the 'greater', as St. Thomas calls them, among the Hebrews having some knowledge of the Holy Trinity in the times before the Messiah was born incarnate into the world. The Wisdom in Proverbs "was life, and the life was the light of men." (John, ch. 1,v.4) Thus those who remained true to it — such were the people 'of the truth' of whom Christ said "They hear my voice" —i.e. the voice of him incarnate as a man who spoke to them in a material voice. You see in this how grave an error was involved in the rendering "The light was coming into the world". He was already in the world, and the world was made through him, and his delight "was with the children of men"— "*deliciae meae esse cum filiis hominum*". Furthermore, this Wisdom says "The Lord had me in the beginning of his ways, before he made any beginning of things." (Proverbs ch.VIII,v.22) I am told that the word I render here as 'had' is the Hebrew word also for 'begot'. Also: "before the abysses were made, I was conceived" (ibid. v.24).

2. Science and knowledge

That the divine Wisdom is the source and cause of human reason and speech in its essential working seems to me to be the truth, which a wise intelligence will perceive. But I have a confirmation of this by the work of a highly intelligent present day philosopher who nevertheless has not perceived it.

This philosopher is Willard Van Orman Quine, an American logician, for a long time professor at Harvard. His many books include some not concerned with technicalities of logic alone; he knows many languages and has thought much about problems of translation and communication, of how we know what a piece of language says. His handling of these problems gives occasion for enunciating a

famous formula; which expresses a doctrine largely sound and clarifying, but which raises a fundamental difficulty for his this-worldly philosophical programme, by which all possible knowledge should fall within the bounds of 'science' (in this word's usage in English and also in French and Italian). Science so conceived is 'natural science' and is thoroughly materialistic. Quine's famous dictum is: "To be is to be the value of a variable." I should offer a brief explanation of this. In modern logical notation we have sentences which can be read "For all x, x is F." To give an example, a true proposition of this form would be "For some x, x is an even prime", i.e. "Something is an even prime number". The "x" in these notations is called a variable, and in a logical system it is likely to be said what the variables, x, y, n and so on 'range over'. n is the most usual letter to choose when you are talking about numbers. Thus we would be most likely to find e.g. "For some n, n is an even prime" and it would be obvious that the variable n ranges over numbers. There is only one even prime, the number 2, but that doesn't mean that the only possible substitution for n in the 'open sentence' n is an even prime is 2. It is the only substitution for n which results in a true sentence: "2 is an even prime", but as the variable n ranges over numbers, you could produce a well-formed but false sentence by substituting 7, or 10 or any other numeral.

Now when Quine said "To be is to be the value of a variable" he meant that to be is to be a member of the class of things that a variable ranges over. Thus, if numbers are what the variable ranges over, numbers are being reckoned to exist.

This brings us to a further idea that Quine has: that of 'ontological commitment'. Your ontological commitment is to the things that your theory says there are. That is, you must now not choose false sentences like "There are 3 even primes", but rather true ones like "There are just five primes from the number 1 to the number 10" — true if 1 itself is allowed to count as a prime number. This proposition implies that there are numbers, and so your adoption of a variable whose values are numbers shows that you have an ontological commitment to numbers.

It is of course possible to criticize this account of existence, but there are many things that are very interesting about it. One of these is that it seems to be a matter of choice what variables you are going to accept in your system. This may not seem correct when the example is 'numbers'; after all, how can you avoid admitting that there is just one even prime number, and, in doing that, aren't you admitting that for some n, n is an even prime number, and therefore that for some n, n is a number? This last is rather unlikely to be a theoretical statement that you will find yourself making, but it does seem to be one you'd have to assent to if you granted that 'to be is to be the value of a variable' and that you can express arithmetical truths by using formulae in which the variable n occurs, which ranges over numbers. To say you have an ontological commitment to numbers is to say that your theory says that numbers exist, inasmuch as it uses a variable ranging over numbers to say that there are numbers with this or that property.

3. The intentional verbs

I now come to a peculiar difficulty which Quine has, though he does not let it bother him to the extent of giving up his thesis. It is that he can find no properly scientific account of intentional verbs. If we are strict with ourselves, we shall eschew them. That is to adopt as our own the 'severe' muse of 'science'. But we cannot easily do this, and Quine doesn't want to forbid us e.g. to speak of someone as believing or saying such and such. In his big book *Word and Object* he does indeed find a way of construing sentences to the effect that someone believes something, which allows him not to speak of an intentionality apparently involved in them.

To explain 'intentionality' quickly: a verb like "believe", indirectly governing a sentence, as in "James believes that Tom is a thief" might be true of a particular James who knows a particular Tom. But it might nevertheless be false to say "James believes that his mother's cousin is a thief", even though he believes that Tom is one and also Tom is in fact his mother's cousin, but he doesn't know the relationship. Hence the occurrence of "Tom" is not 'purely referential', since another perfectly true way of referring to Tom can turn a true sentence into a false one. This is the characteristic of intentionality in our verbs of attitude etc. Quine manages to devise a way in which he can take 'believes' not as a term, but only as part of a longer expression which has not got this characteristic.

But -and this is what I've been leading up to in telling you of Quine's philosophy- he has not found a way of sterilizing the expression "says that" as it occurs in speaking of what a theory says, so as to make it appear as part of a construction that is innocent of the objectionable characteristic of intentionality. To repeat, he doesn't want to forbid the use of such expressions as have that characteristic - but he does want, or need, to have a possible analysis in the background to which he could retreat. In the case of "says that" he hasn't got such an analysis. What then becomes of his conception of ontological commitment to what one's chosen theory, or conceptual apparatus, says exists?

"Such and such — or so-and-so — says that" — this remains a locution which Quine knows he can't forbid. But his philosophy insists that it ought to be forbidable, because he is in some odd sense a materialist. I say "in some odd sense" because after all he believes e.g. that numbers exist and they are not material. Yet he does not hold that if he followed his conceptions of the scientific, he would have to strive after an analysis involving no mention of numbers. Intentionality however is unacceptable.

4. The 'austere muse' of scientism and subjectivism

If I have any lessons for you in what I have been saying, they are two: (1) beware of modern translations of ancient texts, when the translators may be inspired by the spirit I spoke of. Alas, it has even infected the translators of the Scriptures into Latin. The revised Vulgate perhaps corrects errors of St. Jerome:

but concerning verse 9 of chapter 1 of St. John's Gospel, it corrects him where he was not only right, but all importantly so. His text —and the Greek one— say that Jesus was the light that enlightens every man who comes into the world. This leads to (2), for it means first of all that developing humans become able to express, or at least realize, that something is so. Quine's fancy here is that there are primarily 'stimulus sentences'. They may consist of just one ejaculation, e.g. "Rabbit!". (He makes up the word "Gavagai".) We observers discover what stimulus this is a response to by e.g. trying it as a response and seeing whether it itself evokes signs of assent or dissent on the part of the people to whose language it seems to belong. If it evokes assent, we may learn that it is a stimulus response to what we were trying it as a response to.

This is wrong in so far as it assumes that a primary stimulus response can be regarded as something saying that such-and-such is present. But think: one may say "Mmm" in response to the song of a blackbird. If someone else has a response of the same kind, that may show that their utterance is a suitable translation of our "Mmm". It would not show e.g. that anything has been named or said to be present.

Saying what is so, or is to be so, is the act of a word. Not indeed of just any word. (Counter-examples are easy to find.) Nor yet indeed always of a word that can have that role. Sometimes a gesture, not even a conventional one, can be a word. But if there is a saying that something is or is to be, this done by some sort of word that says it.

Quine's marriage to what he counts as the 'austere muse' of the strictly scientific prevents him from being able to give any account of 'saying that...' He cannot legitimately accept the lack of "transparency", the unavoidable "referential opacity" of intentionality. He does something to avoid it for the verb "believe"; but his effort at an account of "says that" only uses what looks like, but he says is not, direct speech, after "says": it remains "referentially opaque". This he calls an advantage, as indeed it must be if the account is to succeed. For though in "A says-true 'B is an F' " he allows substitution of equivalent terms, he cannot allow substitution of alternative designations which merely happen to designate the same. Thus he deserts his 'severer muse' and grants that one must do so as a matter of convenience for communication. But what has become of 'ontological commitment'? How can a man in his position so much as speak of this as if it belonged in a 'scientific' account? We are left wandering in a desert waste of subjectivity.

5. Proposition and existence

Let me now return to the fact that 'saying that ...' is the act of a word. If there is a linguistic utterance which is a "saying that " then it is a sentence, even if it consists of only one 'printer's word', or is a complex sentence with subordinate clauses. There are indeed plenty of sentences, of one 'word' or many, which do not 'say that' anything. Consider the following:

Help!

Fire! (imperative)
Fire!
Fiat lux
When I bang the table you will leave the room Lovely! Going, going, gone.

Of these, the third could be a 'saying that'. The last is the utterance of an auctioneer in a sale. His performance makes it the case that the bidding for an item is finished. The fourth, "*Fiat lux*" (in English "Let there be light") is taken from Genesis telling of the creation: "God said 'Let there be light' and there was light".

The similarity and the contrast between this and the case of the auctioneer are interesting. The bidding in the sale of the item is finished because that is the rule in an auction. By contrast, in the Genesis story light is made to come into existence by the creating will which the human writer symbolized in the word "Fiat lux." That creating will is the thought whose occurrence of existence is the occurrence or existence of the created thing. The act of a creating intelligence is indicated by logical and mathematical calculi being usefully applicable in exploring phenomena. Cf. Newton's feeling of 'thinking God's thoughts after Him'. He was apparently seeing what was so in the universe.

We utter words of many kinds. Often they are sentences, and among sentences some are sayings that. These we perhaps call 'propositions', which in turn are of many varying kinds. The 'saying that' by many propositions is what gives them their enormous importance. This lies in the extremely usual peculiar connexion between a saying that... and a reality. Where there is this connexion, it exists whether the proposition is true or false, for a false proposition is converted into a true one by negating it, and negation introduces no new feature.

Not every saying that has this characteristic; that some utterance is a saying that may merely be a mark of its surface grammar, the form of words that makes one call what is said "an indicative statement". In doing philosophy we should beware of being misled by this into pointless searches. Galton found that many people have coloured visual images in connexion with numbers. (See his Enquiry into the Human Faculty). He did not find out or (I believe) try to find out 'what having such images is'. The reports were 'sayings that' in their grammatical form, but not reports where truth was anything other than not pretending.

Here we may note that Quine's test, by observing assent and dissent on the part of users of a language we are trying to understand, would have no application in this case. If A says the number five is yellow and B says it is purple this is not a relevant case of 'dissent'; nor would it be assent on B's part if he too said it was yellow. Quine in fact has no account of assent and dissent which will serve to characterise a bit of language as a 'saying that'. Sympathy with a cry of fear, for example, or response to a call for help will not give us examples.

The power of thinking what is so, even wrongly, is created in men, giving them language that can express it. 'Being so' is the first thing to get into the nascent human intellect, the beginning of knowledge which is not wisdom but is its background.