

**THE FINAL CAUSE AS
PRINCIPLE OF COGNITION
AND PRINCIPLE IN NATURE**

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The Final Cause as Principle of Cognition and Principle in Nature by G. S. Morris

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TO WHICH IS ADDED

THE DISCUSSION THEREON.

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IN more than one of the papers presented at the meetings of this Institute, the notion of final cause, or of design in nature, has been dwelt upon and defended. There can be no excuse for returning to the subject, except the desire to have included in the records of the Institute a paper, which shall attempt still more specifically, and, perhaps, from a point of view not previously chosen, to establish the definite presence of the idea in the world of reality, and its necessity as a principle of our thought about nature.

The late Professor Trendelenburg, of Berlin, in an essay on the *Ultimate Ground of Distinction among Philosophical Systems*, discriminates as follows:—"In all systems of philosophy, either force is conceived as superior to thought, so that thought is not primary, but rather the result, product, and accident of blind forces; or thought is made superior to force, so that blind force alone is not primary, but is the outcome of thought; or, finally, thought and force are represented as at

bottom the same, and only distinguished in human opinion." (*Historische Beiträge zur Philosophie*, vol. ii. 1855, p. 10.) The disjunction seems exhaustive, and there can be no doubt under which member of it we are to range ourselves. Not the first alternative, which is espoused by materialism, nor the third, which corresponds to Spinozism, but the second covers the ground of our Christian idealism. We hold that primacy in rank and in power belongs in this universe to thought, or intelligence. This is our philosophical attitude, which becomes further differentiated and illuminated by the addition to it of Christian faith.

The scientific defence of this position is accomplished partly by metaphysical argumentation, and partly by analysis of the results of physical and psychological observation. What is true in thought, we claim, can not be false in nature, but must find in the world of natural reality its confirmation and realization. If the ideal controls the real, if intelligence governs force, there must exist in the world of real forces indications of this control and government.

In the acquisition of knowledge we proceed from the known to the unknown, from the sign to the thing signified, and (quite generally) from the part to the whole. Moreover, if knowledge is for us possible, it is, of course, so only under the conditions inherent in our nature and in the nature of real things. It is because man is a part of nature, that he may *à priori* assume a fundamental likeness or other relation between what is essential in his own nature and what is essential in the world around him. The physical (phenomenal) identity of the human frame with the natural elements is admitted and established. Analogy would lead us to suppose that what is specially characteristic of man—the developed reason and moral nature—is not a wholly incommensurable, isolated quality in him, but that it has its analogue or correlate in nature—or, that there exists in the latter something so akin to man (as Plato would say) that only the reason of man, and not the senses, can apprehend it. Analogy leads us to look for the ideal in nature.

And, as matter of fact, we do find, or think we find, in nature, in abundance, that which can only be ideally apprehended. Of this description, above all, is apparently space itself, which is a specimen, on the largest scale and in a most significant way, of a realized abstraction. In the same category we are disposed also to class all concrete relations, as of order in succession and co-existence, symmetry, and the like.

These, we assume, can not be said to be introduced into nature by the intelligence of the observer, for they would exist—such is our necessary conviction—even though no rational being, such as man, were in existence to observe them. What was *à priori* anticipated seems thus to be *à posteriori* confirmed, in so far at least as it regards what may be termed the passive existence of the ideal in the real. Our present, immediate concern is to see whether the ideal—thought—is also actively present in the real, as a principle underlying and controlling it—more especially in the form of final cause.

The question is a metaphysical one, in so far as it relates to our judgment of the real constitutive nature of the so-called "real" objects in the world, or of the world in general; and it is a logical one, or a question belonging to the theory of cognition, in so far as it is connected with the complex of propositions which we are compelled to hold as true regarding the conditions and forms of human knowledge. The answer to the metaphysical question will depend upon the answer to the logical one, to which latter, therefore, we may at once address ourselves, by way of introduction to the former.

Human knowledge is, conceivably, either of the real or of the phenomenal. It is also direct or indirect. These two divisions are not coincident, and each covers an important distinction.

As to the first: the distinction between real and phenomenal needs to be carefully stated, by definition of the terms employed, since it is by no means an obviously fundamental one. All that *is, appears*; strictly speaking, we know only how the object known appears to us, and in this sense it may be said that all our knowledge is of the phenomenal. (And this suggests the still more profound sense in which it may be said that all our knowledge rests in the last analysis on faith. *Credo, ut intelligam.*) But the (conscious or unconscious) employment of the appropriate logical processes leads us nevertheless to distinguish between the real and the phenomenal, and to recognize in the distinction the expression of a fundamental verity. By knowledge of the real I mean knowledge of the essential, constitutive nature of the object of knowledge, of the true, noumenal cause, or metaphysical knowledge. All other knowledge relates to what I understand by the phenomenal, hence to what is non-essential, not constitutive, and to effects or phenomenal causes, rather than true causes.

By direct knowledge, I mean such as is furnished immediately in consciousness; the knowledge of our own being and of its attributes, and of all our conscious states; by indirect, all other.

I omit, for the present, the query whether or to what extent all knowledge of the real is direct; a part of it, at least, evidently is such. But not all direct knowledge is of the real; for the definite, changing contents of consciousness, which we know directly, are for the most part purely phenomenal.

The reflection confronts us at the outset, that, in assuming the possession by man of knowledge of the real, we run counter to the dicta and arguments of noted philosophers in ancient and modern times. This fact of itself need not, however, deter us from making the assumption, since, for that matter, philosophers equally distinguished have upheld our doctrine. Nor will the conditions of this discussion permit more than a passing reference to the especial positions of opponents. Kant's attempt to establish a strict limitation of knowledge to the phenomenal was, fundamentally speaking, a failure. For his attempted demonstration of the exclusively subjective nature of the "forms" of sensibility and of the understanding, and of the ideas of the reason, has been shown to be defective, and hence inconclusive;* he himself, in practice, did not observe the limitation for which he contended (he regarded "things-in-themselves" as *causing* in us impressions whence we could infer at least the existence of the former, and thus contradicted himself by applying to the transcendental realm of true being the category of causality, which he affirmed to belong merely to subjective, relative, human thought); and his doctrine may be said to have been disproved by a decree of history, since his immediate successors, professing (notably in the case of Fichte) to carry out to its legitimate consequences his own teaching, landed at the opposite extreme of pretended absolute knowledge. As for English philosophers of the empirical school, who have denied of man that he is equal to the cognition of anything that is real (in the sense of this term indicated above), the fundamental principle, upon which they proceed in their arguments, it is competent for us to pronounce an imperfect generalization and a principle which, carried out to its logical consequences, leads to the absurd.

* See, for example, Trendelenburg's *Logische Untersuchungen*, vol. i. chap. 7, and *Histor. Beiträge zur Philosophie*, vol. iii. art. vii.

Consider, for example, the words of John Stuart Mill, in book i. ch. 3, of his *Logic*, "Everything is a feeling of which the mind is conscious." What is true in this assertion is what is above admitted, namely, that all being, so far as known by us, *appears* to us, *i.e.*, is known in the forms, under the conditions, by the means, which are peculiar to human cognition (truismatic as this may sound). I do not inquire whether it be a correct use of terms to identify consciousness with feeling—virtually to define the one by the other. But the whole and only truth of the expression cited (as far as it concerns the point immediately under consideration) is, that all our knowledge of the real must, to be possessed by us, be a part of our individual consciousness. But to affirm that this is the whole truth of the case, is to identify the part with the whole, the aspect with that of which we perceive the aspect, or (better) the form with the content, and the appearance with that which appears. It is true that our metaphysical knowledge (knowledge of the "real") does not come to us through the medium of demonstration. Like all that is ultimate, it is simply apprehended, is acquired and recognized directly, and can be confirmed by indirect demonstration alone. But the testimony of consciousness to its reality is ever present, and furnishes the one conclusive answer and corrective to statements like that now under criticism. Hume showed that the logical issue of such a principle is philosophical scepticism; and it is substantially this to which Mr. Mill himself is led. (See his *Examination of the Philosophy of Sir William Hamilton*, chs. xi. and xii.) But the considerations, by which philosophical scepticism is shown to be absurd, are too familiar to need to be re-stated.

All knowledge consisting in ideas, it is a work of both psychological and metaphysical analysis to answer (in the second place) the metaphysical question as to the ideas which represent or are the medium of knowledge of the real, on the one hand, and of the phenomenal, on the other; as also to show what knowledge is direct, and what indirect. In the case of indirect knowledge, we are obliged to resort for confirmation to logical criteria of truth, or to processes (observation and experiment) guided by logical rules.

Pre-eminently, and in the first place, our knowledge of reality is knowledge of ourselves, furnished in direct consciousness. A long line of thinkers, among whose names are included the illustrious ones of St. Augustine and Descartes, have called attention to our direct consciousness of our own existence, as providing the immovable starting-point and foundation for all true (ontological) knowledge. Differences