

# ***The Standpoint of Religion*** ***Shukyo no tachiba (1920)***

**by Nishida Kitaro; W.S. Yokoyama, trans.**

*(This is a draft translation of Nishida Kitaro, "Shukyo no tachiba," in Nishida Kitaro Zenshu [Collected Works] 14: 301-309. It was originally given as an academic lecture at Ryukoku University, Kyoto, in December 1919, and published in Rokujo gakuho the following month.)*

For religion to take its place among today's ideologies, it has to have a foundation to which it has given considerable thought, if it is to defend its ground while verifying that ground for itself. As any religion is prone to influence from without, the proponents of that religion need to stand firm in the face of [such influence], or risk losing their standpoint altogether.

At present, the greatest adversary religion faces is the natural sciences, in particular the concept of man derived from a basis in natural sciences. It is not necessarily the case that the natural sciences are antagonistic to religion, but if the truth of natural sciences is made the sole truth, this gives the truth of religion no place to stand. What the truth of the natural sciences is and how to consider this problem critically thus become matters of extreme importance. We must also ask whether it is necessarily the case that religion has to be destroyed by the natural science version of truth, or whether religion has a standpoint of religion apart from this? These are problems we must turn our attention to today.

When we ask what truth is, common sense tells us truth is where our thinking corresponds with events in the outside world. In philosophy, this is known as correspondence theory or mimetic theory. But when we try to explain truth this way, we run into complications. To give a mathematical example, no one would deny the sum of the angles of a triangle equals that of two right angles, but there is no way to demonstrate this by correspondence theory. This is because the geometrical figure made up of points and lines that mathematicians deal with has no actual existence in the outside world. Mathematicians say a circle is inscribed by a trail of points equidistant from a central point, but rigorously speaking no such circle exists in reality. Even drawn using precision instruments, it would not be possible to rigorously produce what mathematicians call a circle. What mathematicians call truth thus has no existence in reality. This is a riddle that correspondence or mimetic theory can never solve in a million years.

Next, if we think the reverse: that something existing in the external world has to have a basis wholly in our beliefs. That is, the source of our beliefs lies within ourselves. The source of truth is to be sought within ourselves. That something exists in the external world first has to fit a logical configuration. Logical configurations are already provided in our subjective/intuitive view [of things]. As we proceed further, we find there are categories for various kinds of logic. Once an existent fits a certain category, for the first time we can believe it to exist. Once an existent is seen to fit a Kategorie, for the first time it can be regarded an actual existence. In today's philosophy this is called an a priori. An a priori is not a subjective/intuitive view -- this we must make clear. An a priori does not refer to each individual person's beliefs; it refers, rather, to a pre-experiential configuration [of the truth] that all people have to accept [as true]. If that were not the case, it would not be possible for us to establish what we know [about reality].

In philosophy, this kind of thinking is called Critical theory. While it invites misunderstanding to say such truth is based on subjective/intuitive grounds, and one must be careful to remember that an a priori is everywhere different from individual belief, it is only with a priori that it first becomes permissible to say that a person's perception [of reality] differs from another's since each person has their own distinct personality and experiences. For

that reason, one might say that the criticism directed at Critical theory is one permissible only with the establishment of Critical theory itself.

The fundamental configuration of knowledge is not outside the mind, but within it; to use the term 'self', it is the configuration already supplied the self before its differentiation into an individual existence. This way of regarding truth, then, is an epistemology of criticism. What might be said to not resemble it is pragmatism, which enjoyed a vogue in America at one time. In pragmatism, truth is subjective, there is no absolute truth, and truth must have some utility value. This is not necessarily without significance. In physics, for instance, a datum of knowledge contains truth, though never an absolute one. The British scientist Lord Kelvin explained light as the movement of ether, but it was not a definitive theory. Now we have scientists like Maxwell who take a different stance. [But] those who adopted the ether hypothesis did so because it was a convenient way to explain [certain] natural phenomena. In this way of thinking, there can be no eternal and unchanging truth; there is only the utility of various ways of thinking.

The way of thinking of pragmatism and that of Critical theory are both rooted in the subjective/intuitive view, but pragmatism is evaluated by the advantage it offers each person, whereas Critical theory is the subjective/intuitive view before [differentiation of] the individual; in other words, the greatest point of difference is [the latter accesses] the foundation of truth through a pre-experiential self. In Critical theory, truth is completely unrelated to whether it reaps benefit or harm, or profit or loss; truth is determined in this person. For example, there is no one who conceived the basic laws of logic, yet everyone has to follow these laws regardless.

If this was the point from which Critical theory was established, this would mean that the natural science version of truth we shall now consider is, despite its being [called] a natural science version of truth, cannot exist separate from our subjective/intuitive view (that is, the pre-experiential self). First, its basis has to have a logic. Next, it has to have a temporal and spatial configuration. And last but not least, it has to be complemented by various subjective/intuitive hypotheses. For instance, Newton's three laws of motion was not arrived at by experience, but determined subjectively/intuitively. This is the a priori for physics, and it is on this that the field of physics is constructed.

If we think of matters in this way, we can say that the truth of the natural sciences is an intellectual construction built on our subjective/intuitive view, but aside from this, we have another meaning of truth (truth here being used in the broad sense). The knowledge of the natural sciences is not the sole truth. Or, it might be better to say there is another [form of] knowledge that anyone would recognize. These are the beliefs built on our affectivity/feelings.

We have knowledge, but at its basis are beliefs that are more than knowledge, [beliefs] on which knowledge is established. [Beliefs] do not clash with knowledge; rather, they form its basis. That is, [beliefs] are a truth that grows out of our affectivity/feelings. It must be said that, while the world sought by knowledge and the world sought by affectivity/feelings may differ in that standpoint, the latter is a world at a level deeper than the former. However, if we ask what manner of relationship holds between these two [i.e., belief and knowledge], the basic configuration of knowledge is judgment (handan). The simplest form of a judgment is the formula 'a is b'.

However complex [a quantum of] knowledge may be, it is by the formation of this configuration for judgment; whatever judgments we examine, it may be analyzed as the formula 'a is b'.

Judgments are a key problem in the study of logic. For any judgment to take place, there has to be the whole in which the subject and the predicate are contained. For example, to distinguish white from red, there has to be a whole that is neither white nor red, yet which has the potential to become either white or red. Judgments [are arrived at] only when the whole is given, and only subsequently is analysis made. That is why some people understand the German word *urteilen* to mean 'to distinguish'. Knowledge is judgment, and judgment has to be provided the subject and predicate on which [the whole] is organized.

To know white and black we need to know a third party that maintains the relationship of white and black. Without knowing this [third party] there would be no way we could talk about white and black as differing. At the ground of knowledge there has to be a synthetical whole. This [synthetical whole] cannot be seen as knowledge; what we can see as knowledge is 'this is white' or 'this is black'. The synthetical whole cannot be grasped as knowledge, but it is at work at the ground of knowledge.

For a while psychology without a soul (*Psychologie ohne Seele*) enjoyed a vogue among experiential psychologists who sought to view the soul from the standpoint of knowledge. [But] the soul in its entirety cannot be understood from the standpoint of knowledge. It would be better to say that the soul is not the object of knowledge, but is at work at the ground of knowledge. In works such as the *Treatise on the Middle* (*Chu-ron*), *sunyata/emptiness* is being viewed from the standpoint of knowledge and that is why it appears to be empty; in fact, it is a powerful force in [our] actual existence/reality; [it {*sunyata*} is] the power of life giving shape to the ground of knowledge. This is the content of our affectivity/feelings, the basis of [our] beliefs. I am unable to explain it but the power of convictions are being forcefully expressed in the real world.

If we think deeply, this could even be the content of [our] life. Our true life is the same as [our] affectivity/feelings, and it is in the form of [our] affectivity/feelings that the content of our life is expressed. [Our] true experiences are expressed in the form of [our] affectivity/feelings.

Whenever a new truth is discovered, it does not take place by mastering all the knowledge given thus far; rather, it is a leap forward from a standpoint that goes beyond what we know. That is why truth is said the work of genius. A new truth emerges via a new synthetical whole. This is the same in mathematics, except that once a truth is discovered [in mathematics] it is systematized in the form of knowledge.

The truth that arises in the standpoint of affectivity/feelings has since ancient times been called religion or the fine arts, and while different from knowledge, it has a meaning deeper than knowledge. If we think in this way, we can say that affectivity/feelings again are superior to knowledge. And so, this closely approximates in tone the thought of pragmatism. Even in the truths discovered in physics, there is an intimate relation between the personality of the developer or creator [of a branch of physics], and rather than refer to physics generally, it is common to call it Thomsonian physics or Maxwellian physics. The character of Thomson is to regard reality as sensible; in contrast, that of Maxwell is to think of matters abstractly. This thick human coloration is also detected in other fields such as philosophy.

As explained above, the truth of religion is to be sought on [the plane of] human affectivity/feelings; the truth of religion is built on man's grand scale of life; [as such] it is founded on a different standpoint from and is organized around a different truth than that of the natural sciences. But as to why [religion] is threatened by the natural sciences, it is because religion seeks to assimilate the standpoint of natural sciences into itself; and, further, because religion seeks to conform to the natural sciences. By so doing, religion loses its own character and so earns the derision of the natural sciences. In the Old

Testament there is the account of how the earth was the center of the universe and how man was conceived as a special creation, but do these thoughts ultimately belong in the realm of religion? These are more like reflections on sin and evil, hence belong to a completely different standpoint.

Even when interpreting the dogma of ancient religions, unless we clarify that standpoint, it is not possible to understand the great religions. It may well be that the knowledge someone like St. Augustine possessed is, by today's standards, erroneous and childish, but in the background, depending on the interpretation, there is stored for eternity an undying truth. The same would of course apply to Buddhism.

For this reason, to explain what religion is, this from a standpoint different from that of science, the interpretation of religious dogma is of essential importance for the present age. In this way, I believe that religion would avoid the derision from the natural sciences and would be able to truly affirm this basic quality [it possesses].