

Truth, Body and Religion

Jarl-Thure Eriksson

Abo Akademi University

16.6.2010

Dear participants of the Symposium

Ladies and Gentlemen

Quid est Veritas. Those were the words of Pilate, who while washing his hands tried to find something to accuse the man brought before him by the Jews. The anagram of the 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 counselor at a Salvation Army Summer Colony.

So what is truth. In a religious context "truth" is like a mantra, a certain "must" 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 (1225-1274) "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 rises, when we as humans compare reality, as we expire 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 the religion.

Some of us have heard the story of the boy who wanted explore the nature of time. As the pragmatist he was, he started to disassemble his mothers awakening clock, however without coming any closer to the problem. The time measuring device, the clock, does not tell the meaning of time. For us humans, knowledge of time gives a context to operate with. 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 heap of mankind some 50 to 100 thousand years ago, most certainly assisted by the development of language, lifted the mind from dwelling in the present to a metaphysic state, wherein it was possible to make time travels in the mind by remembering occasions from the past or making strategic plans for hunting or attacks on neighboring tribes. Meaning is putting a sensational experience in a context and seeing a dynamic narrative either from history or in the coming future.

According to the dualistic principle of Descartes humans consists of a body substance and a soul substance. In the 17th century the soul had a deep religious meaning, one saw the soul as a ghost being somehow immersed in the body 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 have a cross-connecting function by uniting different regions of the cortex. As a further result, the conscious mind expires the real world as a scene whereon you yourself is 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 phase mythical tales have an amalgamating influence on the community. Summer means 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 archeology 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 not be a cultural development.

In summary, the religious characteristic of the human mind emerged in parallel with the intellectual faculties, maybe 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 logic, that human beings incorporated superior powers on the scene in their mind. As time went on it appeared that the religious thought by communication between individuals also had a strengthening power on the society, religion provided a social glue between individuals.

Descartes was after all a prisoner of ancient thinking, he saw the body and the soul as two separate entities. His last problem was to understand how those 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.

Have a nice Symposium!

Thank You