BOTOND GAÁL

THE TRUTH OF REASON AND THE REALITY OF THE WORLD

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT OF EXACT SCIENCES FROM A CHRISTIAN VIEWPOINT

BÖSZÖRMÉNYI JENŐ ALAPÍTVÁNY DEBRECENI REFORMÁTUS HITTUDOMÁNYI EGYETEM DEBRECEN 2002

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To my dear wife

MÁRIA

and

our three children

GERZSON, BOTOND and VERONIKA

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PREFACE

Almost all fields of science use the words 'truth' and 'reality' in a certain natural way. Their exact meaning or definition, however, are not found in each field. Specialists use them in an established context or with a specific meaning in their own division of science. With the development of science, he relative disambiguity of truth and reality has not been preserved by any of the fields of science, moreover, it has disappeared in several cases. By now inter- disciplinarity has been taken for granted so it is no wonder that the tendency is towards a 'clearly comprehensible language' by each field of science and, in the interest of a faster and more precise flow of information these terms should become the means of expressing ideas in a straightforward fashion.

The above problem is raised in a more explicit way in the field examined by us. In both philosophy, and exact sciences and theology it has been felt that the conceptual understanding of truth and reality has not been clarified to the required extent. There are shifts in interpretation and their understanding may differ occasionally. The degree of this difference causes complications not only in the fruitful co-operation between the fields, but also in the disciplined cultivation of science within a single area. Considering philosophy alone, certain thinkers say that truth is the thing that is beyond the knowledge of the spatio-temporo-material world perceived by the mind. In other cases, it is the understanding of reality itself that presents a problem. The term is used as if it constituted the double control of scientific cognition along the line of reality – cognition – reality, but in this context, reality only means experience. Thus, it is necessary for each field of science to interpret the world which it wants to know using ideas which are close to each other.

Discussing the topic, reality is interpreted through objects and phenomena seen sub specie totalitatis. Reality is understood to be the universe forming a whole, in all its spatial, temporal, material and intellectual aspects. The mind tries to understand this universe and fixes the truth of reason at the contemporary level of knowledge, which does not necessarily correspond to full reality. Therefore, unlike reality, truth can never exceed the knowledge established by the intellect. Truth is regarded to be the thing that has been covered by human intellect in the process of understanding reality. Thus the truth of reason always includes the possibility of exceeding itself, too. This is the essence and, at the same time, secret of scientific thinking. Should any law

between the truth of reason and the reality of the world be discovered by us, we have come closer to this secret. That is the aim of science.

I have been interested in how man's ideas of the surrounding world have changed in the course of history. The question of what the internal structure of the universe and the human mind perceiving it are like has recurred from time to time. I have always felt that the solution to this question should lie in the understanding of the relationship between the truth of reason and the reality of the world. Thus my goal has been definitely set. To achieve this goal I have examined the detectable historic signs of the shaping of the aforementioned relationship over the past two and a half thousand years. I have expected my examinations to be beneficial in two ways. On the one hand, I have hoped to find the laws which could serve as a link between the development of exact sciences and the human intellect exploring the world. I have approached the problem from a Christian standpoint asking whether the nature of human reason and the structure of the immanent laws of the world are congruent or not. This intellectual problem has been one of the most difficult ones since the ancient times. On the other hand, I have been searching for the answer to a most intriguing and often asked question: why was it the European civilization that had become a decisive factor among all other civilizations? Going further, I have also asked how and to what extent Greek science and the Jewish and Christian approaches had contributed to a culture of that high level.

I think my ideas are just a minor contribution to answering these highly complicated but extremely interesting questions which have been dealt with by so many. It is my strong belief that these questions will be properly answered when there is an even stronger collaboration among sciences, including theology. The effective work to be done joining forces will most likely consider investigations concerning the basics of nature, knowledge of reality and science and, consequently, it will contribute to the research of the origins of the whole of our European culture.

Holding a grant, I have been given the privilege to belong to the disciples of Professor Thomas F. Torrance who worked at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Edinburgh. Professor Torrance, holder of the Templeton prize, often shared ideas with Michael Polanyi, discussed his problems with his master, Karl Barth and was in uninterrupted contact with the best of philosophers, mathematicians and physicists. These forms of cultivating science

have become a model for me, too. I have learned from Torrance how to interpret the contingent approach of the universe in Christian theology and exact sciences. When I investigated how deeply this approach was true in some fields of mathematics, physics and theology, I could see that contingency did play a basic part in exploring the relationship between the truth of the reason and the reality of the world. Professor Torrance has had a significant share in shaping my way of thinking in these areas. I am really grateful to my old master.

It is my pleasure to recall of my research in the Center of Theological Inquiry at Princeton, New Jersey. Many questions were discussed with my academic friends there. The results were built into this book. I am also grateful to the members of the European Society for the Study of Science and Theology and to the participants of the Science and Theology Conference in Debrecen for the fruitful discussions which has always encouraged me in my work. With a sense of gratitude I think of several friends of mine in Hungary from whom I have learned a lot. I am thankful to Jusztina Nagy-Jánossy for making a basic translation of this difficult text from Hungarian into English. I ought to express my special thanks to Frank Sawyer, the guest-professor of Sárospatak Theological Academy, for his great assistance in reviewing the text of this book.

Botond Gaál Debrecen/Hungary December, 2001

INTRODUCTION

The task to examine how the high level civilization of Europe developed appears to be an exciting one. The process is still in progress: the people of different continents are trying hard to incorporate this civilization in their own culture and use it to build a modern society capable of developing.

Informatics developing at a tremendous speed has been an excellent example of high level science of European origin. Being a new field of science, little is known about it and it is also difficult to predict to what heights it may raise the world. Certainly, we are part of a promising developmental process when, at an ever growing speed, human knowledge can create devices needed for the cultivation of science. These devices have their impact on the human mind which has created them at an even faster rate through the communication of information. It is not only the facts and results of science that give the essence of informatics, i.e. the internal reality of this self-generating process, but also the speed of communicating information, which is an inherent property of the subject. The faster the flow of information via to-andfro feedback, the greater the output of man which, consequently, results in a more powerful technical development. No wonder why the whole world rushes to take over and learn this high-level culture of European origin. It also seems evident and certain that several nations will enrich the universal cultivation of science through their own creativity and so far unutilized intellectual and moral energies in the near future.

Undoubtedly, this process is not a predestined or blind one which would yield chance results; on the contrary, it has its inner laws, a regulatory order that can be discovered. Several attempts have been made to reveal what the highlighted position of the European civilization is due to in this global process. The different sciences have given different explanations about this spectacular leading role. In fact, several competent thoughts were born and their harmonization may give rise to a more acceptable and uniform theory which, at a higher level of thinking, will decide about the value of truths thought to be valid until now. No such general theory has been given birth yet, so the

theory of science can be enriched by adding partial results to it. All fields of science may produce useful discoveries but it would be a mistake if any of the fields thought they had acquired the final truth and given a perfect explanation for now and forever. That field of science may yet reach a higher level thus making former truths relative. It is an open-ended process and the laws of order should be found within the process itself.

As far as the European development of scientific thinking is concerned, the different areas give different reasons for the shift in paradigms. For example, history points at facts of the satisfactory or unsatisfactory socialization of technical achievements1 as well as the undoubtedly important development and incorporation of literacy, a method of cultivating science, into the conscious sphere.2 The several divisions of philosophy have been trying to find out about the springs which lie and govern the history of ideas in the background regardless of whether they are of conscious, economic or social aspect. As it will be demonstrated soon, natural sciences - as they are understood today - are in the most ambiguous position because, after a promising start in ancient times, the shocking shift only came in the modern times and it is rather difficult to say why. After all, it is hard to find a reassuring explanation to why it was the milieu of the modern times when the 'tree of knowledge' grew to its biggest size or why that soil was the most nourishing one to enable the tree to produce immeasurably and incomparably richer yields compared to those of the other parts of the world. This question could emerge as a real problem for representatives of other cultures such as thinkers raised in the traditions of Chinese, Babylonian and African civilizations of several thousand years. The problem can be presented in another way: representatives of Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese 'universism' and Muslim thinking may ask what caused the spectacular progress in the cultivation of science in European societies whose results, serving as useful tools, are now shared by the whole world.

¹ Cf. István Hajnal, Technika, művelődés. (Technology, education.) Studies. Compiled and preface written by Ferenc Glatz, História Könyvtár, Department of the History of Science of HAS (Hungarian Academy of Sciences) Budapest, 1993. 299. (in Hungarian)

² Cf. István Hajnal, Technika, művelődés. op.cit. Studies: History of European culture - literacy, 13-27., Rational development and literacy, 29-36., Literacy, intellectual layer and European development, 36-64 (in Hungarian). The preface on pages XIX-XXIV by Ferenc Glatz specially written to this compilation by István Hajnal shows the historical

No fully satisfactory explanation has been found to the 'hows' and 'whys' of European development. Therefore it is worth pointing out facts which can help us better understand or, at least, approach this problem that presents a hard puzzle to solve. The question 'What caused the development of exact sciences in this part of the world from ancient times until now?' appears to be of utmost importance. Where is the secret hidden? Why did it develop that way? Why did it develop here? Why was the development full of obstacles and what forces of drawback had to be overcome? It also may be worth noticing what led to the sudden rise of exact sciences starting form the 15th and 16th centuries.

In this work, I would like to answer these questions or contribute to existing answers through a special kind of investigation which may enrich approaches and give new ideas for the exploration of the topic. Let me start with an interesting remark: In fact, the results of fantastic depths and heights in exact sciences were born in a geographical area, on a social basis and in a scientific and spiritual environment whose borders coincided with those of the mind-set represented by Christianity. That was the case until the middle of the 20th century when representatives of other cultures also contributed to scientific development. Mention should be made here of Asian nations that raised the already existing scientific levels, in a most intriguing way, by borrowing their intellectual tools, such as the mathematical apparatus, from the above areas. Now that we know the final result it seems worth going back to the beginnings to find out about the roots from which the European mind emerged, and to see what the nourishing sources for the European style of the cultivation of science were. Then we should go along some of the most important historic stations which had their positive or not so positive impact on scientific development. If the field of interest is restricted and the road is taken from the standpoint of Christian theology, surprisingly useful facts will be discovered. They can be seen as landmarks which the history of science has passed unnoticed, not realizing that these important signs were also standing there. It must be mentioned that these road signs were occasionally drawn ambiguously, moreover, set up in the wrong direction which now makes it necessary for us to criticize things in the interest of the disciplined cultivation of science. But first, let us look at the start, the birth and childhood of exact sciences in the ancient times.

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