The Right Answer to Pontius Pilate

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[First published in ***Studies in Philosophy and in the History of Science: Essays in Honor of Max Fisch,*** *e*dited by Richard Tursman with a Preface by D. W. Gotshalk, Coronado Press, Lawrence, Kansas, 1970, pp. 8-17. Originally H. S. Harris wrote a paper for this *Festschrift* on the early Hegel entitled "The Fragment on "Faith and Being" in Hegel's Early Theological Writings" but decided that "The Right Answer to Pontius Pilate" written likely before 1965 was more suitable if only because it was shorter. Harris taught a course about medieval philosophy that may account for his use of scholastic forms in his discussion. The reader familiar with his later and better known work will find the seeds of much of his interpretation of Hegel in this essay. Harris wrote his thesis ***The Social Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile*** which was accepted in 1954 under the direction of Max H. Fisch [1900-1995] at the University of Illinois. The editor of the *Festschrift*, Richard Tursman, was also a student of Max Fisch and like Harris a member of the Department of Philosophy, Glendon College, York University, Toronto. Another little known essay by Harris is "Voluntary Association as a Rational Ideal*" in **Nomos*** (Yearbook of the American Society for Political and Legal Philosophy*, XI: Voluntary Associations* 1969, 41-62). This last essay was written at the urging of his wife.]

[Original print publication page numbers are in brackets.]

[p.8]

Foreword: A note on the form of what follows

What follows is not only an argument but an illustration or exemplification of what is argued. It is also, secondarily, a philosophical interpretation of the technique of argument in medieval philosophy.

The basic position underlying the argument here stated is that rationality, the distinguishing characteristic of *homo sapiens* is a social product and that man could not be a rational animal if he were not already a social one.

Thus *thought* the distinguishing activity of *homo sapiens* is minimally dialogue and Plato gave the first correct definition of it when he defined it as the dialogue of the soul with itself. He also was the first to put forward something like the definition of truth here offered (***Gorgias*** 472b-c; cf. ***Gorgias*** 486e-487a and the whole subsequent argument). But since he also recognized as a necessary consequence the impossibility of *completing* a dialogue in any positive sense (no real agreement between Socrates and his "touchstone" Calicles is possible) he saw that the purpose of *writing* philosophy can only be to *stimulate* discussion.

But to write a dialogue is not the best way to start one. One must somehow *show* the object of rational discussion ─ one must reach a conclusion that does justice to all viewpoints ─ without claiming finality for it. The medieval technique of Question, Objection, Response, and Solution of Objections, seems ideal for this purpose. This technique is of course only a formalization of the dialectical method not of Plato but of Aristotle (exemplified for example in his discussion of the question "What is the good for man?" in ***Ethics*** I, 5-12, where chapters 5 and 6 are "Objections", chapter 7 is "Response" and chapters 8-12 are "Solutions").

Plato's method emphasizes the theoretical endlessness of inquiry and Aristotle's the practical ending of it. What was needed here was a compromise between the method of Plato and that of Aristotle; and this has been achieved by a novel use of the ancient device of the explanatory *scholium* to provide *ad hoc* answers to the objections. The device was not formally employed as far as I know by medieval thinkers in anything like the way I have used it here but they did at times discuss the objections as they were raised while reserving formal replies until after the Response. Thus I believe I have remained close both to the medieval thinkers and to Aristotle in all the essential aspects of my mode of argument.

"The Right Answer to Pontius Pilate"
Fragment of an Apocryphal *Quaestio Disputata de veritate*

(The question appears to be "What is truth?" but the introductory division and everything except the first Article is lacking.)

[p.9]   *First Article*

Whether there is anything that we *do know* for certain to be true; or (alternatively and more accurately) whether there is anything that we *mus*t claim to know beyond doubt and beyond the possibility of effective contradiction.

It would seem that there is not: FOR

Obj. 1 No empirical matter of fact is true beyond doubt and beyond the possibility of effective contradiction.
Scholium This objection I take to be "obvious" in the present context.
ad Obj. But it requires to be supplemented by:

Obj. 2. Purely formal statements of logic and mathematics are not true beyond doubt and beyond the possibility of effective contradiction. This objection is probably not "obvious" in the present context so I will defend it thus:

FOR: A logically true statement is "true" only within the system if it is true at all. There are some reasons for saying that we ought not to say that logically valid statements are "true" at all: for

instance the notion of logical validity is not confined to simple two valued systems where all statements are true or else not true but false.

Scholium We can argue that this is on the contrary the very reason *(ad Obj. 2.)* for saying that the two valued logic of consistency with respect to negation is "true". For this logic we might say *is* the logic of our concept truth itself. It formalizes just what we mean by *true* as opposed to *false* and since there are so many possible logics it is all the more important to know and to be able (and be permitted) to say what is *true* (as distinct from what is false or *not true*) about our concept of truth itself. *Have we then discovered here a truth beyond doubt?* (Perhaps we have but when the consequences of it are formulated clearly they do not seem to be what Pilate was asking for). In any case *it would seem that we have not* for a further objection here arises:

Obj.3. There are in fact several different theories about our notion of truth itself. Thus there is no absolutely certain truth about our concept of truth. It seems likely that none of the theories so far put forward (say the "correspondence theory", the "coherence theory" and the "pragmatic theory") is "the simple truth" about truth and it is surely possible (conceivable within the two-valued logic of our concept of truth?) that there is no simple or final truth about truth at all unless it be that our concept of truth is inconsistent and involved in contradiction (this would be an absolute truth of a kind but one that Pilate did right not to wait for because he would doubtless have said that he was quite well aware of *that* already).

Scholium This objection in its turn can be met by the argument that one of *(ad Obj.3)* the theories of truth ─ *the correspondence theory* ─ *is at least part of the truth about truth* because all other theories of truth that are even faintly plausible contain it in some form as a necessary presupposition. This answer to the objection can be allowed to stand for the moment because it leads us directly to the crucial objection which reveals the weakness that makes an answer to Pilate in terms of formal logic unacceptable. This fourth objection will be the final one to be considered here:

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Obj.4. Even if the correspondence theory be allowed to stand as absolutely true it does not resolve Pilate's question, for there are, as a matter of observable fact, many theories which "correspond" with "reality" in different ways which are all sufficiently specifiable to allow the employment of the concept of "truth" in all of them, even though the theories themselves may be logically incompatible

with one another in various ways: and it is therefore reasonable to suppose that "reality" is in its nature patient of variant interpretations none of which can claim privileged or absolute status. Indeed this hypothesis seems to be the only one upon which an unbiased appraisal of Pilate's real problem (about the "true" destiny of man) can be based. Therefore it would seem that the question he posed is logically unanswerable, that he posed it precisely in order to compel recognition of this fact, and that his going out without waiting for an answer was the best way of enforcing the point that his question is not one to which a *true* answer can be give.

Scholium This objection is the work of a real demon (not of any philosopher's fancy). (***ad Obj.4***) Like all inventions of the devil it takes many forms and for this reason it cannot be finally refuted (although the conclusion is demonstrably false no matter how it is *arrived at* because if it can be *arrived at* then rational communication is possible, and if rational communication is possible it is the appropriate human aim presupposed even in the raising of the problem about human destiny, and hence the conclusion is false). Furthermore, like all the inventions of the devil the objection contains nothing but a cunningly distorted image of the truth. This has been made as clear as possible here by stating the argument and the conclusion in their most dangerous form ─ the form in which they are made to appear as necessary presuppositions of any achieved brotherhood of man. For certainly it is true that we must abandon all simple linear philosophies of progress if we wish to obey the Second Commandment ─ "Love thy neighbour" ─ or the second formulation of the Categorical Imperative ─ "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only". Does it not therefore follow as a corollary that we must adopt Pilate's attitude to the question he asked? The answer that he did not wait for is dramatically obvious in the context of the Gospel. Jesus has just asserted that "for this cause came I into the world that I should bear witness unto the truth" implying that the truth is something independent of his witness. But he adds at once "Everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice" and of course his confidence of this rests on that other claim recorded by St. John "I am the way, the truth and the life". St. Thomas would probably have prefaced *his* reply to the question by citing this authority perhaps in combination with the saying of the Philosopher "To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, is true". But the cumulative result of the above objections is to make this appeal to Holy Scripture appear sinful and the appeal to reason foolish.

SED CONTRA:

On the contrary, the Apostle says "Ye shall know the truth and the truth **[p. 11]** shall make you free"; and the Commentator (- C. S. Pierce as the *Philosopher* herein is Kant) rightly declares "The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the *truth*, and the object represented in this opinion is the *real*". Likewise it is written "Seek and ye shall find: knock and it shall be opened unto you."

RESPONDEO, DICENDUM EST QUOD:

I answer, it *must* be asserted that we know beyond doubt and beyond the possibility of effective contradiction that when men inquire together sincerely about any matter in dispute between them they *can* in the end find a solution that is seen to be satisfactory by all of them and by all rational observers. In the process of inquiry the problem may be radically transformed, but the term "satisfactory solution" does not include the "giving up" of the problem. To say this is only to say that men can achieve rationality. To attempt to deny *this*, to utter the formula "It is not absolutely certain that men can ever achieve rationality" is only to utter a string of sounds which are demonstrably falsified by the act of understanding them or claiming to know what they mean. Any one of us can give a meaning to the assertion "You are not being rational" when it is directed at him by someone else, and thus we may come to believe that we can conceive what would be meant by the assertion "No men can ever be rational". But there is only one imaginable circumstance in which we could say this and know what we were saying, and that would be if something like the Christian vision of the Last Judgement came true. But then *ex hypothesi* we should be miraculously lifted out of our present situation of seeing through a glass darkly. We should all be at that moment rational and the *fated* agreement of all inquirers would come to pass. The sentence would be false and the most that could be true would be "No men have ever been rational and I now see that no man ever can be rational except by the grace of God". But, that is *not,* our present situation and even if we supposed, as I for one do not, that that is how the ultimate agreement is fated to come about, it is still the case that the only rational assumption in our situation is that however dark the glass may be we can see through it if we try long enough and hard enough. If this is not the case we cannot even intelligently *say* or suppose that it is not the case because we cannot intelligently say or suppose anything. It may nevertheless be true even though we cannot suppose it (and hence the more accurate statement of the

problem announced at the outset is concerned with whether there is anything that we *must claim to know beyond the possibility of effective contradiction.* No *man* can *effectively contradict* the claim that rational communication is possible for men even if perchance it is not. We might for example really be playthings of Descartes' malignant demon ─ or, more realistically, of the evolutionary processes ─ but it would make no more sense to say we were *deceived* on the first hypothesis than on the second. We would not on this hypothesis be capable of being either deceived or undeceived.

I suppose ─ indeed I very much hope ─ that I am merely flogging a very dead horse here. The part of my thesis that will, I surmise, seem most open to effective contradiction is the assertion that when we say we must always be able to arrive at a universally satisfactory conclusion we are saying *no more* **[p. 12]** *than* "It is possible for men to be rational and to communicate their differences of opinion to one another and inquire into them rationally". Yet this equivalence must hold if we are to be able to distinguish rational communication from non-rational communication (which certainly occurs) and more rational from less rational modes of inquiry (I do not think anything strictly describable as non rational inquiry can occur ─ unless tossing a coin is *inquiry* ─ it is a quite respectable outcome of inquiry but that is different).

Rational communication is any form of communication which is both aiming at rational agreement, and employing a method consistent with the achievement of that aim. Rational agreement about any problem is essentially agreement about what constitutes a disinterested standpoint or a neutral analysis *of that problem*. Nothing at all can count as an *analysis of the problem in which* the possible outcomes with the paths by which they can be achieved are not identified, and nothing can count as a neutral analysis in which these outcomes are not evaluated from the point of view of all parties interested in the dispute (including those that may be absent from the discussion).

It may well seem that this ideal of rational agreement is never achievable; and in one sense this is true. It is true by definition that (setting aside the Day of Judgement hypothesis) the finally conclusive agreement can never be reached; no matter how well we may come to agree or how secure we may feel about our methods of achieving neutrality in analysis of disagreements we can never know that we are *fated* to remain firm in our agreement (because fate here is simply a name for what actually happens and what actually happens is only known when it happens). The truth that

makes us free is the truth still to be discovered in the future, and the only truth we can be *absolutely* sure of is that this must be so and hence that we must always be concerned to preserve this situation in order that we may have reliable standards for distinguishing between truth and error at all.

It can readily be seen that in this answer the crucial conception is not that of truth but that of *rationality*. Truth has been defined as a purely regulative ideal for communication and inquiry. Thus one might say that it has been demoted to the realm of values. Pilate has been answered but at the same time any literal interpretation of a claim such as "Jesus is the Christ" has been denied. It never *could* be true that "The Word (of truth) was made flesh" or that any sentence in the past tense asserting the complete realization of the truth could be true. Of course anyone is at liberty to believe that *rational humanity* has been instantiated in some man now dead, and he may believe that "Jesus is the Christ" in that sense; but if he believes this then he is either committed to believing that any man can be the Christ and hence that it is only natural that other communities should find rational humanity instantiated in other models, or else to admitting that Jesus was not really a *man* at all and hence that his appearance was irrelevant to our common human problems.

Properly speaking, however, it appears to me to be a fundamental error to suppose that rationality can be instantiated in a single mortal individual of the species *Homo sapiens* at all. Perhaps this is the most fundamental root of **[p. 13]** error, in so far as error can be supposed to have any rational structure at all ─ for there is nothing necessary about the genesis of errors as there is about the genesis of truths, and the important determining causes of errors are not rational at all but derive from the needs, impulses, wishes and practical concerns of particular human animals or groups of human animals. I call it the root of error because it is the belief that makes possible the establishment of authorities that are independent of rational discussion and rational inquiry; and any authority that is thus removed is (we might say by an appropriate transformation of the definition of truth) "fated in the end to become irrational".

In order to meet objection 4 in all its multifarious forms precisely what is needed is the deliberate and conscious abandonment of the idea that the rational man is or can be a thinking *substance* ─ an entity possessing in itself the foundation on which truth can be established ─ and the deliberate and conscious acceptance of something more like Pascal's conception of man as a thinking *reed*, a thing

sensitive to every wind of opinion but possessing a shape and life of its own and not patient of any and every shape or any and every pressure, something that grows in clumps and is capable of surviving and repairing almost any damage done by the violence of some force other than the wind as long as it is rooted in its native habitat among the other reeds, but quite unable to withstand even a sudden change of the wind when isolated from the rest. It is in and through communication with others like ourselves that rationality, the capacity to think, is brought to birth; and it is in and through the establishment of rational communication (as distinct from emotional involvement which is the more primitive, typically *animal*, type of communication) that *homo erectus* ─ already a being who dwells out of natural necessity in communities becomes *homo sapiens* ─ the being who can consciously establish communities and can deliberately set out to establish the rational community of the species as a whole.

When rationality is thought of in this way, rational thought becomes itself a mode of public social interaction and behaviour which can be criticized and evaluated publicly by standards and criteria that are universally acceptable without reference to the private experiences, intuitions, certainties, doubts, confused notions or clear and distinct ideas of any single individuals whatever. But it should not be thought that either the existence or the importance of private personal experience and conscious life is in any way undercut or undervalued by this. On the contrary it can be quickly shown that in the view here advanced it is the spontaneity and free play of this personal private experience that is assumed as the criterion of rationality itself and hence as the absolute value. If what is absolutely true must be determined by reference to the logical presuppositions of rational communication, what constitutes rational communication is determined by the criterion of maximizing personal freedom and guaranteeing the inviolability of privacy. Thought itself as the establishment of a standpoint valid for all parties to a problem must be conceived as a mode of *social action* which is of overriding importance in *public* life precisely because the fundamental problem of a rational community is to minimize the appeal to irrational, involuntary interactions between its members. It is a fundamental assumption **[p. 14]** therefore that everyone should believe what he chooses (or rather that he should be moved to belief only by the free blowing winds of opinion). But the expression of his belief in public, the modes of his thought (i.e. of public argument) and of his action must be regulated by the canons of rationality. On the other hand no man can have the freedom to remove himself all together from the climate of rational inquiry which the necessities of

community life generate. Thus there is nothing equalitarian about the freedom of opinion therein guaranteed. Any man may believe what he chooses. But if his opinions themselves conflict with the presuppositions of rational communication (as those of professed Nazis do for example) he will be at an inevitable disadvantage). He cannot be tolerantly allowed to express his beliefs in the only way they can *consistently* be expressed (i.e. in *deeds*); he must express them if he wishes to publish them at all in the mode of public argument, a mode which is radically inconsistent with the beliefs themselves.

To take a less obvious example: when convinced Marxists or Freudians (whose beliefs are perfectly compatible with the maintenance of rational communication, and indeed are aimed at establishing it on sounder foundations than hitherto) begin to answer the arguments of their adversaries by explaining how in *their* view these people come to have such erroneous opinions we must immediately recognize that they are in the wrong. They are necessarily in error even though it might turn out that their view was right and their analysis of the error was right, because before we can properly consider the *genesis* of an error we must establish the neutral standpoint from which all parties can perceive that it is an error that is under discussion. No mode of expressing one's belief which ignores the fundamental requirement of neutrality in inquiry can establish the truth of the belief even though the belief may in fact turn out to be true when someone else sets about the task of establishing it properly.

REPLIES TO OBJECTIONS:

To Obj. 1. Given a clear agreement about the definition of an actual problem and the appropriate method of its solution the solution arrived at by appeal to the facts often is true beyond doubt and beyond the possibility of effective contradiction. Two friends who wish to go fishing can properly rely on the tide tables and the sunrise or sunset times provided for the use of the anglers, while two astronomers interested in the motions of the sun and moon may dispute about the accuracy of the tables, and two philosophers may even dispute about the *kind* of certainty that the statement "the sun will rise tomorrow" possesses.

To Obj. 2. It is always necessary in any rational dispute to settle what the criteria of a satisfactory solution are; and one part of this is agreement on the logical canons to be employed. But there is

nothing really absolute about consistency with respect to negation because there is nothing absolute about *any* verbal or symbolic formulation of a solution. This is partly because, as Aristotle already saw, different types of inquiry admit different degrees of exactitude, and partly because the conceptual structures in which we express our differing points of view are very flexible so that views that may appear to be logically incompatible are often reconcilable in fact when they are **[p. 15]** correctly understood. The real logic of inquiry is the logic of correct understanding; consistency with respect to negation is generally a useful instrument in achieving understanding, but it has no peculiar status or absolute value. (This is not to be taken as an apologia for any "non-Aristotelian" logic; the instrumental logic of all human dialogue is based on Aristotle's "laws of thought" and it is quite wrong to speak of "dialectical logic" as if it was an *alternative system* that anybody could ever *use*. Dialectic is only a different way of making use of the ordinary two-valued logic. Other logics might become useful in certain circumstances but as far as I know they are not presently employable in human communication. (See further the Reply to Obj. 3 below).

To Obj. 3. The pragmatic theory of truth is in all essentials the *true* one although for reasons indicated above and below no absolutely true (i.e. final) formulation of it in the language of discourse is possible. It is true precisely because it provides a logically satisfactory explanation of this impossibility of final statement. The defence of the absolute truth of the correspondence theory given in the Scholium is inadequate because the way in which it is contained in other theories varies. For example, if the coherence theory is taken to be true, then it may be absolutely or perfectly true that truth is *adaequatio intellectus et rei*. But it is true with equal absoluteness that we can never know anything perfectly (i.e. in the mode of exact correspondence) except the definition and the impossibility of producing a non self-referent instance which satisfies it. This is the dialectical shipwreck of the correspondence (and the coherence theory too); the only way out is to give up both the ideal of perfect correspondence and the ideal of perfect coherence ─ or to put them off into the indefinite future, as in the pragmatic theory of which the response above is a form. Thus in fact Obj. 3 is valid against taking two valued negation-consistent logic as *absolute* truth ─ it should be taken simply as the present instrument of rational discourse. It may in fact be indispensable, or it may not. If there were beings who discoursed about their experience in a multi-valued logic and *if* we somehow came in contact with them, I see no reason for ruling out *a priori* the possibility of mutual

communication. But of course these are enormous *ifs* and there may be something empirically or logically wrong with one or both of them.

To Obj. 4. The premises of this objection are true but the conclusion is not valid. The replies to objections 1 and 2 indicate that any use of the concepts of empirical and logical "truth" is dependent upon certain agreements about the aim and purpose of the common activity. Because life can be lived in different ways it is to be expected that different standards of truth and relevance will be employed by different groups that live or work together. Nevertheless it does not follow that there is no absolute truth because it does not follow that there is no purpose that all human communities must share. There is in fact such a purpose for any community which has a concept of "truth" as something to be inquired about and discovered (and no concept that is not analogous to our "truth" in these ways can be regarded by us as a concept of "truth" at all). This purpose is the maintenance of rational communication and the minimization of all kinds of arbitrariness and violence in the communications of its members with all **[p. 16]** other beings capable of communicating rationally.

It must be realized that the absolute commitment involved in accepting this purpose as fundamental does not (or need not) involve belief in any final system of truth. We are committed to believing that "for any problem that can be stated a rational solution can be found" not to the quite different belief that "a solution can be found for *all* problems" (as if they could all be stated and solved at once which is logically impossible on the view here taken). Even rationality in the view here stated is essentially treated as an instrumental value. To be precise it is regarded as the methodological aspect of *freedom* (by which is meant the conscious and deliberate experimental discovery and realization of human potentialities in public life and public objects).

There is a sense in which the requirement that all human activities must be methodologically rational commits us to belief in the unity of human nature and hence in the unity of truth. But the way in which *una veritas in variis signis varie resplendet* (Nicolas of Cusa) is only subject to the curb of logical or systematic consistency very indirectly. Assumptions that are in some sense logically incompatible do not *need* to be reconciled unless and until they give rise to practical problems in human communication and action. It is easy to see why scientific inquirers into human nature are bound to go on making assumptions in different fields without being able either to reconcile them

with the assumptions made by those in other fields or to convince all concerned that the assumptions made by others are mistaken. What is problematic determines what can be assumed: and there are different ways in which human nature in society may be (or plausibly appear to be) subject to control and change. Practical difficulties only arise if the use of one method of discovery and control (say in economics) produces evils which are revealed by another (say in psychology). At this point a reconsideration of assumptions becomes *necessary* and the presence of theoretical incompatibilities may well be a useful indication of where to begin. Of course it is always irrational (at least in the sciences that deal with man) to declare with finality that some *specific* theoretical incompatibilities have to be accepted as ultimate.

Or again, it is typical of scientists to be tormented by problems that appear to have no practical relevance and it is radically irrational to deny anyone's right to seek a solution for any problem or to assert *a priori* that there are aspects of experience that are beyond the range of scientific investigation. It is not certain that there is anything that we cannot know. But nonetheless it is certain that there are some things that we *must not do*. For instance, there are experimental procedures which *cannot count as scientific*, if "scientific" is taken to mean "appropriate for use by the rational inquirer" ─ e.g. some of the "experimental" work conducted on human subjects by Nazi medical researchers. "Experiments" of this sort do provide data for the rational inquirer, but only in the way in which observation of the course of nature can provide data even where it is not *physically* possible to reproduce the observed phenomenon under laboratory conditions.

The same considerations apply to cultural differences. We need not hesitate to condemn cannibalism or head-hunting and to insist that these **[p. 17]** practices must somehow be brought to an end, although of course the problem of how this can most rationally be done will need careful study, and will give rise to disputes that can only be resolved by experiment (and hence) cannot be resolved finally at the theoretical level, since a recreation of the conditions for purposes of further experiment would be illegitimate). To take examples from a culture which could not by any neutral standards be called more backward than our own the British were right to condemn and suppress the religious practices of thuggee and suttee in India (although quite possibly they were not very rational about how they did it). But when we come to such cultural differences as polyandry, polygamy and monogamy (to take a set of hardly compatible alternatives that have critical import for the value

structure of any human community) it is not at all obvious that any one system of social organization is the human or rational one, though it *is* clear that every form of family organization has its own weaknesses and its own characteristic diseases. It appears, at least to this observer, that the only position of rational neutrality here is one that accepts cultural pluralism and simply seeks to obviate the difficulties (of moving from one culture to another for example) that arise from it, and to rationalize human relations within each traditional "way of life" as far as possible. *Perhaps* by doing this we *may* eventually create a cultural melting pot even for this pluralism. But I am inclined to doubt it; and because this is, as far as I can see, the only *rational* path towards an answer to the question "What is the best form of family organization?" I am inclined to say the problem has no solution because there is no way to give a univocal yet neutral meaning to the word "best" in the question. It does not make sense, therefore, in this area to ask "What is the *best*?' though it does make sense to say (rightly or wrongly) "This way is *certainly bad* and that way is probably better". The *one truth* of human nature shines *back* just as clearly in the relative and comparative form of the positive judgement as it does in the absolute form of the negative one.