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FACT AND TRUTH

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In dealing with the problem of analyzing oral and written statements to determine their validity, my secondary school English classes seem to become unavoidably entangled in a discussion of the relation between "fact" and "truth." Students ask, "Aren't fact and truth the same thing?" Or "Isn't fact just a different name for truth?" Referring them to the dictionary does not settle the question completely, for there each of the terms is employed at some point in the definition of the other.

Under different circumstances the teacher might be wise to return immediately to the original subject in order to preclude being sidetracked onto something unrelated to the real work of the class. In this case, however, because of the nature of our educational philosophy, it seems important to take advantage of such a ready-made opportunity to present an idea which is vital to New Church thought on many subjects.

What, in terms of New Church thought, is the relation between fact and truth? Is there a distinction between the meanings of these two words? Should they be thought of as synonymous? These are questions which should be answered for the sake of clarity in our own thinking as well as in that of our students.

If we wish to emphasize the fundamental nature of the difference between fact and truth, we might begin by saying that fact is natural and truth is spiritual. Or we might say that fact is external, and truth is internal.

Facts seem to admit of no dispute which cannot be resolved on the basis of convincing external evidence, whether gathered first-hand or seen in some written record. We can by experiment demonstrate that oil floats on water, or that wood is combustible. Measurements will quickly settle the question of the location of a tree or building. And reference to the calendar for 1961 will show immediately what day of the month Easter fell on that year.

Admittedly, some facts require for their verification the employment of instruments or techniques beyond the knowledge of the common man, but eventually we can expect instruments and techniques to be developed which will settle once and for all the factual questions about the nature of things in the physical universe. "Fact," therefore, seems a useful term to maintain as distinctly applicable to that sort of thing for which we may find evidence, either experimental or documentary, which is unquestionable.

What then of the term "truth"? In the New Church at least, and elsewhere also I suspect, there is recognized the need to keep this term distinct from the term "fact" and to see its application to those things which are to be believed and accepted, if they are accepted at all, on a basis other than that of external evidence. Truths are abstract. In a sense their relationship to facts is like the relationship between a virtue in itself and a virtuous act. The integrity of Abraham Lincoln's character is legendary. We believe he was a just man. Why? Is it not because the record of his life indicates a concern lest anyone be deprived of what was rightfully his own? One example is seen in the story of Lincoln's walking several miles to return a few cents to someone whom he had inadvertently overcharged. And we recognize the same concern for the rights of others in his later actions as President of the United States.

Now if our records are correct, we can say that it is a fact that Lincoln returned those few cents and a fact that he behaved in a certain way as President. The acts themselves are facts. The nature of the acts, however, the quality of the acts, is the quality of justice. Therefore we infer that justice is a characteristic virtue of a man who performs such acts. But justice itself is not a fact. Why? Because it lies beyond the realm of demonstration by experiment or documentary history. It involves human motives and intentions, and these are not susceptible to the sort of analysis required to establish a fact.

Now, while we may not say that Lincoln's justness is a fact, we may well say that the statement that he was a just man is a statement of the truth. This is because his actions consistently reflect attributes which we associate with the virtue of justice or with obedience to the Commandment "Thou shalt not steal." We know the virtue in one sense then by seeing its effects in the world about us. Perhaps it would be better to say that we recognize the virtue or have it made real for us, by seeing its effects.

This is not to say that we learn what the virtue is from experience with its effects alone, for the nature of the virtue is learned only because there is something in the mind that responds in a certain way to the seeing of the effects. The fact or the effect is as it were an appearance of the truth or the virtue that lies behind it, and unless there is a prior knowledge of the truth, there will be no understanding of the fact as a reflection of that truth—no seeing in the virtuous act the virtue that lies within it.

Consider the Commandment which forbade the children of Israel to steal and which we teach our children as one of the earliest matters of religious principle. The letter of the Commandment does not deal with internal ideas. Instead it deals with the fact of stealing and cites this fact as being in opposition to the Will of God. Why is this? The Writings tell us it was because of the state of the children of Israel. It is likewise because of the state of the children to whom we teach it that we emphasize the external act or fact of stealing. They understand only facts—external appearances to them are the realities. They are not able to see the quality or truth that lies behind these appearances. That this was the case with the children of Israel is evidenced by their much later attempts to ensnare the Lord while He was in the world by forcing from Him a denial of some literal statement in the Mosaic Law. They could not infer from the Commandment the truth that lay behind it.

It was that unseen truth, however, that gave the external commandment its validity. And this truth applies primarily to the relationship between man and God—stealing inwardly involves and fosters the desire to attribute God's qualities to oneself or to deny that there is a God at all. The truth within is the reality that man's dishonesty can effectively separate him from God and so condemn him.

If the truth is so important; if indeed it is the only important thing behind all the myriad facts with which men come into contact during their lives in this world, what of the facts themselves? What purpose do they serve?

The answer to this has already been suggested. Facts are appearances. They are appearances of the attributes that lie within them or behind them. And because they are appearances, they are not completely reliable in themselves as sources of information about things they represent. Facts are subject to varied interpretations and may produce differing concepts of the qualities underlying them depending upon the interpreter. Witness the differing interpretations of the facts of nature—facts already well established by scientists.

Facts are valuable then only when there is some means of properly interpreting them. And this means is the truth—in the final analysis the truth given to men only in Divine Revelation. When the truth is known, facts may be organized and ordered in such a way as to reflect that truth and make possible its understanding by the human mind. When the truth is known, facts become valuable means of demonstrating and displaying that truth. When the truth is not known, the facts may reflect falsity and lead to erroneous conclusions.

There is a difference between fact and truth, and the difference is such as to warrant not only the preservation of the two separate terms but also the constant reconsideration of their true definitions in our own thinking so that they do not come to seem synonymous or interchangeable.