THE NATURE AND CRITERION OF TRUTH

Must the nature of truth and the criterion of truth be the same? Blanshard answers that if one operates with coherence as the test of truth he will be lead to the conclusion that coherence is also the nature of truth. The purpose of this essay is to show that it is intelligible to accept coherence as the criterion of truth without subscribing to coherence as the nature of truth. Blanshard's insistence upon a logical connection between the acceptance of coherence as the test and coherence as the nature of truth is essentially unsound. The way is then open to an acceptance of coherence as test and correspondence as nature of truth.

Our procedure will be to consider the terms used in his argument—the " nature " and " test " of truth, and " coherence ", with clarification as the major objective. Then, to state succinctly the argument itself and show why it is less than fully convincing. This will leave open the possibility of accepting coherence as the test, while insisting that the nature of truth is other than coherence.

At the outset let us underscore what Blanshard means by the " nature " and " criterion " of truth. By " nature " he means the essential character of the relationship between a proposition and that to which it refers. A " test " or " criterion " is the way one judges whether or not a given statement has that certain relationship to its referent. It is the basis for deciding whether or not a given proposition has the essential character of relationship to qualify as truth. To say that coherence is the test or criterion of truth means that it is the basis for this decision. To say that the criterion of truth is the same as the nature of truth means that the basis for deciding about the essential character of relationship of a proposition is *the same as* the essential character of the relationship between a proposition and its referent. This is tantamount to saying, as we should note, that thought and its object are identical.

But, what is meant by "coherence?" When one attempts to answer this question he runs into trouble. Following the lead of A. C. Ewing, Blanshard admits that coherence cannot be precisely defined and suggests that it is an ideal towards which knowledge strives. The ideal goes beyond but includes consistency. As an integral part of coherence, consistency involves at least acceptance of the law of contradiction and the law of excluded middle. For, to deny either of these laws requires that one, at the same time, makes use of the law one is denying. If one says, for example, that the law of contradiction is false, one is implicitly contradicting oneself. Since the law of contradiction is incapable of self-consistent denial, it is true, and is an essential part of the ideal of coherence.

The same is the case for the law of excluded middle. Every denial of this law completely paralyzes the movement of thought. The law says that X must be either A or not–A. Suspend the law. Then, what thought has to work with is an X which is neither A nor not–A. But, under those circumstances thought cannot even get started. Coherence, then, includes consistency but it includes much else besides.

Coherence requires that every statement in the system is interdependent upon all other statements, whether taken singly or jointly, in the system. Every proposition is a necessary condition without which the system could not be. Take away any proposition and there are repercussions throughout the length and breadth of the system. Add any proposition to the system and there are similarly repercussions throughout the system. Coherence as an ideal is characterized by complete interdependence of propositions, including strict logical entailment. "The integration [in a completely coherent system] would be so complete that no part could be seen for what it was without seeing its relation to the whole, and the whole itself could be understood only through the contribution of every part."[1]

Blanshard ackonwledges, of course, that in ordinary life we are satisfied intellectually with far less than the ideal. The range of that with which we will be content varies with a variation in the subject-matter. In mathematics we would require a proof or demonstration, while in the natural sciences we would accept much less. And, of course, in the social sciences we would doubtless accept even less still. This means that our application of coherence as the test must be keyed to the subject-matter under investigation.

Without much difficulty it would be shown that scientific method is simply an instance of coherence applied to a specific subject-matter. For, what is scientific method ? It usually includes : the formulation of a problem, preliminary observation of facts, the statement of an hypothesis about the facts of which one is aware, experiments to decide whether the hypothesis is accurate, and finally the correlation of the hypothesis with other facts and material. As a way of discovering truth, the scientific method is itself the most coherent hypothesis. In other words, scientific method is coherence applied to a specific subject-matter. It is coherence applied to problems which, in their most precise formulations, can be stated and investigated in ways making sensory confirmation possible. It is coherence applied to problems that admit or allow repetitive experimental control. It is coherence applied to situations where sensory data, and experimental control are often both possible. It is a mistake to assert that coherence is an example of scientific method; rather, scientific method is appropriately conceived as the application of coherence to specific data.

Having clarified these terms and seen something of their application, we are now prepared to consider in some detail Blanshard's argument that acceptance of coherence as the test of truth implies acknowledging that it is also the nature of truth. Of course, to say that coherence is the nature of truth involves a theory of the relation of thought to reality. No attempt will be made to summarize Blanshard's lengthy discussion on this subject.

However, it is important to offer an abbreviated resume of his view since it is this view that undergirds his notion that coherence is the nature of truth. The relation of thought to reality Blanshard calls the " transcendent end " of thought. Now, thought has as its transcendent end an indentity with its object. The " immanent end " of thought is coherence. And this immanent end (as an ideal) is not other than the transcendent end. Perfect knowledge of an object means that coherent thought is identical with its object, coherent object. This identity of thought with its object means that what was first taken as the test of truth must, in the final analysis, also be regarded as the nature of truth. To deny, then, that the test of truth and the nature of truth are the same it is necessary to disavow any identity, even theoretical, between thought and its object. To this overview of the argument and its basis we shall return presently.

We need now to consider in some detail Blanshard's argument that acceptance of coherence as the test of truth entails acceptance of it as the nature of truth. Admitting that this is a difficult problem, Blanshard proposes to show that there is an indirect (negative) entailment. To accept coherence as the test of truth is to agree to employ it in testing all propositions. This means that we employ it in testing the proposition that " truth is something other than coherence." When we test such a proposition by coherence we find that we must reject the proposition because it leads to *in*coherence.

Suppose, for example, that we take as our alternative the proposition that " truth is correspondence." This view of the nature of truth is incoherent. Why ? Because, says Blanshard, " one cannot intelligibly hold either that it is tested by coherence or that there is any dependable test at all."[2]

Consider the first charge. Blanshard argues that it is impossible to argue from a high degree of coherence to correspondence with anything outside that experience. Yet, this appears

to be in fact what one must do each time he employes coherence as the test of truth. A true judgment is one that corresponds to the situation to which it refers. Even Joachim (whom Blanshard cites with approval) says, " The coherence notion of truth *on its own admission* can never rise above the level of knowledge wihich at best attains to the ' truth ' of correspondence."[3] Why does Blanshard insist that the acceptance of correspondence as the nature of truth is unintelligible ? In part because he takes too narrow a view of correspondence itself. In *The Nature of Thought*, Vol. I, Section 9, Blanshard discusses and rejects the view that an idea is a copy of its object. But, of course, most serious advocates of correspondence would agree. They would join him in rejecting a copy notion of the correspondence theory. What is involved in the notion that correspondence is the nature of truth is quite a bit more complex than the copy theory would allow.

No better explanation of correspondence can be found than that given by James B. Pratt in his *Personal Realism*. He indicates that the correspondence theory of truth is an abbreviated expression for a complicated proposition that consists of three statements : (1) the judgment of a person may refer to objects outside of itself, (2) such a judgment may conceivably correspond to its referend in the respect that the referend may actually be as the judgment asserts it to be, and (3) if a judgment does so correspond, it can be characterized by the adjective true.[4]

Each of these statements refers to its object or referend. Moreover, it is neither self-contradictory nor meaningless to say that each of these propositions corresponds with its object—that is, that the situation is as the statement asserts it to be. To deny the third statement by itself becomes simply a verbal quibble. To deny the first or second statements is to deny that judgments can refer beyond the mind that makes them. But, this latter denial is tantamount to denying the possibility of meanings common to minds and therewith the possibility of science and philosophy and

even ordinary conversation. The correspondence theory, then, is true in the correspondence sense of true. It is true in the respect that situations such as those described in statements (1) and (2) are actual. If one denies the reality of such situations, he cannot intelligibly continue to discuss either the correspondence theory or the coherence theory.

Now, Blanshard thinks that he has successfully blunted the thrust of this argument.

> " If truth does consist in correspondence, no test can be sufficient. For in order to know that experience corresponds to fact, we must be able to get at that fact, unadulterated with idea, and compare the two sides with each other. And . . . . such fact is inaccessible. "[5]

Every time we try to grasp a fact we only get some judgment about a fact that must, in its turn, be checked by some other fact. This process of a quest for confirmation can never be brought to an end. It involves the inquirer in an infinite regress.

But, the advocate of correspondence is not without reply. First, a sufficient test in the sense indicated is not required. Certainly, coherence, which Blanshard acknowledges as the best available, will not provide such a sufficient test. Second, correspondence (with its meaning given by the three propositions listed) need not require a comparison of unadulterated fact with idea. All that is necessary is that the referend or object be as the judgment asserts it to be. Third, the correspondence view is in no worse shape than the coherence view. If one takes coherence as the nature of truth, he has the same essential problem of how experience can be related to fact. The advocate of coherence can no more escape the " ego-centric " predicament than the advocate of correspondence. The correspondence view, then, is no more likely to lead to an ultimate skepticism than is coherence. Blanshard's own defence of coherence against the charge of skepticism could serve equally well, with a few minor changes, as a defence of correspondence.

Blanshard's other charge is that if one could get facts directly, then, he could have knowledge whose truth would consist in immediate apprehension rather than correspondence. But, this charge is just as fatal to coherence as it is to correspondence. What can *cohere* with what when one has fact in his immediate grasp ? The nature of truth, under this supposition, is no more coherence than it is correspondence.

The trouble is that the supposition is erroneous. One never does have fact in his immediate grasp. The central inadequacy of Blanshard's coherence view of the nature of the situation is his identification of coherent thought with coherent object. The immanent end and the transcendent end of thought cannot be the same.

Do idea and object have to be one ? Is it necessary that the immanent and transcendent ends of thought be the same ? Certainly knowledge is possible without such identity of idea and its object. In fact, unless knowledge of the objects other than the idea that knows them is possible, genuine knolwledge seems impossible. One's idea, for example, can never coincide in a monistic fashion with a past event; yet, if memory and science are reliable, then it must be granted that one can know what is past. One can then have a true idea about what can never be identical with the idea. A person may truly know that yesterday he played billiards, although his knowledge is today and his billiard playing yesterday in the irrevocable past. That such knowledge of the past is possible suggests that perfect knowledge, however it may be conceived, should not be viewed in such a way as to exclude *this* knowledge. In other words, to conceive of perfect knowledge as an identity of thought with its object is to conceive it in a manner that excludes reliable memories as instances of true knowledge. This exclusion is, indeed, unwarranted.

By the same token this view would also exclude scientific knowledge. Since such knowledge is based upon the accumulation of information derived from experiments, it is dependent upon a

a knowledge of the past. The exclusion of such knowledge, again, seems unwarranted.

Even putting aside these exclusions there is a major difficulty with the view. Can a monistic epistemology offer an adequate account of the situation ? The question at issue is : which is the more coherent of epistemological views, monism or dualism ?

It seems to me that the great weight of evidence favours dualism. Consider briefly such evidence. First, there is what A. O. Lovejoy sometimes called "intertemporal cognition."[6] What he meant by this expression is the reference of a statement of proposition to an event occurring at *some other time*. The reference need not be to some past event but could be to some future event. This reference certainly indicates that idea and its object are two entities. For example, my present idea cannot be indentical with the future situation to which that idea may refer.

Second, there is the trans-spatial reference of ideas which suggests dualism. Ideas may refer to spaces which are not immediately present. Surely such ideas can be true without being identical with that to which they refer. My idea of the center of the moon or of the center of a mango fruit that I have never seen cannot be identical with the objects.

Third, if it is true that other selves do exist, and that a self or part of a self can never be identical with another self, then a dualism in epistemology gains additional support. When an individual has an idea of another self, his idea is not a part of that other self, nor is the other self a part of his idea.

Fourth, there is the often mentioned fact of error. If an idea were identical with its object, how would we account for error ? Dualism, by contrast, accounts for error by insisting that ideas *refer* to objects, while never being identical with them. For the epistemic dualist an idea may not refer accurately to its object because it is based on insufficient observation or distorted observation or incoherent thinking.

Finally, epistemic dualism has the advantage over monism because it leaves the metaphysical question open. The epistemic dualist leaves open the question of the kind of universe in which we live. Whether or not one accepts metaphysical monism or metaphysical pluralism must be decided on other grounds. This theoretical option is not, however, open to the consistent epistemic monist. If the epistemic monist avoids solipsim, he is likely to be an absolute idealist. By insisting upon an epistemic monism Blanshard commits himself to a metaphysical monism. This it would seem, is unfortunate because the preponderance of evidence points to epistemic dualism. Blanshard's acceptance of metaphysical monism is an outgrowth of his insistence that coherence is both the criterion and nature of truth. This insistence is unwarranted.

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NOTES

1. *The Nature of Thought* (New York: The Macmillan Co., [1939] 1955), Vol. II, p. 266.
2. Harold H. Joachim, *The Nature of Truth* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), pp. 171, 175.
3. *The Nature of Thought*, Vol. II, p. 268.
4. J. B. Pratt, *Personal Realism*, p. 82.
5. Blanshard, *The Nature of Thought*, Vol. II, p. 268.
6. "Reflections of a Temporalist on the New Realism", *Jour. Phil.* 8 (1911), 590.