

***Text 2 : The question of absolute truth (6 p.).***

***Part I. Basic concepts and problem statement.***

***The meaning of the word "absolute".***

The Latin word "absolute" has two meanings:

- (1). independent: e.g., the authority of the "absolute" monarch (absolutism);
  - (2). total (overall): an absolute rule knows no exceptions; an absolute solitude knows no presence (it is a 'pure' or 'pure' solitude); an absolute trust in authority or in a person.
- In these two ancient meanings sticks a pair, viz. absolute/relative (= utter/relative): is 'absolute' (independent and/ or exception-free) that which has no relation to anything outside itself (it is relation-free); thus one understands that it is said that "God is absolute" (the absolute being or so).

Philosophy, at least in its main subject, ontology or theory of being, i.e., the doctrine of reality, is concerned with absolute "truth. Since Parmenides of Elea (-54/-...) the expression 'kath'heauto', secundum seipsum, has existed according to itself.

E.g. one considers a child, the education or so 'according to (him or her) self', i.e. as the child is in itself, as the education is in itself (i.e. as education, as such, as such). In other words, then the child considers 'absolutely' (or the nurture ), i.e. its 'being'. That means that there is child, education, etc. independent (see first Latin meaning) of ourselves engaged in it, and/or overall (see second Latin meaning: all child-being, all education without exception). Platon called that independent and/or total side of something the "idea" of it (hence his theory of ideas). Considering that overall and independent reality he called 'theoria'. This is the core of all classical philosophy (and professional science in that sense).

***The meaning of the word "truth.***

Traditionally, the word "truth" is used in classical philosophy in the sense of correspondence between reality, (being) and knowledge, resp. thought.

Several variants can be distinguished.

**(1) Knowledge and thinking theoretically.**

Called 'true' any knowledge and thinking that corresponds to reality. In this sense, 'true' is opposed to 'false' or even to 'undecidable' ("It will be summer weather next Monday," is one such judgment that is undecidable until it is). This money from concepts, but especially from judgments about propositions.

**(2) Metaphysical.**

A certain philosophy, since Platon, Aristotle and Plotinus, assumes that reality as we find it answers to one or more higher yes,

divine principles (Pythagorean number forms, Platonic ideas, Aristotelian "forms" or so), which are the metaphysical beyond their nature the ground(stroke) of it. Thus Saint Augustine will say that things answer to, correspond to, God's ideas. In that metaphysical sense, things are "true," conforming to God's thinking.

### (3) Ethical-politician.

Behavior, individual and/or or social obeys (responds) to norms (rules of conduct): in this sense one speaks of ethical-political 'truth'. If one applies state laws in his life, that life is "true" in the politic sense. "A true son respects his father" means that the son, insofar as he conforms to its ideal, normative form, is 'true' in the ethical sense.

*Note:* More times than not, "true" is also what is independently a general: "what is 'true' that comes up in the language of an honest man". Things here are truth, i.e. their reality, as they are in themselves. Cf. above on "absolute".

#### *The meaning of "absolute truth".*

Only now can we purely define the subject. 'Truth' is reality and 'absolute truth' is  
**a/** the reality insofar as it

**b.1./** independent, relationship-free, existing in itself and

**b.2./that** in its intact, gifted, overall nature. That is the starting point.

Transferred to an understanding, judgment, reasoning, theory, and so on. I.e. knowledge and thought-theoretically, one can say, e.g., "Two plus two" is an absolute truth". This means:

**1.** independent of anything, especially our subjective impressions, opinions, etc. and

**2.** in all cases (general exception-free) constitutes two plus four (four is the shortened name of the summary set of two sets with two elements each). In this sense, there are absolute truths.

#### *The difficulty.*

As long as one speaks

**a.** about reality in itself ( cf. Parmenides), independently and integrally, in general and

**b.** about clear examples of it such as two plus two is four, as applications thus of absolutely true knowledge and/or thinking, there is no difficulty. However, in very many cases the data at issue is not so clear and obvious. For example, the anti-

authoritarian education a good education or not? The answer to this is difficult to put into absolute, i.e. independent and exception-free form. That is the difficulty. The not so clear, yes, the unclear cases. That is where our ability to interpret or interpret falls short.

**Result:** more than one opinion prevails about one fact. Something already established by the archaic poet Homer in Hellas.

***The meaning of "dogma".***

'Dogma' is a typical Greek word. It means "opinion"; later, because "doxa" also means "opinion," it takes on the meaning of "legal precept" and of "imposed doctrine. Thus e.g., when the Stoics or the Epicureans speak of their dogmata, they mean the propositions accepted in their school group-wise: one cannot belong to the school without adhering to those opinions. Similarly: the doctrine of papal infallibility in the Catholic Church; it is even a conciliar agreed dogma. The ordered collection of all dogmas is called "the" dogma or "dogmatics. This is accompanied, in the stoa or Epicureanism and in the Catholic Church, by a Magisterium, i.e. a number of persons who are decisive interpreters and normative for adherents.

**Note:** In itself, dogma, dogmatic Magisterium, etc., is an intellectual and a neutral thing that the classical Greek thinkers, with their intellectualism (emphasis on reason) and/or rationalism (emphasis on reason) brought into the world. In itself, it is a method like so many others. This is the meliorative language.

Yet the difficulty begins when this method exceeds its own limits (Hubris, arrogantia) and becomes, to use a contemporary word, 'ideology'. This gives rise to the pejorative use of words: 'literary', 'political', 'social' dogmas are movements imposed in an authoritarian manner. Such a behavior is "dogmatizing" behavior or "dogmatism" or "dogmatic. Thus, in psychology, the word means "absolute," "authoritarian," "despotic," "totalitarian" or so on. Someone e.g. speaks in an absolute "tone.

***The meaning of "dogmatism".***

In addition to its humanities pejorative meaning, "dogmatism" has two meanings.

(a) In Greek antiquity this means that attitude of knowing and thinking which believes that man can arrive at absolute certainties, which transcend the immediate given (i.e., the phenomenon or phenomena); e.g.

1. that since time immemorial, the sun regularly rises and sets,

2. but that this regularity is due to a divine providence (as Stoics or Catholics teach), is not immediately given (phenomenal); in this sense, dogmatism stands in opposition to skepticism, which claims that man, regarding absolute certainty, does not get beyond the phenomenal (and its description, called "phenomenology");

(b). In modern philosophy, "dogmatism" means that epistemology or knowledge-theoretical opinion which claims that human knowledge has reality value and even absolute reality value, without devoting any investigation to the question of whether this is so; - in this sense, (naïve) dogmatism stands in opposition to the criticalism of I. Kant (1724/1804)-that such a dogmatic "sleep" (according to Kant) should be critically examined, - showing that Kant represents a modern form of ancient skepticism.

Kant is a phenomenalist: 1. he accepts that which is immediately given 2. without pronouncing on whether there is an absolute reality or truth answering to it; in which Kant resembles Homer, who gives more than one opinion (interpretation) about one and the same fact (phenomenon) without ever taking a stand; i.e. he practices a suspension of judgment or 'epochè';- attitude of which the first Sophists in Hellas were the forerunners.

### ***Part II. Solution options.***

Practical point of departure.- That even today the question of absolute truth provokes more than one answer, prove such phenomena as, on the one hand, pluralism (making more than one answer socio-culturally acceptable), tolerance, yes, relativism (not accepting any form of absolute truth, - which cancels itself out by the fact that the one who claims: "There is no absolute truth" ("Everything is pure relation"), himself makes an absolute yes, dogmatic statement); on the other hand, inquisition (witch and heretic hunts), excommunication (expulsion from the school or church drawing group) and speaking ban.

Reference should be made, for the Dutch Church, to S. Konijn/ J. Dekkers, *Bouwstenen (overpeinzingen bij een groeiende polarisatie)*, Hilversum, 1972, especially p. 21 (overview of the polarisation points: authority, obedience, (true) doctrine; tradition; dogma; - thinking vertically (from Magisterium (and God)) and horizontally (from man and basis); old and new: generation gap; statistics assessment). Outside the Catholic Church, the situation today is similar: there is dogmatic Marxism and so-called pragmatic Marxism. Doesn't Michel Oukhov in 'The Year of Liberalism' (1980) complain here with us about the fact that 'pluralism' is written off as 'dirty' or 'dangerous' by the older guard from socialist and liberal quarters, and that "this tolerance must come to an end"! Doesn't he write an "Avenue" about right-wing socialists and progressive liberals? The dogmatism/skepticism relationship is more than a religious ecclesiastical problem: it is about a cultural problem without more.

### ***The traditional rules of conduct in the church.***

- Bishop L.A. Van Petegem, in *Church and Life*, 1973: 15 (12.04.19 178), commenting on the episcopal letter on the encyclical, *Humanae Vitae* (30.08.1968) formulates the rule of conduct as follows: The question is: "What becomes that, though

not infallible, yet very weighty doctrine of the encyclical, should anyone come to a judgment of conscience, of his case, which deviates from that doctrine?"

The Episcopal statement says: if, however, someone who is knowledgeable and capable of forming, after serious examination, before God, a firmly founded personal judgment - which always presupposes the necessary information - comes to a different conclusion on certain points, he is entitled, in this, to follow his conviction. However, he must always be prepared to continue his research and reflection honestly.

***Double interpretation of this church rule of conduct.***

- The Bishop of Ghent insists that the rain, according to the Belgian bishops, applies only to the "knowledgeable and competent," "that is, to the competent moralists in the matter." These competent moralists may, if need be, he says, by virtue of their studies and competence, have arguments that make their assent to papal teaching difficult: in that case they may, in conscience but only "for themselves," take a divergent position. This implies that publicity for their opinions is forbidden to them. In theologian Latin, this is called 'silentium obsequiosum' (respectful, submissive silence). In fallibility, they should remain prepared for further research and study. Every other person who is not knowledgeable and qualified to personally pronounce on the papal teaching is truth not yet, must abide by the encyclical and any publicity, among fellow believers e.g. is forbidden to him. After all, divine law is absolute truth and it is "authentically interpreted" by the Church Magisterium, i.e. correctly understood and explained. Church Magisterium and divine law are, for Bishop Van Peteghem, identical.

Different is the interpretation of the same ecclesial rule of conduct with e.g. the existential theologians: the skill and competence, is, for them, not exclusively limited to competent moralists. The reason: skill and competence is more than the formation of Catholic ethicists, which is strongly dogmatically intellectualistic, and scholastic.

The diversity of situations, i.e.: subjective and objective circumstances, is the rule here. An ordinary person, e.g. an industrial worker who has no scholastic training, can be a competent and competent person in his situation, if need be. Everything revolves around the question, "What is right skill and competence?" "Is it to be found exclusively among Catholic moralists?". It is the exclusive that is questionable.

The right relationship the both (exclusive inclusive) position.- So irreconcilable are these not. Insofar as the Catholic existential theologians and moralists, respectively, adhere purely to situational ethics, i.e., do not go beyond each one for himself in his individual and concrete situation, they still remain somewhat within the elitist interpretation, which limits competence to the select or élite of Catholic moralists who have universal (and thus dogmatic) bearing if they advocate purely the official doctrine and only situational bearing if they deviate. Only the situational existential extend the permitted principle of deviation to every person in a situation.

*Note:* Something else is the frontal vote position which simply sets up an antidogma, i.e. that instead of giving each individual the right of derogation for his or her situation, it gives each individual general or universal bearing. E.g., one asserts first and foremost that contraception or abortion is permitted as a matter of principle, i.e., everywhere and always (absolutely), and as such should even be included in legislation. This places the Church outside the scope of valid interpretation of divine law, which considers child life to be of absolute value.

23.09.1980

A. T'Jampens