

Truth, body and religion

Q*uid est Veritas.** These are the words spoken by Pilate who, as he washed his hands, tried to find something to accuse the man of who had been brought before him by the Jews. The anagram of this classic Latin sentence is: *est vir qui adest*: that is the man in front of you. The coincidence of this anagram fascinated me as a teenager. The confrontation between Jesus and Pilate was illustrated in *Ripley's Wonder Book of Strange Facts*, a book I had received from an elderly lady from New York during a visit to the USA in 1963, where I worked as a counsellor at a Salvation Army Summer Colony.

So, what is truth? In a religious context 'truth' is like a mantra, a certain imperative to believe in sacred things. However, one of the great minds of the Medieval Ages actually gave the best possible definition of truth. According to Thomas of Aquinas (1225–74) 'truth is a measure of the resemblance between reality and human perception' (*veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus*). In nature there is no truth: everything is as it is in an eternal quest for harmony. The concept of truth and falseness arises, when we as humans compare reality, as we experience it through our senses, with the representation we have in our memory, a comparison of new information with stored information. If we look for the truth, we have to search in the human mind. There we will also find religion.

Some of us have heard the story of the boy who wanted to explore the nature of time. As the pragmatist he was, he started to disassemble his mother's alarm clock; without, however, coming any closer to solving the problem. The time-measuring device, the clock, does not communicate the meaning of time. For us humans, knowledge of time gives a context to operate within. The nature of meaning is one of the most intriguing questions in philosophy. The concept of meaning is closely related to the human mind. Non-human primates do learn things by experience, but are not capable of long-term planning. The intellectual leap of mankind which occurred some 50 to 100 thousand years ago, most certainly assisted by the development of language, lifted

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the mind from dwelling in the present to a metaphysical state, wherein it was possible to make time travel in the mind by remembering occasions from the past, or making strategic plans for hunting or attacks on neighbouring tribes. Meaning is putting a sense experience into a context and perceiving a dynamic narrative, either in terms of history, or the coming future.

According to the dualistic principle of Descartes, humans consist of a body substance and a soul substance. In the seventeenth century the soul had a deep religious meaning; one saw the soul as a ghost being somehow immersed in the bodily being. Today we draw a parallel between soul and mind, the mind being a result of cognitive functions. We still know very little about the working of the mind, about consciousness and about 'the self'. New information accumulates continuously. For instance, mirror neurons seem to have a bearing on empathy and social abilities. It might even be that the network of these neurons has a cross-connecting function by uniting different regions of the cortex. As a further result, the conscious mind experiences the real world as a scene wherein you yourself are an actor.

In his large work *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, about the rise and collapse of cultures, Oswald Spengler includes religion as an important ingredient of each form of culture. Spengler uses seasonal changes as a metaphor for the maturation of civilizations. During the spring mythical tales have an amalgamating influence on the community. Summer signals the appearance of religious thinkers writing down ethical rules. The autumn brings enlightenment and philosophers searching for reason. An increasing secularization announces the coming of the winter phase, the last stage before collapse. From archaeology and history we also know that religion plays a central role in the interplay between the ruler and his subjects. But we also know that without a religious infrastructure, there would probably be no cultural development at all.

In summary, the religious characteristic of the human mind emerged in parallel with its intellectual faculties, perhaps assisted by the development of the mirror neurons. On the inner scene humans saw themselves as members of a social group. Threatened by natural catastrophes, diseases and tribal violence it seems logical that human beings incorporated superior powers into their mental scenarios. As time went on it appeared that the religious thought by communication between individuals also had an efficacious effect on society, religion providing a social glue between individuals.

Descartes was the prisoner of an archaic mode of thinking; he saw the body and the soul as two separate entities. His final problem was to understand how these two interacted. He did not recognize the soul as the working of the mind, the force that actually gave man life and made him human.