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Paul's Way of Knowing

Story, Experience, and the Spirit

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Contents

Part Two: The Structure of Paul's Knowledge

Part Three: Coming to Knowledge in Paul's Letter to the Galatians

Introduction

A Dilemma, a Question, and a Sketch of the Answer

1. The Dilemma

If anything is clear about the early Christian movement it is that the first believers in Christ were not technical philosophers. In *The Passing of Peregrinus* the second-century satirist Lucian of Samosata (b. ca. 120 CE) unleashes his wit on the gullible Christians who were so easily duped by the charlatan Peregrinus Proteus. One can detect behind Lucian's sarcasm a genuine amazement that anyone would reject the Greek pantheon of gods, only to worship a crucified Jew from the backwater province of Palestine. What seems to stir up Lucian's derision even more than the content of these beliefs, however, is the lack of critical thought which the Christians apply to their doctrines. "All this," he explains, "they take quite on trust," with the effect that the Christians are perfect targets for a con artist such as Peregrinus: "Now an adroit, unscrupulous fellow, who has seen the world, has only to get among these simple souls, and his fortune is pretty soon made; he plays with them."[1] Not only does Lucian's attitude betray the wide intellectual gulf which lay between the Roman elites and most early Christians, but it also echoes a criticism which has been repeated innumerable times in the centuries since the dawning of the "Age of Reason." Despite occasional attempts to dress itself up in the trappings of philosophical respectability, Christianity has never been able to escape its reputation for encouraging a less than rational belief in traditional doctrines. Somewhere at its roots the Christian movement seems to have been shaped by a kind of thinking very unlike the rationalisms which characterized Lucian's Roman philosophy and modern European thought after Descartes.

Before we add our assent to Lucian's judgement on the early Christians, however, we must observe that the past century witnessed a disturbing

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[1] Lucian, *Peregrinus*, 11–13 (quotation from 13).

erosion of our confidence in the powers of human reason. This post-modern insecurity is captured by Umberto Eco in his novel *Foucault's Pendulum* when the enigmatic Belbo describes to Casaubon the epiphany which he experienced as he gazed at the enormous pendulum which hangs in the Conservatoire des arts et métiers in Paris:

> ". . . then last year, when I saw the Pendulum, I understood everything."
> "Everything?"
> "Almost everything. You see, Casaubon, even the Pendulum is a false prophet. You look at it, you think it's the only fixed point in the cosmos, but if you detach it from the ceiling of the Conservatoire and hang it in a brothel, it works just the same. And there are other pendulums: there's one in New York, in the UN building, there's one in the science museum in San Francisco, and God knows how many others. Wherever you put it, Foucault's Pendulum swings from a motionless point while the earth rotates beneath it. Every point of the universe is a fixed point: all you have to do is hang the Pendulum from it."
> "God is everywhere?"
> "In a sense, yes. That's why the Pendulum disturbs me. It promises the infinite, but where to put the infinite is left to me."[2]

What makes Belbo's anxiety so poignant for many contemporary readers is that we share his sense of loss. We too have become aware that the cherished beliefs, the unquestioned assumptions which once formed the bedrock of reality, seem now to float rootless. There seems no way to find the absolute centre of things, and so every circle we inscribe at the boundary of our world appears arbitrary. Yet, like Belbo, most of us cannot celebrate this sense of epistemic dislocation. Rather it overwhelms us like seasickness, a pervasive *nausée* which we learn to tolerate but for which we cannot help wishing we could find a cure. Our minds recoil at the thought that we are as absurd as Beckett's characters as they wait for Godot, their world constricted to the ugly banalities of boots, sore feet, and cruelty. We crave a myth to live by as we need air, but even more we have a need to *believe* the myth. We want its world to be real. We want the anchor point of that pendulum to really *be* the centre of the world, a fixed point from which we can measure our place. Hence the search for a centre has not died. Richard Rorty's pragmatic relativism, the communitarianism of Habermas, Wittgenstein's rooting of language games in a "form of life," Quine's redefinition of philosophy as the servant of science, Levinas' absolute ethical responsibility in the gaze of the

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[2] Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*, 201.

"other," each represents in its own way a rebellion against Beckett's vision of absurdity. Even Derrida, whose flag was often waved on this side of the Atlantic as the champion who would put an end to all settled meaningfulness, began to talk later in his life of real ethical meaning in concepts such as "hospitality." It is still unclear, however, just how that meaningful centre for thought and life can be trusted, how we can really come to believe a myth again. Lucian's smug confidence in the power of reason has given way in many of us to Belbo's tragic uncertainty.

In this context we see more and more thinkers looking back in order to look forward. In Continental philosophy we can perceive a "religious turn" which seems to involve the conviction that there are important sources for meaning which were excluded, fatally, by the secularism of the Enlightenment. In theology too we see a shift away from the classical liberal project of reconstructing religion on the grounds of secular reason, away from Bultmann's demythologization, and toward a more humble engagement with the pre-modern past. In the post-liberalism of Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and Thomas Oden or in the work of the "Radical Orthodoxy" group we see a hope that Aquinas, Augustine, Athanasius, and Paul may not have been so naive in their belief. Suddenly the early Christians do not look quite as foolish for their refusal to play Lucian's rationalist game. Could it be, we wonder, that they stood in living contact with ways of grounding belief and meaning which we have forgotten, approaches which are vitally important now if we are to escape the death throes of modernity?

2. The Question

Enter Paul. The present project is conceived as another contribution to this exploration of the epistemological resources of our Western past and, for theology, of our Christian past. The question which we will pursue is how Paul, as the most influential Christian thinker in the first century, assumed he could know about God. It is clear that the Apostle did not ask how knowledge was possible in the sense that we do now after Descartes and Kant. Nor was he concerned with the self-conscious logic of the Stoics or with the arguments of the Skeptics. In part this is because, whatever exposure he may have had to the philosophical street-preachers in his native Tarsus, Paul did not belong to the social elite to whom the details of Hellenistic philosophy

were for the most part restricted. In part Paul was not overtly concerned about epistemology because he was a Jew and, prior to his experience on the Damascus road, a fairly traditional one. Yet it is this very *lack* of interest in theorizing about knowledge which makes him so valuable as the object of our study. For in reading the letters of this Apostle to the Gentiles we step outside of the technical epistemological tradition stretching from Plato, through Descartes and Kant, to the philosophy departments of our universities. This is not to say that Paul was entirely unaffected by popular Hellenistic philosophy. He betrays no interest, however, in the kind of epistemological debates and self-conscious logic which were a staple of elite philosophical discourse. In Paul we have the opportunity to see how someone approached religious knowledge who was at one and the same time foundational in the development of Western culture and yet relatively untouched by the epistemological currents which so many now suspect are bankrupt. What assumptions did such a thinker make about human knowledge of God? More specifically, what kind of logic did Paul employ when he tried to lead human beings from comparative ignorance into greater knowledge, and how does that logic presume we should understand human knowing?

3. The Strategy of this Study

In the first part of this study I will explore Paul's attitudes towards reason and rationality. I will begin by examining the two passages where Paul seems to address most directly the human epistemic situation: Rom 1:18–32 and 1 Cor 1:17–2:16. I will then broaden my focus to survey the evidence for Paul's attitude towards human rationality throughout his letters, and to ask what kind of rationality the Apostle seems to regard as legitimate. Finally, I will turn to survey the trend in contemporary Pauline studies which recognizes the importance of interpretive rationality in Paul's thought and argument. We will see that the Apostle seems to have a much more positive attitude towards reason than many might assume. The Spirit is, for Paul, an indispensable factor in this acquisition of knowledge, but that Spirit's role is one of facilitating proper reasoning rather than displacing human intellectual activity. Even in the believer's initial conversion to faith in Christ, I will argue, the Apostle does not understand God's sovereignty to totally eclipse human reasoning. We will also see how Paul treats the Christ event and

certain other experiences as interpretive keys which, in the context of a Jewish framework of thought, will allow human beings to interpret themselves and their world properly.

In the second part we will examine Paul's claims to knowledge and ask what kind of logical structure his knowledge exhibits when it is taken as a whole. This will involve collecting all of the passages in Paul's undisputed letters[3] in which the Apostle describes human beings (himself or someone else) as knowing something. My focus will fall on the kinds of object which this knowledge grasps, so I will look at all those passages in which 1) verbs of knowing occur with an identifiable object, or 2) nouns denoting knowledge are employed and the content of that knowledge is identifiable from context. It will soon become clear that there is a narrative structure to the Apostle's knowledge. Moreover, we will see here further evidence of Paul's emphasis on hermeneutical reasoning, for the Apostle's ethical knowledge seems to arise out of this narrative as individual people are "emplotted" within the story. Finally, we will observe that this narrative knowledge is not, for Paul, an end in itself. Rather, all of the Apostle's knowing is geared to bring believers to that "knowledge of God" which includes a committed relational connection with God and Christ, a knowledge which itself constitutes salvation.

The third and largest part of this study aims to provide a clearer picture of the narrative, hermeneutical logic which Paul seems to assume is a reliable path to religious knowledge. Taking the letter to the Galatians as a sample of Paul's argumentation, I will try to uncover the logic by which that argument proceeds. My approach in this section will be similar in some ways to rhetorical analyses of Galatians. My focus, however, remains essentially different. Most rhetorical readings are concerned with identifying recognized features of ancient rhetoric in Paul's writing. While this is an important question, I am not interested here in isolating parallels with the surface structures of the Apostle's speech. Rather, I want to uncover the

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[3] I will restrict my analysis for the most part to those letters for which there is a fair consensus that Paul is the author: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. I also regard Colossians and 2 Thessalonians as genuine, and so I will refer to these letters as well. Neither letter, however, offers decisive or distinctive evidence for this study, so their inclusion should not skew the outcome even if they are pseudonymous.

argumentative logic which lies implicit beneath that surface.[4]

Why choose Galatians as a test site? Unlike Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, and the Pastoral Letters, the Pauline authorship of Galatians has not been seriously challenged. Likewise, unlike 2 Corinthians and Philippians (and in some circles 1 Thessalonians), there has never been serious debate about the integrity of the letter. This is important for our purposes, because we will be tracing the logic of Paul's argument from beginning to end. In order to do so, we need to be confident that what we are reading was, in fact, written as a single sustained argument. This leaves us with Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, and perhaps 1 Thessalonians. The ongoing debate over the nature of the Corinthian situation makes 1 Corinthians a difficult letter to use as a test site. Its loose structure, in which Paul deals with a series of apparently distinct issues, also means that 1 Corinthians lacks good examples of an extended argument.[5] Likewise, the ongoing controversy over the argument of Romans would make any reconstruction of the logic in Romans as a whole very controversial. To what extent was Romans an occasional letter? If it was, what kind of situation does Paul address? How does his discussion of the Jews in chapters 9–11 fit into this argumentative setting? At present there is little consensus over any of

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[4] The difference is clearly illustrated by a glance at Siegert's work *Argumentation bei Paulus*. The observation that Paul often uses syllogistic or enthymematic argument (*Argumentation*, 191–5) does not tell us why the Apostle selects the premises which he does or the nature of the logic by which he moves from premise to conclusion. The observation that Paul sometimes employs familiar *topoi* (*Argumentation*, 199–202) does not tell us why he selects those and not others, what he is going to say about them, or why he thinks his audience should believe him. Siegert also focusses on the symbolic and typological connections which Paul often draws, but without providing insight into the logic by which these connections (and not others) are justified (*Argumentation*, 209–24). In contrast, Siegert begins to describe the underlying logic of Paul's argumentation when he observes that Paul often focusses not only on prior causes, but also (in typical Aristotelian and Stoic fashion) on the ends of things as causes (*Argumentation,* 207; see Rom 4:16, 18; 5:20f.; 7:13; 8:15, 17; 1 Cor 1:27–31; 11:19; 2 Cor 7:9; 12:7–9; Gal 3:14, 19, 22; 4:5; Phil 1:25f.). Siegert adds: "Meist ist vom Heilsplan Gottes die Rede, auch vom Zweck der Tora und vom Zweck des Todes Jesu" (*Argumentation*, 207). See also Siegert's observation that Paul often evaluates things based on their consequences (*Argumentation*, 207).

[5] Some attempts have been made, of course, to outline an underlying argumentative unity which holds Paul's treatment of these diverse issues together (see, e.g., Mitchell, *Rhetoric of Reconciliation*). There is, however, little consensus at present about the success of such attempts.

these questions. This is not to say that the interpretation of Galatians is a simple task, and some readers will doubtless find reason to challenge my own interpretation of the letter. There is, however, broader agreement about the setting and purpose of Galatians. Moreover, the sheer length of Romans makes it less manageable as the focus of a detailed analysis. On the other hand, the very brief note from Paul to Philemon is simply not substantial enough for our purposes.[6] Left with a choice between 1 Thessalonians and Galatians, the latter emerges as the obvious candidate. On the one hand, Galatians is a much more focussed letter than is 1 Thessalonians. Throughout, Paul directs his attention to one basic issue, allowing us to see a sustained example of his reasoning.[7] On the other hand, although Paul's intention in 1 Thessalonians does include some (new?) instruction (see, for example, 4:13–5:11), the bulk of the letter either rehearses Paul's history with the community in order to strengthen their bond with him (1:2–3:13)[8] or repeats ethical injunctions which are already familiar to the audience (4:1–12; 5:12–22). This means that most of the letter either is not argumentative or simply alludes to arguments which have been presented before. In Galatians, however, we have Paul addressing a new problem with a community, and so we have an opportunity to examine his argument without having to reconstruct so much of his teaching on prior occasions. It is thus to Galatians that we can most profitably look to explore the epistemological assumptions which drive his argumentation.

This analysis will begin with the assumption that Paul intends, by means of his Galatian letter, to influence his audience. This influence is in large part aimed at their behaviour; he wants to move them to act differently. At the same time, however, the primary way in which he can influence this behaviour is via their thoughts. If he can convince them that a certain way of thinking is true, then this way of thinking will (as all preachers and

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[6] Paul's rhetoric in Philemon is also highly allusive and depends heavily on non-discursive modes of persuasion.

[7] Betz (*Galatians*, 30) does not overstate the case when he writes that the body of the letter "contains nothing but one strictly rational argument."

[8] There may be some argumentative function in this description of their relationship. It has been suggested, for example, that the Apostle may be actively differentiating himself from common orators, in much the same way that some philosophical writers do (see Winter, *Philo and Paul*, 150–55). See also Malherbe, "Gentle as a Nurse."

politicians hope) lead them to a new way of acting.[9] To the extent that Paul himself believes in the ideas which he wants to inculcate in Galatia, Paul's purpose in the letter is largely to bring his audience from relative ignorance (belief in false ideas) to a new knowledge (belief in certain true ideas).

The method of analysis will be relatively simple. I will move sequentially through the letter, asking at each stage of Paul's argument how the Apostle is trying to influence his audience's thinking. Not all of his strategies will be rational, but our focus will be on those parts and aspects of the argument which *do* appeal to the audience as rational, thinking persons.[10] I will concentrate on the ways in which the Apostle invites his audience to follow him through a series of inferences. This does not mean simply describing what Paul actually says. It means, rather, isolating Paul's assertions in the argument and describing the logical relationships between those assertions. In this way my method will be not unlike the approach of transformational-generative (T-G) grammar. Paul's specific word choice, word order, phrasing, etc. are the "surface structure" of his argument, corresponding to the surface structure or "performance" of a sentence. Beneath the specific wording of a sentence, however, T-G grammar identifies a "deep structure" of semantic relationships between ideas. A given deep structure can be expressed by means of several different surface structures. At the same time, the deep structure of a sentence can be inferred from its surface structure. In a similar way, we will be looking to infer from the surface structure of Paul's discourse the deep structure of logical relationships which it expresses. To the extent that the Apostle's argument appeals to the reason of his audience, it is this deep structure which is the real instrument of communication and of influencing their thought.[11]

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[9] Thurén (*Derhetorizing*, 25) rightly observes that while every act of communication is at the same time an attempt to influence the receiver, this need not reduce Paul's theology to a means of *practical* influence, since "[h]is goal may well also be to affect the theology of the addressees. Even such 'theoretical' goals are possible."

[10] As Thurén points out, while studies of the context in which Paul's thoughts arise may help us to understand why the Apostle chooses one idea over another, such studies "are of little help for *understanding the thoughts* of the apostle" (*Derhetorizing*, 13; italics original). If we are to understand Paul's ideas we must still grapple with that level of his discourse as an autonomous system.

[11] There is at least a superficial similarity here to D. Patte's structuralist distinction between Paul's "convictional logic" and his "argumentative logic," between "faith" and

In places the surface structure of Paul's argument is highly enthymematic, leaving unstated one or more premises or (particularly in his ethical instruction) even whole steps which belong to the deep structure of the argument. At these points the only option will be to try to reconstruct the missing links in Paul's inferential chain, and my analysis will become correspondingly more speculative. The criterion with which we will control this reconstruction, however, will be the same one with which we decipher such enthymematic performances in ordinary speech: the ability of the reconstructed deep structure to account for the elements of the argument which *are* explicit in the performance of the letter. Coherence will be our watchword.

Once we have outlined the deep structure of Paul's argument in Galatians, we can proceed to ask what *kind* of logical relationships it involves. In other words, we will be asking what kind of reasoning Paul employs when he guides his audience through a process of rational inference. It is at this point that we can glimpse the epistemological assumptions which underlie Paul's argument. For the Apostle will likely lead his audience through rational processes which he himself thinks are reliable ones. In other words, the kind of reasoning which Paul encourages in the members of his communities is likely the kind of reasoning which Paul believes will actually lead reliably to knowledge.[12]

"theology" (see Patte, *Paul's Faith*). After all, T-G grammar is itself a kind of linguistic structuralism. The problem with Patte's approach for our purposes, however, is his insistence that the "convictional logic" of Paul's basic symbols and concepts is distinct from (even detachable from) the logic apparent in his actual speech. This ends up locating the "real" meaning of Paul's speech very far from the ideas as the Apostle presents them, reformulating them in a form which Paul himself would be hard-pressed to recognize. The relative autonomy of Patte's "convictional logic" also raises questions about what controls are operative on his reconstruction of that deeper meaning. On the other hand, the point of T-G grammar is that there *is* a direct link between surface structure of speech and the deep structure which it is geared to communicate. One discerns the syntax (or logic) of the deep structure precisely by studying the syntax (or logic) of the surface structure. So too in this study we will explore the underlying logic of Paul's reasoning with his audience by taking seriously the surface level of his argument and asking about the logic by which it progresses.

[12] I assume here that, as a general rule, Paul's arguments are composed in good faith and are not deliberately manipulative. There remains, of course, the possibility that Paul is deliberately deceptive or employs rhetorical arguments whose logic he himself does not

This examination of Galatians will confirm the tentative conclusions reached in Part Two about the nature of Paul's ethical knowledge. We will see that, for the Apostle, it does in fact arise from the emplotment of one's life in the theological narrative. I will also show that Paul's narrative is not simply imposed on the world. Rather, it remains open to new events which can drastically change the story's shape, and as one's construal of the narrative changes so too Paul insists that the ethical conclusions which flow from that story will also change. In all of this, Paul is simply assuming the truth of the traditional Jewish narrative which forms his overall hermeneutical framework. His argumentation tells us much about how the Apostle believes he can proceed from this starting point, but it reveals little about Paul's reasons for choosing (or retaining) this particular story. I will pause for a moment, however, in the conclusion to this study and ask whether the narrative logic which Paul assumes in his argumentation might allow us to extrapolate a way in which the story as a whole could be grounded or justified. These parting suggestions will also afford us the opportunity to ask again how Paul's use of reason in leading his audience to knowledge might be reconciled with his insistence that knowledge of God is the work of God's own Spirit.[13]

4. Caveats

Before we begin, three caveats are necessary. First, this is not a comparative investigation. It would be desirable to set Paul's own patterns of reasoning in contrast with those of his contemporaries, both elite philosophers and more humble thinkers. That comparison is, however, simply too large to be undertaken here. We may find, moreover, that this necessity turns out to be a virtue. For in our overriding concern to locate Paul in his cultural and

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believe is valid. This possibility has been highlighted recently by, e.g., Thurén in *Derhetorizing* and Given in *True Rhetoric*. Unless we are going to accept a global hermeneutic of suspicion in relation to Paul, however, we can evaluate this possibility only on a case-by-case basis.

[13] The relationship between our reconstruction and Paul's own thought must, of course, remain tentative. We are inferring Paul's thoughts from his words, and this is always an uncertain business. As Leander Keck has observed, "[t]o touch [Paul's thinking] we must rely on inference" ("Paul as Thinker," 28).

intellectual context, it is all too easy to impose on his thought interests which are not really his own. There may be real value in trying first to understand Paul's thinking in its own right. It is my hope that this study will furnish an understanding of Paul's approach to religious knowing on the basis of which fruitful comparisons might be made down the road. At this point such comparisons would simply be premature.

Second, this study is not intended to uncover Paul's *conscious thinking*, but rather the assumptions and logical structures (perhaps never articulated in Paul's own mind) which are evident in his attempts to persuade. The difference here is similar to the difference between a description of a speaker's linguistic competence – the rules and patterns which govern that speaker's crafting of a sentence – and someone's conscious thoughts while they are speaking. Most Greek speakers never thought consciously about making their adjectives agree in gender with the nouns which they modified. Even if they did, they might have described in different ways that pattern in their language. Yet we can still observe patterns in their speech and infer from them certain grammatical and semantic relationships which seem (unconsciously) to have governed the speaker's formulation of sentences. In the same way we can infer from Paul's argument assumptions about what for him constituted valid reasons for belief, about how someone could rationally move from ignorance to knowledge, assumptions which the Apostle himself may never have brought to full consciousness.

Finally, my purpose in what follows is not to reconstruct Paul's own process of discovery. Keck rightly points out that

> arguments adduced to persuade others are not to be confused with the persuader's own thinking about the subject matter the arguments reflect. To recognize this distinction is not to accuse Paul of thinking one thing and saying another but rather to acknowledge the difference between cognition and persuasion. The track along which Paul sought to move his readers' thinking is not necessarily the same track along which his own thinking had already moved.[14]

My goal in the study which follows is thus not to uncover the path by which Paul came to his own understanding of the Gospel. The aim is, rather, to bring to the surface his tacit assumptions about how people in general can come to knowledge. Paul may in fact have followed a different track in his own discovery. Our purpose, however, is not to reconstruct that historical

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[14] Keck, "Paul as Thinker," 27.

process, but to reconstruct Paul's assumptions about the kind of rational process which *should* take place in his audience's minds. With these cautions in mind, we turn now to our survey of Paul's attitude towards rational inquiry.