

BLACKFRIARS

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ON EVIDENCE

EVIDENCE is truth. But it is truth begetting certitude.

As certitude is not merely knowledge but the knowledge of our knowledge, those cognoscitive faculties alone have certitude and are moved by evidence that are self-reflective by knowing that they know.

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Though the lower cognoscitive faculties know without knowing that they know, yet in so far as they know they yield analogies for understanding the relation of evidence to the higher cognoscitive faculties.

We may therefore say that for the eye the only evidence is the form or colour of the object; for the ear, the sound of the object; for the nostrils, the smell of the object; for the palate, the taste of the object; for the touch, the pressure or weight of the object.

Evidence for one faculty (say, hearing) is not evidence for another (say, sight). The eye cannot perceive even the loudest sounds.

In other words, evidence for a faculty is the object of that faculty.

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We should not say: "the proof of a thing." We should rather say: "the proof of a thing for A—or B; or for faculty A—or B."

Though the proof of a thing is essentially related to the thing, nevertheless the thing is not essentially related to any proof of it.

As to prove means to make a cognoscitive faculty certain of a thing, we do not prove things for themselves but for certain other beings, or states of mind.

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Hence the seeming paradox that things often seem less

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certain after they have been proved than before. There are minds that have no doubts until they have been given the proof of their certainty. This is not a paradox, but a psychological fact.

Minds who are thus jostled into doubt by an array of proof have been quietly and rightly resting their certainty about a thing on the thing itself: no wonder they are unsettled when asked to rest it on something else.

Of these minds some are restive when asked to worship a God who is led in by one of His creatures, say, the sun or moon; and especially, if led in by the creation of His creatures, say, the Relativity Theory.

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On the other hand, some men find their souls reassured by facts which in the sphere of pure reason are far from reassuring.

Nicodemus witnessed the miracles of Jesus Christ and remained unconvinced; paradoxically, he witnessed the death of Jesus Christ and was convinced. In other words, what a display of divine power failed to do was done by a display of human power. The truth was that Eternal Love finally captured the mind of Nicodemus by first capturing his heart. He was conquered by one of those *raisons du coeur* which are not the natural but only the adopted and cherished children of the mind.

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“If I say the truth, why do you not believe Me?” (Jn. viii, 46).

It is part of the irony of life that truth needs a recommendation.

Even the eternal sun is not welcomed unless introduced by some dim lantern of human reason.

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How precious and decisive becomes all evidence when we hope that it will prove true.

How unconvincing becomes even the strongest evidence when we hope that it will prove untrue.

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The will to believe should not blind us to the difficulties; still less should it blind us to the evidence.

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A man of strong words was wont to say: "Truth needs no tag. The Church which is the Incarnate Truth, if it will but teach and live the truth, may largely dispense with a Publicity Department."

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Chesterton has written: "A man is not really convinced of a philosophic theory when he finds that something proves it. He is only really convinced when he finds that everything proves it."

In other words, a man's philosophy is not something that he thinks but everything that he thinks. Philosophy is not merely a unity but a totality. It is all in one; and one in all.

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Now, ultimate truths are seen to be true not only because everything proves them but because everything is proved by them. Not only does our knowledge of them grow out of proof, but grows into proof. We should know an acorn is an oak-in-little if we saw it growing from the oak. But we should also know the acorn was an oak-in-little if we saw it grow into the oak.

Thus the evidence which begets certitude is not always merely rectilinear, or convergent, but circular. It is the peculiarity of circular movement as distinct from rectilinear that any given part of that movement can be looked on as the effect and as the cause of any other part.

Thus in proving the miracles which are a proof of a good man there is a circular movement in the proof. Thus the miraculous deeds are recommended by the moral character of their doer. Again, the moral character of the doer is recommended by his miraculous deeds.

Yet there is a world of difference between logical "arguing in a circle" and psychological "knowing in a circle."

The most accepted and important example of this circular movement of psychological proof is in the three theological virtues: Faith, Hope and Charity. In the beginning Charity

grows out of Faith and Hope; which are then called dead Faith and dead Hope. But in the end Faith and Hope grow out of Charity; and are then called living Faith and living Hope.

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“Art Thou the Christ? Tell us plainly.” Jesus answered them: “I tell you, but you do not believe. The works that I do in the name of my Father—this witness to Me.

“But you do not believe because you are not of my sheep” (Jn. x, 24-26).

The Truth is not here using equivocation or compromise. In reality He is insisting on the fact that evidence is not mechanical but psychological. It cannot fully or even accurately, though not fully, be represented as the tilting of a balance by the last tip-scale.

In the highest matters of man's knowledge faith is not a mechanical reaction but a free act. Conviction is not compulsion. Just as good health does not outweigh good fare though it may outvalue it, so one argument does not outweigh another. The chief factor is our attitude towards any message; is our attitude, of love or hate, towards the messenger.

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An agnostic objector has said: “Truth is belief without evidence.” It was an absolute statement; yet not perhaps so suggestive of inconsistency as another admission made by a theist: “Faith is certitude beyond evidence.”

I answered at once, but not accurately: “Faith is not evidence about the fact; but it is evidence about the witness to the fact.”

Later on I came to see that this agnostic difficulty could be met by spending a few moments with a dictionary of the English language finding the meaning of the word “Evidence”; and by a further few moments in a court of English law where this meaning is applied by twelve average Englishmen to matters of life and death.

The dictionary would reveal the fact that the English language, often poor in words of philosophical precision, is

especially rich in composite words beginning with "self." Of these words that enrich our thought few are more valuable than "self-evidence," which is clearly distinguished from "evidence."

What a few moments with a dictionary would do for an agnostic conscientious objector to faith would be perfected by a few moments in a court of English law during a slander trial.

The conscientious agnostic would find that twelve average English might bring in the verdict of guilty on evidence that was not self-evidence. Moreover, an English judge would confirm their verdict-on-evidence by the death-sentence. Yet neither the jury nor the judge has, or is expected to have, self-evidence of the murder. Indeed such self-evidence—or, more accurately, such first-hand evidence—would find its way, not into the jury-box nor the judge's chair, but into the witness-box.

But in a court of English law evidence which is not self-evidence may be looked on as so certain that on its strength a citizen may be shown the strongest sign of his fellow-citizen's justice by the death-penalty.

A certainty vouched for by death can have no higher certainty.

Legal evidence is thus but another name for witness or Authority.

Finally, the things of faith are not without evidence, though they are without self-evidence.

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"I am the Light of the world."

The Pharisees therefore said to Him: "Thou bearest witness about Thyself" (Jn. viii, 12).

What else can light do but be its own witness? The sun does not borrow light; it lends light. The sun is evident not only when its shining is seen, but when other things are seen in its shining.

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All evidence is concerned either with Principles or with Facts.

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But the evidence for Principles should be *self-evidence*—
e.g., a whole is greater than its part.

And the evidence for Facts should be *first-hand evidence*
—e.g., “I, Thomas, saw Jesus after His death. I put my
hand in His side. Jesus was alive.”

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Truth to be apostolic needs a truth-teller.

Truth confirms itself; but does not utter itself.

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Ultimate being is self-evident.

Ultimate truth is self-assertive.

Ultimate goodness is self-recommended.

Ultimate beauty is self-persuasive.

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The Stone Age and the Iron Age have now given place to
the Age of Advertisement. In the beginning good-wear and
good-fare needed no further evidence than themselves. Men
said, “Good wine needs no bush.”

This Age of Advertisement has elaborated the art of re-
commending one thing by another. Morning newspapers
which were once self-recommended are recommended by
their morning nudities. Food-substitutes, usually more costly
and less wholesome than the alleged food, are recommended
by artistic wrappers. It has been left to the twentieth-
century advertisement specialist to give us the epithet
“dainty margarine.”

But we may timidly suggest that an age which, under
pressure of poverty, is compelling artists to adorn margarine
is not honouring Art, as Art was honoured when it was asked
to adorn the House of God.

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