Understanding, Desirability and Truth

*Configurative and Evolutionary Perspectives on ‘Understanding’*

Johan Marticki
johan@metamorph.se
This paper examines *how* human beings may be able to reach certain kinds of understanding. On either side of the *how*, a cognitive apparatus and evidence will be theoretically presupposed. Though this examination will frequently spill over into the domains of cognition and evidence, there is no presupposition that the solution will be found exclusively in either; rather, answers will be sought in a conceptually unprejudiced *how*. 
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Epigraphs</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Configurative and Evolutionary Perspectives on Understanding</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wainwright</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zagzebski</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alison</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toward an Evolutionary Model of Understanding</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The waking have one world in common. Sleepers meanwhile turn aside, each into a darkness of his own.

Heraclitus\(^1\)

Sleep provides much material for our self-knowledge. A great many revelations have come to people in sleep or light slumber. Sleep colors our psychic life. This happens gently, in a feminine way: when we change our convictions, we do not think of sources.

Pavel Florensky\(^2\)

The light shines in the darkness, and then we are aware of it. What good is the teaching or the light to people unless they make use of it? When they are in darkness or in sorrow, \textit{then} they will see the light.

Meister Eckhart\(^3\)

\(^2\) Florensky, Pavel, Jakim, Boris (ed.): \textit{At the Crossroads of Science and Mysticism}, Semantron Press, 2014, p. 7.
Introduction

Human beings often demonstrate a puzzling capacity to reach new and, what appears to be, better understandings by means that turn out to be difficult, sometimes even impossible, to conceptualise. Such understandings evolve not only on an individual level but also on a social or cultural level, and they include not only what we tend to think of as moral or ethical understandings, but also understandings concerning means to ends evaluated according to criteria of self-interest.

On an individual level such understandings include the understanding 1) of the reformed bully who has come to the conclusion that mean and selfish behaviour is detrimental even to his or her own well being, and 2) of the reformed libertine who has discovered that endless quest for pleasure, even if exceptionally successfully lived, leaves him or her empty and miserable, thirsting for purpose and meaning. On a social or cultural level, such understandings include 1) the reformed slave-owning society’s realisation that social peace and prosperity based on slavery is peace and prosperity based on somewhat murky ideas of truth and justice, and therefore detrimental even to the well being of those who appear to be enjoying its fruits, and 2) the realisation of the modern consumer society that notwithstanding high living standard, unlimited availability of entertainment and boundless future prospects for technological development, the genuine answers to a present state of unease, angst or psychiatrically diagnosed disorders are perhaps not ultimately to be found by means of even better living standard, more entertainment, even higher technology or in the psychotropically induced acceptance of status quo. Note that whereas two of the examples sketched above contain what we no doubt would characterise as moral or ethical aspects, the other two do not necessarily contain such aspects; all examples, however, contain understandings concerning means to ends evaluated according to criteria of self-interest.

Such understandings, based on a large variety of variable factors and therefore very difficult to conceptualise, do indeed come about. We can of course deny that they are better than the understandings that preceded them, but then we will immediately find ourselves in awkward positions, at least in regard to examples involving moral issues. In what follows, the existence of such understandings – understandings that are difficult and perhaps even impossible to conceptualise and that are experienced as better than the understandings that preceded them – will be assumed. Ideas concerning how such understandings can be reached will be the primary object of study in this paper. Four domains to which the how
pertain will be central to the discussions of this paper: cognition, evidence, human interaction with environment, and philosophical understanding of ‘understanding’.

**Relevant Contemporary Research**

Possibly related to the *how* problem are the more famous dilemmas involving rational and/or justified belief. Pascal’s wager and William James’ *Will to Believe*⁴ have, as reactions against radical scepticism and radical evidentialism, become canonical classics, the insights of which are put into fresh use in cultural apologetics by thinkers such as William Lane Craig. My interest revolves round the diffuse and so far vague notion of *how* it is possible to reach new understandings (which in turn may justify belief) and how the person reaching such understandings can *know* (but not prove) such understandings to be true. So far, I have found little research dealing specifically with this subject.

Ideas of Jonathan Edwards and John Henry Newman, as well as ancient speculations of Plato and Aristotle, that touch upon this issue, will be dealt with indirectly in my discussion of William J. Wainwright’s *Reason and the Heart*.⁵ Louis Roy, in ‘Wainwright, Maritain and Aquinas on Transcendent Experiences’,⁶ argues that Wainwright lacks an explicit epistemology. This may be so. As we shall see, Wainwright’s focus is mainly on cognitive aspects.

My second discussion concerns certain ideas of someone whose focus is more explicitly on epistemology: Linda Zagzebski. Zagzebski has done much work in the field of virtue ethics and virtue epistemology, domains that not always deal directly with the *how* interest of this paper, but that nonetheless often appear to deal with the issue indirectly. In this paper I shall specifically discuss Zagzebski’s understanding of ‘techne’ as it relates to the concept of ‘understanding’, a conceptual framework that Cheng-hung Tsai discusses and constructively criticises in her article ‘Techné and Understanding’.⁷

My third discussion concerns the work of James Alison, theologian and Roman Catholic priest, who draws inspiration from mimetic insights first developed by René Girard. Girard’s insights have engendered a vast amount of secondary literature and been applied in

---

various disciplines such as literary criticism, psychology, anthropology, theology, economics and neuroscience. Girard’s *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (in translation: *Deceit, desire and the Novel*)\(^8\) deals systematically, from the point of view of literary criticism, with the how-factor. Psychiatrist Jean-Michel Oughourlian’s further development of interdividual psychology in *Genèse du désir* (in translation: *The Genesis of Desire*)\(^9\) is also relevant to the object of study in this paper. An up to date interdisciplinary view is provided in *Mimesis and Science: Empirical Research on Imitation and the Mimetic Theory of Culture and Religion*,\(^10\) edited by Scott R. Garrels. The article ‘Desire and Vision: Problems of Conversion’\(^11\) by Julia Meszaros is germane to matters discussed in this paper: drawing on insights from James Alison and Iris Murdoch, Meszaros examines how human beings can begin to desire what is good. In ‘On Becoming Human: Jean Vanier, Carl Rogers and James Alison on Disabilities, Acceptance, and a Noncompetetive Theological Anthropology’\(^12\) by J. Alexander Sider, Alison’s work is examined, from the perspective of health, together with the work of a psychologist, Carl Rogers, and the work of the founder of L’Arche, Jean Vanier.

The publications of Alison do not appear to have been examined together with the publications of either Wainwright or Zagzebski. The publications of Wainwright do not appear to have been examined together with the publications of either Zagzebski or Alison. The publications of Zagzebski do not appear to have been examined together with the publications of either Wainwright or Alison. As far as I can tell, this paper represents the first attempt at examining the work of these three thinkers with the objective of shedding light on the progression of understanding.

The texts that I choose to analyse often examine the mysterious how-factor in relation to phenomena that pertains to the perhaps even more mysterious domain of revelation. I have chosen to focus on three writers that belong in the Christian tradition and that may therefore be assumed to share similar understanding of revelation. This selection excludes many legitimate points of view (shamanism, philosophical materialism, Buddhism,

---

\(^8\) Girard, René: *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, Libraire Arthème Fayard/Pluriel, 2010.


etc.), but in turn allows a reduction of the amount of variables that may influence ideas concerning the how-factor.

The phenomenon of revelation can be approached in various ways. In *Divine Discourse*¹³ Nicholas Wolterstorff argues for the plausibility that God speaks, and the speech of God can, in his view, plausibly be understood as being not identical with and yet part of that which is revealed. Whether ‘revealed information’ is or is not revealed by God will not concern us much here; the objective of this study is primarily to evaluate ideas concerning how individuals, communities or cultures are able to grasp information that, hypothetically, is being or has been revealed. In *Must Divine Revelation Produce Understanding?*¹⁴ Mark Sluys approaches the phenomenon from yet another angle. Sluys comes to the conclusion that revelation does not necessarily produce subsequent understanding. At least two and probably all three of the textual contributions that I evaluate share this view that evidence may be presented and yet not compel subjects to whom it is presented to fully comprehend the evidence.

**Determining the Question**

It is by no means clear that revealed information – whatever that may be – must be located ‘out there’, in the external environment, for if revelatory processes do indeed occur, then they might just as well appear to occur within the mind to which information is supposedly being revealed. In regard to potential development of new understanding, two (probably all three) of the textual contributions evaluated in this paper nonetheless appear to assume environmental evidence as a prerequisite for the accomplishment of new understanding. Whether such new understanding is itself revelation (revelation as mental process), or whether it is based on revelation (revelation as environmentally available) is a moot point, and a strong partisanship to either of the two views risks engendering many unnecessary intellectual stumbling blocks. What will become clear as this paper progresses is that the understandings discussed appear to involve stuff that is being – in one way or another – revealed to the mental faculty. Just how this process comes about is what this study is about.

How, in what ways, is it possible to comprehend how human beings, by means that are difficult to conceptualise, can reach new understanding and know that the new understanding is better than the one that preceded it? I shall first examine what aspects of this

---

question might be answered by Wainwright, Zagzebski and Alison. As already mentioned, all three writers belong to the Christian tradition and can therefore be assumed to share basic similar outlooks. Yet the materials analysed have very different approaches. Each material in isolation cannot be expected to give a satisfactory answer to all aspects of my question. As the analysis proceeds, I shall point out the strengths and weaknesses of each material in regard to its ability to generate answers to my question. Though they have different approaches, I do believe that their approaches are complementary. I hope that these different approaches will allow me to reach a more profound answer than what might be the case if I were to limit myself to only one of the approaches. Based on the analysis of Wainwright, Zagzebski, and Alison, I shall attempt to construct a synthetic model able to give a complete answer to my question.

Structure of the Paper

William J. Wainwright’s *Reason and the Heart: a Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason* will bring to attention the notion of and potential importance of a correctly disposed mind or heart. Wainwright’s analysis is mostly, but not exclusively, concerned with how human beings can be able to reach knowledge in theistic matters; he assumes evidence to be ‘out there’, yet a wrongly disposed heart may preclude us from comprehending the full meaning of evidence. Wainwright examines the thesis that ‘mature religious belief can, and perhaps should, be based on evidence but that evidence can be accurately assessed only by men and women who possess the proper moral and spiritual qualifications.’15 His examination is based on case studies of material from Jonathan Edwards, John Henry Newman and William James. Although I shall on occasion refer to James, Edwards and Newman provide insights that are more relevant to the present study, and therefore, in examining Wainwright, I choose to comment primarily on the ideas of Newman and Edwards. The section dealing with Wainwright will focus on cognitive aspects germane to my question.

Linda Zagzebski is a philosopher known primarily for her work in ‘virtue ethics’ and ‘virtue epistemology’. In the article ‘Recovering Understanding’16 she puts the epistemic value of certainty in a historic perspective. There have been, according to Zagzebski, periods in history during which radical scepticism did present a real threat to the concept of truth. During those periods philosophers have been primarily concerned with the ‘epistemic value of

15 Wainwright: *Reason and the heart*, p. 3.
certainty and focused on the nature of justified belief. During periods when scepticism has not been experienced as a threat, philosophers’ concern has been with explanation rather than with justified belief. According to Zagzebski, an era dominated by radical scepticism is now drawing to an end. In arguing for the recovering of understanding, Zagzebski draws on Plato and his concept of techne, i.e. an idea based on a means-to-ends understanding. With Zagzebski we begin to be able to imagine different scenarios of correctly disposed minds (or hearts), correctly disposed, that is, in order to achieve certain ends: In order to build good ships (end), a shipbuilder needs certain skills (means), and so on. In applying Zagzebski’s understanding of how understanding is reached, in analogy with how one becomes accomplished in the craft of shipbuilding, we appear to be encouraged to identify trainable skills that should be useful for enlightenment. What kind of skills could they be? Analytical? Intuitive? Practical? Zagzebski’s reasoning is a good deal subtler than one might first expect, and it might be wise to resist an impulse to jump to conclusions. With Zagzebski, an understanding of the concept of ‘understanding’ is suggested; and ‘truth’ will assume a functional meaning within a means-to-ends framework. The part dealing with Zagzebski will focus on philosophical, or epistemological aspects germane to my question.

Much in Christian tradition suggests something rather puzzling concerning a supposed nature of a correctly disposed mind or heart. ‘You will profit in virtue just so far as you can break your will’, writes Thomas à Kempis, ‘and follow the will of God.’ If we are indeed dealing with trainable skills, there seems, at least from a Christian perspective, to be something rather paradoxical about it: Peter the Apostle, it appears, had to suffer illusion after illusion before he, becoming disillusioned, could begin to reach new understanding; none of the original apostles appear to have been particularly bright; Paul the Apostle invites us to be crucified with Christ; John the writer of the First Epistle admonishes us not to love the world, nor that which is of the world, etcetera; Augustine of Hippo’s wayward paths to understanding also seem, much like those of Peter’s, to have carried him through painful disillusionment – a death of a kind, or indeed a mortification of desire – and a slow discovery of what to him must have appeared to be a truer view of self in relation to his fellow creatures and to the divine. This brings us to a notion that has as yet not been suggested: truth, if there be truth, might be dangerous. Dangerous, that is, to our preconceived ideas of right and wrong, of how the good life ought to be lived and what our objectives in it ought to be,
etcetera. Dangerous also to our pretensions concerning our ‘self’ and our potentially unjustified differentiation between what we deem good and bad. James Alison takes all these factors into account in *Raising Abel*.\(^{19}\) With Alison, whose ideas are based on mimetic theory, ‘desirability’ becomes a crucial factor in the shaping of understandings; and ‘truth’ will assume a negative, falsifying meaning that differs from the functional ‘truth’ within Zagzebski’s means-to-ends framework. In Alison’s understanding, external events are liable to influence the human conceptions of self in relation to others and to the divine; but it is only when individual or cultural defences have broken down that biblical revelation can begin to exert its influence, initiating, as it were, *subversion from within* of the subject’s or culture’s worldview, thus enabling a new and more truthful worldview, based on the understanding of the truth concerning the ‘innocence of the victim’, to emerge. The section dealing with Alison will focus on interactive aspects (especially ‘potential environmental influence on the formation of understanding’) that are germane to my question.

In the final discussion I shall extract three hypotheses, each based on one of the previous analyses. These three hypotheses, together, will begin to give a more complete answer to my question. At this stage I hope that each hypothesis can, based on the previous analyses, reasonably be considered as plausible. Nonetheless, I shall attempt to test the hypotheses further against what I choose to call a criterion of experience. At this stage I will avail myself of quotes from William Shakespeare’s play *King Richard III*\(^{20}\) and Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov*,\(^{21}\) as well as input from Blaise Pascal’s *Pensées*,\(^{22}\) and St Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain’s and St Makarios of Corinth’s *Philokalia*.\(^{23}\) Finally, I shall propose a possible answer, based on all preceding analysis, to my question.

The body of this paper, then, will consist of discussions of the contributions of 1) Wainwright, 2) Zagzebski, and 3) Alison, and 4) an attempt, based on the preceding discussions, at constructing a synthetic answer to my question.

**Method**

Conclusions will be reached by means of analysis of ideas. I will attempt to clarify the ideas of each writer by formulating reasonable interpretations of their work. Reasonable

---


\(^{21}\) Dostoevsky, Fyodor, Garnett, Constance (transl.): *The Brothers Karamazov*, The Modern Library, 1996.


interpretations will be reached in accordance with a principle of generosity, according to which the reasonable interpretation will be one that is as consistent, logically coherent and free from contradiction as possible; the reasonable interpretation will also, in accordance with the same principle, be one that renders the view of each author as ‘acceptable’ as possible.\textsuperscript{24}

In testing the hypotheses derived from the analysis of each material, I will use aspects of ‘literary criticism’, a method used to examine literary texts. As exegetes engage with biblical texts, so the literary critic may engage with literary texts: the critic may, for instance, focus on the life of the author, socio-cultural issues concerning the environment in which the text was authored, related texts, earlier manuscripts, or the meaning of the text. Some may deem one of these aspects to be supremely important, others may hold that many aspects are equally important in order, for instance, to determine the actual meaning of the text. However, literary criticism is not necessarily as scholarly as exegetics. According to the article ‘Literary Criticism’ in Encyclopaedia Britannica literary criticism is often ‘itself considered a form of literature’, and the article also states that it has been proven that ‘literary criticism can play a role in social change.’\textsuperscript{25}

I will, by means of quotes from Shakespeare and Dostoevsky, suggest two very different states of mind. The quotes are selected because 1) I consider them to be realistic and precise depictions of particular states of mind, and 2) because they shine light on several aspects that are important in the attempt to answer my question. Why Dostoevsky and Shakespeare? In works such as Mensonge romantique et vérité Romanesque and A Theatre of Envy\textsuperscript{26} Girard defends the thesis that certain ‘classic’ writers, including Dostoevsky and Shakespeare, follow a similar literary structure in regard to how they understand desire. The themes of such writers, far from being experienced as ‘original’, tend to be experienced as ‘timeless’; also, the ability of persons belonging to many different generations and eras to recognise themselves in the characters produced by these writers have withstood a ‘test of time’. Girard argues that these writers have managed to reach a genuine anthropological insight, divorced from influence of temporal fads, and advances the hypothesis, based on the analysis of these writers, that desire is ‘triangular’, or ‘mimetic’. I shall assume that these writers have a realistic anthropological grasp and that their characters reflect genuine human experience. Thus I will use texts written by Shakespeare and Dostoevsky in order to be able to

sketch two opposite states of mind, and I will comment upon the content of the texts to the extent that comments may shed light on the hypotheses that will be under examination. To the extent that the ‘behaviour’ of the ‘understandings’ discussed in this paper is rendered more comprehensible and plausible within the perspective of theses literary texts, to that extent my hypotheses may be regarded as corroborated against a criterion of experience. The discussion of the three hypotheses within the framework of Shakespeare-Dostoevsky will, I hope, enrich this paper with a touch of psychological realism.

Theory
I will now discuss a few theoretical concepts that will be important in the discussions that follow. Then, under the headline Progression of Understanding, I will discuss a ‘logical pattern’ that will surface in the discussions that follow. Mimetic theory will be explained in the initial part of the section dealing with Alison.

Anthropology
Basic understanding of the human being will differ somewhat between the authors discussed. None of the three thinkers understand humans as exclusively rational and, in their rational capacity, in full possession of the means necessary to correctly interpret and control the environment; instead they agree that humans may to a large extent be fraught with and run by factors beyond rational control. Views will differ somewhat, however, in respect to whether and to what extent the human creature has within her all the means necessary to perfect her cognitive ability in order to grasp new and better understandings: Wainwright and Zagzebski might hold as plausible that they do, whereas Alison holds that human identity is formed by an ‘other’ and prompts us to consider the potentially crucial role of evidence as trigger.

Evidence
All of the thinkers hold as plausible the view that there is ‘evidence’ for matters divine. Yet the role evidence play will differ. Wainwright’s focus is on the mental state required in order to grasp certain evidence; from Alison’s perspective evidence effectuates subversion from within of the mental state. One view does not necessarily exclude the other.

When discussing ‘evidence’ it is important to be aware of its ‘referent’, i.e. what the evidence discussed is supposed to be evidence for. Wainwright’s examination carries him toward theistic arguments and evidence will thus often, but no always, tend to refer to whether or not there is a theistic reality. Zagzebski’s focus is on ‘understanding’ and she does
not explicitly discuss evidence, yet her discussion establishes a means-to-ends framework within which a human being may learn to interpret events, based on, we must suppose, some kind of feedback, in order to improve a technique. ‘Evidence’, then, would, if the term were used, in this context tend to refer to indications pertaining to the perfection of a technique. Alison is interested in a very particular sort of evidence. Though it may take many forms and shapes, the evidence that interests Alison is more narrowly defined: it is a counter-story, the perception of which will tend to undermine preconceived notions pertaining to a dominant pre-existing story.

**Epistemic superiority**

The notion of ‘epistemic superiority’ will be introduced in the treatment of Wainwright and it will remain relevant in all the ensuing discussions. Epistemic superiority implies that one who possesses it is better suited to pass judgement. Nobody will allege that the form of epistemic superiority that might be attainable will imply better ability to judge in all matters. For Wainwright (who is the only one to use the term explicitly) epistemic superiority will mainly concern the ability to assess evidence in theistic matters. For Alison, epistemic superiority, if he were to explain the term, would no doubt concern not only the ability to understand evidential counter-stories, but also the ensuing transformation of the mind that is triggered by those very counter-stories. Zagzebski would perhaps give epistemic superiority its widest application, for her reasoning appears to imply that someone who has mastered the craft of carpentry ought, by reason of her having mastered that particular craft, be better qualified to give advice concerning matters that ostensibly have nothing to do with carpentry. This is because she holds as plausible that mastery of a *techne* (I will explain this term in the section dealing with Zagzebski) entails having grasped a part of some *general good*.

Furthermore, the writers will provide different perspectives concerning which factors might be responsible for producing epistemic superiority: Wainwright appears to hold as plausible that both the influence of grace and the exercise of perfectible virtues may effectuate ‘epistemic superiority’, Zagzebski tends to focus more on perfectible aspects, whereas a reasonable interpretation of Alison would lead to the conclusion that ‘epistemic superiority’ at least partly is produced by contra intuitive evidence that effectuate *subversion from within* of false understandings, thus enabling truer understandings.
Revelation – or revealed matter

The concept of revelation will, even when not explicitly called revelation, have a somewhat hazy role to play in the discussions of this paper. Both Wainwright and Alison deal explicitly with material which they suppose belong to the domain of revelation. While I wish the reader to keep the term revelation, or, perhaps even better, revealed matter alive while digesting the discussions that follow, I shall attempt to pinpoint the very narrow aspect that I deem particularly relevant to my question: I wish to bring attention to the terms ‘revelation’ and ‘revealed matter’ because the understandings that are to be discussed appear, in various aspects, to be revealed or uncovered to the mind. Never will there be question of any Descartes laboriously meditating in perfect isolation and thus producing understanding. Instead, it appears, insights may dawn on just about anyone, high and low, bright and not all too bright, unexpectedly. The evidence will appear to have been there all along. Yet, suddenly – not clear how! – a person can begin to perceive old evidence in new light. I will consistently use the term ‘understanding’ in my discussions, but I wish that this revelatory aspect be at least considered as a potential attribute to the particular kind of ‘understanding’ discussed.

Understanding and Knowledge

The kind of understanding that will be examined has been characterised as difficult or even impossible to conceptualise. Nonetheless, I assume that such understanding can, to a certain degree, be represented. Evidence of understanding can be recorded in oral tradition and in written documents. Such evidence may then facilitate the formation of particular understandings. Such evidence usually does not provide any explicit conceptualisations of the particular understanding that it is supposedly evidence for; but I assume that it is possible to detect, in such evidence, the central ideas of particular understandings. It is not that central ideas of understandings are difficult to spell out, they are not (see the examples at page 4 of this paper); it is the intricate relations between premises that lead to the conclusions of such understandings that may be difficult or even impossible to conceptualise.

The concept ‘understanding’ will not always refer to the same phenomena. Zagzebski, who discusses the concept of ‘understanding’ in general and philosophical terms, gives ‘understanding’ its widest application. Alison, who does not explicitly discuss ‘understanding’, implicitly gives ‘understanding’ its narrowest application. I am interested in understandings that involve ideas concerning means conducive to ends, but whereas Zagzebski, for instance, discusses the craft of shipbuilding as means to producing ships, the particular kinds of understandings that are of particular interest in this paper aim at something
more ineffable, as indicated above in the scenarios of the reformed bully, libertine, slave-owning society and modern consumer society. Just what that ineffable aim might be will, by means of Pascal, be suggested in the final discussion. In my question ‘understanding’ is to be understood in a narrower sense than Zagzebski’s means-to-ends-based understanding, and in a somewhat wider sense than Alison’s victim-based understanding. Whereas the scenarios above of the reformed bully and slave-owning society clearly appear to fit within Alison’s framework, the scenarios of the reformed libertine and consumer-society are more difficult, but perhaps not impossible, to interpret within that same framework.

Zagzebski will distinguish between understanding and knowledge. Understanding, on her view, is not necessarily based on knowledge. When it is based on knowledge, propositional knowledge does not exhaust the sources on which understanding is based. When Zagzebski refers to ‘knowledge’ she usually understands it in a classical sense, as true and justified belief. ‘Propositional knowledge’ is understood as knowledge that can be spelled out in declarative sentences, as, for example, ‘The sun rises in the east.’ Propositional knowledge can, as per the example above, be evaluated as true or false, whereas this is not necessarily the case for understanding. Another way to distinguish between the two is knowledge that (propositional) versus knowledge-how (understanding, as Zagzebski understands it).

Yet, as the analysis proceeds, we shall see that the more restricted kind of understanding that pertains to my question not only can be true or false, but, in regard to certain aspects, it seems, necessarily must be true or false. This brings us to Popper and Kuhn.

**Progression of Understanding**

I will find occasion to argue for the plausibility of an evolutionary approach to understanding. I believe that understanding may progress, if there is an objective reality toward which it can progress, by means of the same logic as Popper’s logic of scientific discovery: through falsification by deductive logic.27 It is only the hypothetical progression by means of falsification that will be of interest in this paper, not Popper’s entire methodology. If we assume there is objective reality and that human beings can approach reality, I hold that Kuhn’s paradigmatic understanding of scientific development as the replacement of one puzzle-solving tradition by another must reasonably, against Kuhn, be interpreted to progress

---

by similar logic. Why should we replace one puzzle-solving tradition with another? Because the one being replaced does not yield as fruitful explanations or predictions as the one taking its place, i.e. the successor can reasonably be interpreted as giving more accurate description of reality. Kuhn’s point is that it is not through testing that one tradition is rejected on behalf of another, but by some sort of assessment of the yields of its puzzle-solving ability, and, more bizarrely, that each tradition only makes sense within the tradition proper, which would imply that different traditions are incommensurable. I would argue that our understandings are tested all the time, that different understandings pertain to the same reality and that they are, at least in some respects, commensurable. I believe one can plausibly argue that understandings that have been experienced as important and vital and that are being discarded must, in some respect, be experienced as relatively falsified vis-à-vis a new and relatively corroborated understanding, i.e. experienced as falsified and corroborated in relation to a supposed objective reality; if not, any progress would appear to be arbitrary. A theory that generates many contradictions (and which might therefore, in a sense, be considered logically falsified) will not immediately be rejected: it may first be subject to improvement through modification; it will only be rejected when there is a new theory available that yields fewer contradictions and that demonstrates a better or more fruitful explanatory capacity. I am going to discuss progression of understanding, not progression of science, and I suspect that the falsification-pattern is germane to progression of understanding. It is no doubt not the case that progress of human understanding proceeds through methodological testing, yet arguably we humans are mindful of and uneasy about contradictions in our worldviews. And our worldviews are continually subjected to great strain. We may of course, as we often do, hold on to implausible understandings because of emotional reasons or deep desires, or reach for fanciful understandings that appear singularly attractive; but do we generally reject our proper understandings (the ones we have earlier found especially attractive and/or meaningful) unless we experience them to be somehow falsified? Whether or not such experienced falsification may be reliable is, of course, a crucial question, and a prudent and initial attempt to deal with that question will be made in the final section of this paper.

---

Purpose

Wainwright’s *Reason and the Heart* carries the subtitle *A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Understanding*. Similarly, this paper could carry the following subtitle: *A Prolegomenon to a Critique of the Progression of Understanding*. The purpose of this paper is to raise questions concerning the concept of ‘understanding’, and especially concerning a hypothetical progression of understanding that might be based on experience of ‘desirability’ and ‘truth’.
Configurative and Evolutionary Perspectives on ‘Understanding’

Wainwright

Scientific detachment has long been considered a virtue germane to objectivity. The detached scientist, so it is believed, is better suited than the non-detached scientist or layman to grasp the significance of evidence. State of mind, it is implied, matters; or in other words, state of mind appears to have epistemic value. The assumption that ‘state of mind’ or ‘heart’ may matter in our ability to grasp the full meaning of evidence is discussed by Wainwright in *Reason and the Heart*. Wainwright is interested in the grasp of a certain *kind* of evidence, evidence that is sometimes associated with the domain of revelation. Wainwright, however, does not assume that detachment is the ultimate requirement for proper assessment of the force of such kind of evidence; in fact, he is especially interested in the importance of what we may term extra-rational factors as potential *requirements* for grasping the full meaning of evidence. A crucial question that arises from his analysis, and that he leaves unanswered, is whether human beings are in inherent possession of the wherewithal required to grasp the full meaning of evidence, or whether something like *infused grace* is required. In examining Wainwright, we shall see that he explores this problem mainly from a *cognitive* point of view, that is, his main interest is the disposition of mind or heart – the cognitive apparatus – and what may constitute the ideal setup for accretion of human knowledge.

*Configuration of Heart and Assessment of Evidence*

Wainwright holds the prudent or quasi-evidentialist view that ‘mature religious belief can, and perhaps should be based on evidence’. But how is evidence in religious matters to be correctly assessed? Wainwright examines and argues for a tradition between two extremes, in which:

- reason is capable of knowing God on the basis of evidence – but only when one’s cognitive faculties are rightly disposed. It should be distinguished from two other views that have dominated modern thought. The first claims that God can be known by “objective reason,” that is, by an understanding that systematically excludes passion, desire, and emotion from the process of reasoning. The other insists that God can be known only “subjectively,” or by the heart. Both views identify reason with ratiocination. They also assume that reasoning is objective only when unaffected by wants, interests, and desires. The tradition I will

---

29 Wainwright: *Reason and the heart*, p. 3.
discuss steers between these two extremes. It places a high value on proofs, arguments, and
inferences yet also believes that a properly disposed heart is needed to see their force. Wainwright goes on to demonstrate how such epistemic theory ‘is deeply embedded in
important strands of the Christian tradition’, specifically mentioning Calvin, Aquinas and
Anglican divines. This view invites us to reconsider the notion of ‘epistemic superiority’ in
relation to a ‘properly disposed heart’; not in the sense that ‘properly disposed heart’ is all that
matters, since proofs, arguments and inferences continue to play a crucial role, but in the
sense that full epistemic superiority can only be achieved when analytical faculties are
conjoined with a properly disposed heart.

Is such a view plausible? I shall look at Wainwright’s arguments. First, I shall examine what factors might be involved in a ‘properly disposed heart’ (here I turn to
Wainwright’s discussion of the ideas of Jonathan Edwards and John Henry Newman); second,
I will attempt to evaluate Wainwright’s reasoning concerning human ability to reach new
understandings.

I will begin by providing a brief overview of Newman’s understanding of human ability to engage in informal reasoning; then I will restrict the comments on Edwards
to the most important aspects in which Edwards differs from Newman. ‘Illative sense’ is
Newman’s term for the faculty of informal reasoning. It:

decides which considerations are relevant, assigns weights to different kinds of
considerations, marshals the evidence in some sort of order, applies appropriate principle
(those used in assessing testimony, for example), and balances the positive and negative
considerations against each other.

According to Newman, “it is plain… how little that judgement will be helped on by logic and
how intimately it will be dependent upon the intellectual complexion of the” reasoner (GA 284). Consequently, whether the illative sense is disposed or indisposed to believe
something then becomes a crucial factor. However:

Just as there are no formal rules for producing or recognizing good poetry, so there are no
formal rules for determining the truth in concrete matters. In “concrete reasonings,” the
“ultimate test of truth or error in our inferences” is “the trustworthiness of the Illative Sense
that gives them its sanction” (GA 281)

30 Wainwright: Reason and the Heart, p. 3.
31 Wainwright: Reason and the Heart, p. 4.
32 Wainwright: Reason and the Heart, p. 59.
Unfortunately the illative sense ‘often lead people to opposite conclusions’,\textsuperscript{35} there appear to be no common measure, but in its stead a multitude of variables liable to influence judgement: first principles taken into account, tradition, points of view, etc.\textsuperscript{36} This leads to what I think is one of the most interesting aspects of Newman’s reasoning, when he suggests (as do Heraclitus in the epigraphic quote of this paper) something similar to Walter Lippmann’s anthropological understanding in Public Opinion,\textsuperscript{37} namely that human beings to a large extent are compelled to live in ‘pseudo-environments’.\textsuperscript{38} Because ‘“intuitions, first principles, axioms, dictates of common sense, presumptions, presentiments, prepossessions, or prejudices”’\textsuperscript{39} differ, so will our impression of an argument’s force.\textsuperscript{40} Though illative reasoning appears tainted by subjectivity, Newman does not think that truth is relative; and he believes truth to be accessible to human understanding.\textsuperscript{41} How can this be? According to Newman, the illative sense is susceptible to improvement:

Human beings, […], must acquire the excellence proper to them “by the exercise of those faculties which are” their “natural inheritance.” Each person must complete “his inchoate and rudimental nature… out of the living elements with which his mind began to be” (GA 274). The standard of proper functioning is not furnished by how most people use their ratiocinative powers. It is determined by how those who have perfected them do so.\textsuperscript{42}

How can one know whether one’s illative sense is working properly? According to Newman, though ‘universal agreement should not be expected’, a ‘failure to secure substantial agreement, […], indicates that one’s illative powers are being used idiosyncratically.’\textsuperscript{43} We should expect properly functioning illative senses to conduce to:

“objections overcome, … adverse theories neutralized, … difficulties gradually clearing up,” consistency with other things known or believed, and the fact that “when the conclusion is assumed as an hypothesis, it throws light upon a multitude of collateral facts, accounting for them, and uniting them together in one whole” (GA 254, 255-56).\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{35} Wainwright: Reason and the Heart, p. 62.
\textsuperscript{36} Wainwright: Reason and the Heart, p. 62.
\textsuperscript{38} The terminology is Lippmann’s, not Newman’s. The supposition is that we tend to live in various more or less mutually exclusive ‘imagined realities’ that do not correspond to the one reality in which we actually live.
\textsuperscript{40} Wainwright: Reason and the Heart, p. 63.
\textsuperscript{41} Wainwright: Reason and the Heart, p. 65.
\textsuperscript{43} Wainwright: Reason and the Heart, p. 69.
\textsuperscript{44} Wainwright: Reason and the Heart, p. 69. Quoting Newman: An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent.
Edwards’ conclusions largely overlap with those of Newman, but he does provide one different angle. We have seen that according to Wainwright’s analysis of Newman the illative sense is susceptible to improvement, and its proper functioning appears, at least to a large extent, to be achievable by exercise. Edward’s concept of ‘sanctified reason’ suggests that the capacity for sound reasoning is perhaps less ‘trainable’ than Newman’s illative sense, and more dependent on factors beyond human control. Wainwright comments:

Special grace sanctifies by infusing benevolence or true virtue (viz., the love of being in general). Infused benevolence is the basis of a new epistemic principle; [...]. By its means, the sanctified acquire a new simple idea (the idea of “true beauty”) that the unredeemed lack. Because this idea is needed to understand divine matters properly, the “saints” are in a superior epistemic position.45

Before concluding, Wainwright quotes Edward’s:

The new principle that God infuses “sanctifies the reasoning faculty and assists it to see the clear evidence there is for the truth of religion in rational arguments, and that in two ways, viz., as it removes prejudices and so lays the mind more open to the force of arguments, and also secondly, as it positively enlightens and assists it to see the force of rational arguments… by adding greater light, clearness and strength to the judgment” (Misc. 628, T 251). There is nothing intrinsically supernatural about many of these benefits. The cause of the mind’s reasoning soundly is supernatural, but the effect (sound reasoning) need not be; the spirit simply helps us use our natural epistemic faculties rightly.46

This difference, whether or to what extent sound reasoning depends upon human efforts alone or whether or to what extent it depends upon something beyond human control will recur in our discussion of Zagzebski and Alison. Like Newman, Edwards also believes that extra-rational factors matter in our assessment of force of evidence; unlike Newman, Edwards dares to suggest a particular extra-rational factor enabling us to read evidence properly: ‘true benevolence’,47 a concept corresponding to the Christian understanding of ‘love’ or ‘charity’.

This kind of reasoning appears to presuppose a somewhat controversial understanding of ‘epistemic superiority’, i.e. as defined by the presence and/or right disposition of some extra-rational factor. In chapter four and five of Reason and the Heart, Wainwright attempts to demonstrate that views such as those of Edward’s and Newman’s are not defeated by the charges of subjectivism, circularity and relativism; his analysis demonstrates that the vulnerabilities of Edwards and Newman to the charges of subjectivism,

45 Wainwright: Reason and the Heart, p. 42.
47 Wainwright: Reason and the Heart, p. 52-53.
circularity and relativism are shared by almost all reasoning. Yet, even if such views withstand the charges, it does not follow that they are necessarily plausible. Wainwright gives us a series of arguments concerning why we should nonetheless take them seriously. The first argument is based on a criterion of experience:

Theists who think there are rational arguments for the truths of religion and who, in the light of their beliefs, think through the implications of their disagreements with intelligent, well-informed, honest, and philosophically astute critics will be forced to draw similar conclusions. They believe that their critics’ assessment of the overall force of the evidence is in error. This error cannot plausibly be attributed to such things as lack of intelligence, unfamiliarity with relevant evidence, obvious prejudice, or an unwillingness to consider counterclaims. Edwards would ascribe it to a failure of the heart. And Newman, we could add, might ascribe it to a wrongly disposed illitative sense. Conversely, Wainwright demonstrates, non-theists tend to make similar claims; indeed, anyone who has a firm conviction on an issue on which there is disagreement among intelligent people, appears to have no alternative than falling back on a belief in epistemic superiority. Wainwright acknowledges the danger of ‘intellectual phariseeism’, but suggests that reluctance to ascribe disagreement to dispositional failure is problematic, because: ‘if theism is true, and there is good evidence for it, what other explanation could there be of the failure of so many to appreciate its force?’ And we could add the following: If theism is not true, or if there is not good evidence of theism, what other explanation could there be of the belief of so many educated and otherwise intelligent persons in its force? One way or the other, the disposition of faculties appears to matter: in the first case, the failure could be ascribed to a lack of some hypothetical extra-rational factor; in the second case, the failure could be ascribed to the presence of that very same hypothetical extra-rational factor. One possible alternative is that the ideal of total detachment, excluding in theory all factors liable to delude pure objective reason, is, as has often been claimed, the position of epistemic superiority; yet it is doubtful to what degree such a disposition can be maintained outside operations of hard science and formal logic, and, if it is possible, to what extent such a disposition prompts a person to adopt one position or the other in religious matters. What seems clear is that whether one is a theist or a non-theist, there is no easy escape from seriously considering the notion of epistemic superiority. Yet we do have a choice: we can

---

50 Wainwright: *Reason and the Heart*, p. 149.
either plant our flags in the tradition of Enlightenment, thus reserving epistemic superiority in all domains to pure objective reason; or we can accept as plausible the hypothesis that in some domains epistemic superiority depends on a disposition of mind which includes extra-rational factors as active and necessary components.

Wainwright’s exploration of the latter alternative is not done exclusively in relation to theistic arguments: he argues for the plausibility of the view that certain affections might be needed to perceive not only the truth of religious claims, but also ‘values’;\(^{52}\) and he quotes from Plato’s seventh letter in support of the notion that certain forms of knowledge might not be able to take root in an alien nature.\(^{53}\) This would mean that certain dispositions of mind might blind the subject, and, conversely, that other dispositions of mind might open the subject for correct interpretation of certain kinds of evidence. Wainwright posits, with Aristotle, that:

> Only a person “in a healthy emotional state” can grasp the truth of correct principles. If his desires, impulses, and feelings have “been perverted by wrong training,” he will not be able to do so. Children who have developed bad moral dispositions, who have “a perverted sense of what is worth having in life,” will formulate false principles of conduct. (They will, as Plato says, have a lie in their soul.)\(^{54}\)

Is this outrageous? Wainwright places Kant in the same family of thought as Aristotle and Plato, in the sense that even for Kant ‘a certain affective state is a necessary condition of the perception of moral value.’\(^{55}\) To the extent that theological claims entail value claims, it might then become necessary to grasp the latter in order to be able to grasp the former.\(^{56}\) Are we all equally apt to grasp values? Wainwright cites the view of William James that ‘“as a rule we disbelieve all facts and theories for which we have no use”’,\(^{57}\) then adds that ‘What we have use for, of course, depends on our needs and interests, hopes and fears’,\(^{58}\) goes on to weave in a platonic understanding that ‘judgments of reality are affected by feelings and evaluations’,\(^{59}\) and concludes that: ‘If this is true, then what pains and pleases us will affect our judgments of what is and is not real.’\(^{60}\) According to Wainwright, this implies that:

---

\(^{52}\) Wainwright: *Reason and the Heart*, p. 149.

\(^{53}\) Wainwright: *Reason and the Heart*, p. 149.


\(^{56}\) Wainwright: *Reason and the Heart*, p. 150.


\(^{58}\) Wainwright: *Reason and the Heart*, p. 150.

\(^{59}\) Wainwright: *Reason and the Heart*, p. 151.

\(^{60}\) Wainwright: *Reason and the Heart*, p. 151.
If this line of thought is correct, and our judgments of reality are affected by our pains and pleasures, desires and fears, then rightly ordered affections may be needed to perceive things as they are.\textsuperscript{61}

The scope is now suddenly much wider than theistic arguments and religious matters – it seems to be our ability to ‘see things as they are’ that is at stake. But how are we to conceive of ‘rightly ordered affections’? Wainwright gives no clear answer. In his epilogue he briefly explores the two apparent opposites of ‘hate’ and Edward’s idea of ‘true benevolence’. Hatred may, on the one hand, lead us to ‘exaggerate the force of the evidence for our enemy’s guilt’,\textsuperscript{62} but on the other hand hatred may also make us more apt to ‘notice weaknesses in the case for our enemy’s claim to innocence’\textsuperscript{63} that might otherwise be overlooked. ‘True benevolence’ would seem to suffer from the opposite advantages and disadvantages, but Wainwright never discusses benevolence in relation to the particular case of assessing evidence of an enemy’s guilt; instead he discusses benevolence in relation to ‘divine matters’, and he seems to be dismissing ‘true benevolence’ as a sufficient but not necessary condition of reasoning soundly about divine matters.\textsuperscript{64} The necessary condition could, according to Wainwright, be some more elementary component such as ‘religious hope’, or ‘longing’. And could is the operative word here, because at this stage Wainwright’s work is really done; \textit{Reason and the Heart} is in fact meant to be a mere prolegomenon to the project for which he advocates in the conclusion: ‘a “critique of passional reason” – an account of the conditions under which passion does and does not enhance reasoning.’\textsuperscript{65}

\textit{Conclusion}

Wainwright’s anthropology appears to imply that the human being is a creature fraught with distorting desires, fears and prejudices. Yet Wainwright does not embrace the ideal of detached science, in which sound reasoning is reasoning free of extra-rational influence; to the contrary, he holds as plausible the hypothesis that sound reasoning (at least in certain domains) implies the presence and/or right disposition of extra-rational factors.

I have touched upon the notion of ‘pseudo-environment’. If ‘our judgements of reality are affected by our pains and pleasures, desires and fears,’\textsuperscript{66} as Wainwright believes, then this suggests that we do in fact tend to live in pseudo-environments. But if we assume, as

\textsuperscript{61} Wainwright: \textit{Reason and the Heart}, p. 151.
\textsuperscript{62} Wainwright: \textit{Reason and the Heart}, p. 151.
\textsuperscript{63} Wainwright: \textit{Reason and the Heart}, p. 151.
\textsuperscript{64} Wainwright: \textit{Reason and the Heart}, p. 153.
\textsuperscript{65} Wainwright: \textit{Reason and the Heart}, p. 151.
\textsuperscript{66} Wainwright: \textit{Reason and the Heart}, p. 151.
Wainwright does, that reality is not relative, and that ‘rightly ordered affections may be needed to perceive things as they are’;\(^67\) then there might be a way out of our pseudo-environments. Where there is delusion, there can be remedy. The epigraphic quotes from Heraclitus, Florensky, and Eckhart suggest three potential ways to more truthful understanding.

Wainwright explores both the possibility that human capacity to grasp religious knowledge may be a skill susceptible to improvement by exercise and the possibility that it may depend on grace, but never explicitly concludes in favour of one or the other. The notion of ‘epistemic superiority’ nonetheless becomes crucial as explanation of why intelligent people may reach different conclusions.

In answer to my question, Wainwright’s views imply that divine knowledge may be revealed in evidence, and that such evidence may be fully accessible to the rightly disposed mind. By means of a rightly disposed mind, human beings can reach new understandings. Such new understandings are better than the ones preceding them to the extent that they are based on correctly assessed evidence; to the extent that understandings are based on correctly assessed evidence, they can also be expected to be more ‘truthful’ in the sense that they better correspond to reality than understandings based on incorrectly assessed evidence. It may or may not be possible for human beings to get a rightly disposed mind without divine intervention. This is, I think, how Wainwright would answer my question.

There are two important problems that Wainwright leaves unexplained. First, he does not concern himself with what might motivate a person to re-evaluate evidence, or to begin to endeavour to get a ‘correctly disposed mind’. This aspect will be examined mainly in the section dealing with Alison. Second, Wainwright is concerned with interpretation of evidence, but he does not concern himself with what exactly arises from correct (or for that matter incorrect) interpretation of evidence: Is it knowledge? Understanding? In the following section, I shall examine how Zagzebski understands phenomena which could theoretically be the result of correct (or incorrect) interpretation of evidence.

Zagzebski

Every day we perform a vast number of complex practices, usually without reflecting on the nature of the practices we perform or on the content of the understandings on which we base successful practice. Our performance tends to be more or less successful; yet, in everyday life,

\(^67\) Wainwright: *Reason and the Heart*, p. 151.
we do succeed in achieving ends, many of them trivial no doubt, but still. If we were to examine the nature of the foundation upon which successful practice rests, there seems to be no obvious point at which to start. In a quest for understanding ‘understanding’, where do we begin to look? In her article ‘Recovering Understanding’, Zagzebski invites us to reconsider a platonic framework in which ‘understanding’ is primarily examined within a means-to-ends spectrum. Focus will now shift from cognitive aspects that might enable correct assessment of evidence, to the epistemological nature of the concept of understanding.

**Techne, Episteme and the Common Good**

Zagzebski departs from the basic platonic scheme in which the mastery of a *techne* (usually likened to a craft) enables the master to achieve certain ends. Mastery of a *techne* also enables *episteme* (understanding) of that which occurs within this means-to-ends process. However, before I continue, we shall look briefly at how Zagzebski understands the history of epistemology.

Preoccupation of philosophers with rational belief and justification has been a priority during periods when radical scepticism has been perceived as a serious threat; according to Zagzebski, one such period may be drawing to a close. She suggests that we direct our attention to questions that, because of too much preoccupation with rational belief and justification, may long have been neglected. What questions, then, should be relevant to epistemology today? Zagzebski suggests we look at ‘the questions that dominated epistemology during askeptical periods’, during which ‘[p]hilosophers gave most of their attention to the value of understanding and focused on the nature of explanation rather than on the nature of justification.’

Focus on understanding requires, according to Zagzebski, a reconsideration of the overall perspective:

>The rise of skepticism is accompanied by the concern for certainty, and that brings with it a batch of questions, most of which focus on propositional belief and the process of justifying belief, since justification is what is needed to defend the right to be sure.

The object of analysis has thus, during large chunks of time, mainly been constituted by ‘propositional beliefs’, and ‘justification’ has been set as the main objective. Zagzebski suggests it is time to widen our perspectives, because:

---

In contrast, the askceptical periods have been mostly concerned with understanding, and the questions accompanying it show little concern for justification, often not even much interest in propositional belief, but instead, an interest in the process of explanation, since explanation is what is needed to defend a claim to understand. The understanding/explanation orientation is much less atomistic and more social than the certainty/justification orientation.71

Zagzebski identifies dividing lines within history of philosophy, which, for instance, put Hellenistic and post-Cartesian philosophy in one camp, primarily concerned with certainty, whereas Plato, Aristotle and the medieval period are placed in the other camp, primarily concerned with understanding; both camps were concerned with knowledge, and thus ‘Plato comes very close to identifying knowledge with understanding, while Descartes comes very close to identifying knowledge with certainty.’72

What Zagzebski is suggesting is that we take leave from a one-sided approach that only concerns itself with propositional knowledge and give due attention to understanding. But what is ‘understanding’? Zagzebski acknowledges the ambiguity that historically has made and presently does make any use of the term problematic, and sets out to clarify the matter. We shall now begin to look at the basic framework sketched by Plato and borrowed by Zagzebski, which describes expert knowledge in terms of techne (often exemplified in terms of practical crafts) and episteme (understanding):

Understanding is a cognitive state that arises from techne, and since techne includes certain practical activities that are by no means wholly cognitive, it follows that understanding in Plato is a state that arises from practices that are not purely cognitive. The person who has mastered a techne understands the nature of the product of the techne and is able to explain it. She also knows the good in a sense that gives her a common understanding with practitioners of other technai.73

The mastery of a craft, the result of certain activities that are at least partially non-cognitive, gives rise to a cognitive state of understanding. But such mastery also appears to engender knowledge of ‘the good’ that enables the master of one techne to have common understanding with practitioners of other technai. How can this be? It is because of the platonic understanding that:

the same basic knowledge is essential to every techne – knowledge of the good. It follows that the person who is the most reliable source of knowledge for other people is someone

who has mastered a skill and in doing so has a basic knowledge of the good shared by all experts.

This is a controversial argument. Should we accept the notion that someone who has mastered the *techne* of computer programming thereby possesses basic knowledge of a basic ‘good’ that is assumed to be a common requirement for the mastery of all other technai? Are we to believe that a master computer programmer should, on account of that particular mastery, be more likely than persons who have achieved no mastery at all to have good insights in, say, ethics? Does it affect our propensity to give a hasty reply if we turn the question around: Can we be absolutely certain that this is not the case?

Plato avails himself of a number of practical crafts – such as shipbuilding – in exemplifying *techne*, and in such examples the ‘good’ rendered possible by the mastery of a *techne* appears to be characterised to a large extent by *perfected functionality*, i.e. ships that function. What if the *techne* in question is an academic field? Surely the bringing about of ‘functionality’ cannot define the ‘good’ achieved in an academic field? Zagzebski suggests that ‘[o]ne does not have *episteme* of an astronomical fact without interrelating and explaining its relation to diverse elements within the field of astronomy.’\(^7^4\) In order to have *episteme* of any particular fact, mastery of an entire *techne* is required. The mastery of astronomy (*techne*) would not, then, enable the master to make celestial bodies function properly, but to understand (*episteme*) how they relate to one another.

Perhaps I was too hasty above when I mentioned shipbuilding: the mastery of shipbuilding indeed enables the production of functional ships (a primary good); yet does the mastery of shipbuilding also prepare the ground for an understanding concerning how the entire process ought to be managed (a secondary good) in order to produce functional ships (primary good)? The stereotype of a genius programmer may evoke the image of a petulant anti-social nerd; but does such ‘autistic’ expertise correspond to what Plato and Zagzebski conceive of as *mastery* of a *techne*? Is it possible that, in their understanding, the mastery of the *techne* of computer programming should enable social and humane understanding concerning what is organisationally and socially optimal in order to get a product from its conceptual stage all the way to satisfied users? If we accept the latter suggestion, the master of the particular *techne* of computer programming would perhaps not be the stereotypical nerd-genius, but rather someone like Steve Jobs, i.e. someone with a partial albeit substantial grasp of what structures human behaviour.

Zagzebski indeed appears to have the unfashionable generalist in mind, as she carries on commenting on other academic fields:

Similarly, one does not have *episteme* of some feature of human psychology without the ability to explain how that feature fits into the larger framework of human psychology, and that requires having mastered the *techne* of the psychologist. Assuming that epistemology is also a *techne*, it follows that one does not have *episteme* of some object of epistemology, such as having *episteme* of what knowledge is, without the ability to explain how knowledge fits the other objects of study in the field, and one cannot do that without having mastered the skills of the epistemologist.\(^{75}\)

An interesting question is whether Zagzebski’s qualifications, if broadly interpreted, do not, in our age of specialisation, disqualify most professional academics from mastery? Academics are trained to narrow down areas of interest to compartmentalised spheres that neatly fit into rational categories that can then be methodologically examined in order to answer specific questions. This by itself does not necessarily preclude anyone from endeavouring to form wide general perspectives. But academics – and not only academics! – are encouraged to become really good at something, to specialise in order to make a name for themselves as experts; inter-disciplinary approaches are not encouraged. The question is to what degree ‘understanding’, as I now interpret Zagzebski’s understanding of the word, is at all possible in a culture that favours specialisation, especially within the field of social science.

Is it possible at all to achieve good understanding by mastering a supposed *techne* such as economics, in which the human being is only studied as economic creature? Or a *techne* such as academic history, in which aspects that may be fundamental to human behaviour might be completely ignored by the researcher? Does a historian unconcerned with any anthropological notion concerning envy, ambition and rivalry yet highly specialised in the French Revolution really understand the forces that structured the events of the French Revolution? I am sure such a historian will form some kind of understanding, perhaps even a Marxist one, but is it likely to be a good understanding?

On the one hand, Zagzebski’s proposal seems straightforward enough: ‘One gains understanding by *knowing how* to do something well, and this makes one a reliable person to consult in matters pertaining to the skill in question.’\(^{76}\) If I need to put up some shelves, the advice of a carpenter might be welcome; yet I wouldn’t necessarily turn to my carpenter for dating advice. Does this speak against the notion that the mastery of the *techne*


of carpentry rests on a foundation of ‘good’ that is common to the mastery of other technai? Not, in my view, necessarily, because Zagzebski’s reasoning is somewhat more sophisticated:

This way of looking at understanding makes it unlikely that understanding is achieved by a single mode of reasoning, but it involves more complex processes, including, perhaps, processes that are noncognitive. This leads to the second idea, which is that understanding is not directed toward a discrete object, but involves seeing the relation of parts to other parts and perhaps even the relation of part to a whole. It follows that the object of understanding is not a discrete proposition. One’s mental representation of what one understands is likely to include such things as maps, graphs, diagrams, and three-dimensional models in addition to, or even in place of, the acceptance of a series of propositions.\(^77\)

My carpenter cannot perhaps, based on his or her having mastered the techne of carpentry, be expected to give me sound dating advice; yet we may expect him or her to understand more than mere pieces of information that can be listed in a manual; we may, for instance, expect the master carpenter to understand how to school human beings into becoming good carpenters. And if we conceive of the master carpenter not as a manually gifted but intellectually limited character with a hammer and a nail (a decent craftsman), but as the manager of a renaissance workshop (da Vinci comes to mind), we may expect a good deal more. By dint of its being human activity, the techne of carpentry might overlap with other technai, thus forming mutual spheres of interest including items of relevance to many and perhaps even all technai. The master carpenter – even the da Vinci kind – cannot reasonably be expected to necessarily give the absolute best dating advice; but it has, I think, at least become much less certain that the two areas of interest are utterly unconnected.

Understanding, then, ‘is acquired through mastering a techne; its object is not a discrete proposition but involves the grasp of part/whole relations…’\(^78\) An important additional feature of understanding is, according to Zagzebski, that it to some extent ‘involves representing the world non-propositionally’, because:

\[
\text{it is very unlikely that propositional structure exhausts the structure of reality, and it is even unlikely that propositional structure exhausts the structure of what is intelligible to us.}
\]

\[
\text{I propose that understanding is the state of comprehension of nonpropositional structures of reality. In this sense of understanding, we can understand such things as an automobile engine, a piece of music, […] or reality itself – this last being the object of the science of metaphysics. There is no reason to think that any of these things has an exclusively propositional structure, if indeed it has a propositional structure at all. I am not denying the}
\]

possibility that all of reality can be represented propositionally, but I am denying that the proposition is the only form in which reality can be made intelligible to the human mind.\textsuperscript{79} Does this make sense? Whether or not all understanding can be represented propositionally or not, propositional representations do not exhaust all possible ways in which human beings can reach understanding; practical understanding is a good example – the episteme based on the mastery of the \textit{techne} of carpentry can no doubt theoretically be represented propositionally, almost in every minute detail, but that is not necessarily how the carpenter understands; indeed, the propositional representation of every technical detail comprehended within the \textit{techne} of carpentry is liable to be incomprehensible to most people, including most carpenters, whose understandings are perhaps more likely to be the fruit of their practicing an art than of their judicious studying of propositional representations. Can all musical understanding of a maestro conductor be represented propositionally? Perhaps, but who would be able to interpret it? It would be plausible, within this line of reasoning, to suggest that mastery of the \textit{techne} of music cannot be achieved by individually learning to play one instrument, no matter to what degree of perfection; understanding of how sound is produced and interact with other sound that is produced by other persons might be required; understanding of how certain productions affect the listener might also be required; indeed, it is likely, following this line of reasoning, that the mastery of the \textit{techne} of any art would require a good deal of accurate anthropological understanding.

I accept as plausible the proposition that the ‘proposition’ is not the only form in which reality can be made intelligible to the human mind. But where does this leave us? How is it relevant to my inquiry?

Zagzebski invites us to consider the understanding we get from theories. Even when attempts to render something understandable is unsuccessful, nobody, so Zagzebski claims, rejects the point of the attempt.\textsuperscript{80} We could add that the likelihood of a theory being rejected is less as long as no new theory that explains things better is in sight. Theories, of course, are simplifications; they do not purport to represent the entire truthful state of things, but to explain certain aspects of certain phenomena or problems. Zagzebski points out that understanding – and, we may now add, theories – ‘differs from knowledge as it is normally understood.’\textsuperscript{81} This is because she has in mind a classical definition of knowledge that implies

that that which is known must be justified, believed and true. Yet how can one ever ascertain final certainty that something is true?

Understanding, as opposed to knowledge defined according to the classical definition, does not need to be true. Fair enough. Yet it is regrettable, I think, that Zagzebski does not pursue the potentially fruitful analogy with theory. I shall attempt to do so presently. Like a theory, a particular understanding proposes to correspond to an actual state of affairs; like a theory, a particular understanding can give rise to more or less contradictions. I should like to propose the following criterion of evaluation: the more an understanding engenders contradictions, the weaker the understanding is experienced to be. Suppose we accept a scapegoating Marxist understanding of the events of the French Revolution, and go on to apply this particular understanding to other contemporary events. If such an application would contribute to the end of human suffering and bring about the communist utopia predicted by Marxist theory, then this would corroborate the theory (and implicitly the more general understanding behind the theory) in providing evidence that the theory has accurate grasp of reality; if, on the other hand, such application would only exacerbate conflict and generate more human suffering, then this experience would enliven the options of alternative theories – theories that should preferably be based on more accurate understandings of reality. Understandings represent simplifications of how reality functions; theories, though usually more precise than understandings, are nonetheless simplifications of understandings. Understanding is more general and less specific than theory; yet both attempt to grasp how reality functions. There is no reason to doubt that both understanding and theory can be more or less successful in such attempts.

Surely ‘understanding’ and ‘theory’ so conceived do not meet the demands of knowledge according to the classical definition, but they appear to demonstrate similarities to Popper’s deductive logic, according to which we can never reach certainty that affirmative theories are true and accurate; we can, on the other hand, discover that they are not true or accurate, through falsification. Knowledge in this sense is hypothetical. In this sense even ‘laws’ of nature can only ever be ‘known’ hypothetically; anomalies and contradictions that exist within theories describing reality become arguments for rejecting a theory when a new theory arises that better describes phenomena. Zagzebski, interestingly enough, recognises that truth ‘can actually be an impediment to understanding…’

83 Setup (ed.), Zagzebski: Knowledge, Truth, and Duty, p. 244.
(and theories) presupposes simplification of reality: if we obsess with details the coherence of our understandings (and theories) will be undermined, because the absolute truthful state of phenomena is too complex to correspond exactly to our simplifications. Yet sometimes, it stands to reason, it is reasonable to abandon an understanding on account of factual evidence – when better alternatives are available! ‘Understandings’ and ‘theories’, in the sense that Zagzebski uses the terms, do not meet Popper’s strict scientific criteria of falsification; yet understandings and theories, in so far as they purport to explain phenomena, are no doubt still open to some kind of process of falsification and corroboration – in experience. It is interesting, I think, that Zagzebski does not consider these patterns. Whereas Popper’s normative directives may or may not be ignored to a large extent in scientific practice – would it not be amazing if we were to discover that ‘something’ structures a largely unacknowledged evolution of human understanding and that this ‘something’ does in fact correspond to Popper’s logic of scientific discovery? If we were to accept this line of reasoning, would it be too much of a stretch to suggest that even understandings can be more or less truthful – truthful to the extent that assumptions and inferences that constitute a particular understanding correspond to how things really are?

I am far from certain that Zagzebski would sympathise with such a view. How are we to interpret the following:

understanding does not always build on a base of knowledge. It may be achieved in more than one way about the same portion of reality. More than one alternative theory may give understanding of the same subject matter. This makes sense if we think of a theory as a representation of reality, where alternative representations can be better or worse, more or less accurate. But more than one may be equally good, equally accurate. This form of understanding does not presuppose knowledge or even true belief, and if we assume that two competing representations of the same part of reality cannot both constitute knowledge, it cannot be a form of knowledge.84

The suggestion that several theories may be ‘equally good, equally accurate’ does perhaps not rhyme well with how Popper is generally understood; and yet, we are indeed discussing ‘understanding’ here, and not theories within the realm of hard science. Perhaps we need to make allowances in the realm of understanding according to the following: 1) given what we know at the present, there is no way of telling whether understanding/theory A is preferable to understanding/theory B; yet 2) things may be revealed to us – the full meaning of new or old

---

84 Setup (ed.), Zagzebski: Knowledge, Truth, and Duty, p. 244.
evidence, of new or old perspectives, etcetera – that will falsify A and render B more preferable.

How does one get a clue as to whether or not a particular understanding is accurate or not? Zagzebski recognises that ‘[s]kepticism about understanding is as real as scepticism about truth. […] we cannot tell for sure whether we have attained it even after we think we have done so.’ And yet ‘unlike truth scepticism, understanding skepticism has never had a significant hold on the philosophical imagination. That is because the test for success is largely within the practice, the techne, itself.’ This seems straightforward enough: It is reasonable to assume that a shipbuilder who constructs ships that immediately scuttles lack understanding of the techne of shipbuilding. Does this mean that ‘understanding’ is to be measured by a criterion of success? Zagzebski says:

Reliably carrying out the goals of a techne can be verified within the techne. One’s understanding of an art work can be proven by successfully giving that understanding to others by teaching it in an art history class, and success in teaching is defined within the practice of teaching. Success in problem solving is proven by the workability of the solution produced. Again, success is defined within the confines of the techne that gives rise to the problem to be solved.

The success of ‘problem solving’ is proven by ‘workability’ within the confines of ‘the techne that gives rise to the problem to be solved’: this does not sound like Popper at all, but rather reminds of Kuhn’s understanding of normal science as paradigmatic puzzle solving traditions. Yet, what to me seems to be most interesting if we are to discuss a progression of understanding is the logic, and whether processes have more in common with Popper’s or Kuhn’s understanding of scientific practice does not ultimately seem to matter: the logic appears to be the same. If a particular understanding is abandoned because, to use Kuhn’s terminology, it has ceased to support a puzzle solving tradition, then, assuming that there is ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ that we can approach and that change in human understanding is not characterised by mere arbitrariness, then should we not ask why the understanding is experienced as having ceased to support a puzzle solving tradition? Can it not be because a particular understanding begins to be perceived not as corroborated, but falsified by human experience? I think it might.

---

How are we to achieve understanding? Zagzebski never gives any clear definition of understanding, but suggests that:

a definition can be generated by looking at those intellectual virtues that aim not at truth, but at understanding. [...] I suspect that understanding arises from special and unanalyzed, even unrecognized, virtues. It follows from what I have said that we educate people in these virtues when we teach them a techne, but what we do, exactly, is very hard to pinpoint. I think there is a form of teaching that can produce these virtues so they are not simply natural talents – but even their names are elusive.89

The nature of understanding should, according to Zagzebski, ultimately be examined within the field, or techne, of epistemology.90 Zagzebski also seems to suggest that the ultimate end for this particular techne may be related to wisdom:

[i]f Plato is also right that the ultimate object of a techne is some good and all the forms of good are related, we can deepen our understanding of understanding and other epistemic goods by inquiry into the good itself. With luck, that might give us a glimpse of what wisdom is.91

Perhaps. I shall, in the final discussion of this paper, suggest that life itself, with a view toward an ultimate end, may be conceived as a sort of ultimate techne.

Conclusion

Zagzebski has presented as plausible the view that mastery of any techne, no matter which one, enables understanding of a common ‘good’. She does not conclusively specify what this common ‘good’ might be. I have examined the notion that this ‘good’ might consist of some form of anthropological insight and found it plausible. Whether or not we accept it as plausible should, however, depend on how we delimit a particular techne: I believe I have shown that the more narrowly we conceive of a techne, the less plausible such a view is; and the more broadly we conceive of a techne, the more plausible such a view is. Of course, if we conceive of it too broadly, the risk is that the only ones able to achieve mastery of any techne are rare and extremely gifted individuals like Leonardo da Vinci.

This is a good place to mention the second insight we can learn from Zagzebiski: Understanding is not directed toward a discrete object. A techne might be understood as more or less vast and complex, but understanding pertains to the relations between all parts within the techne and at the frontiers of other technai. Understanding is

social rather than atomistic. The broader our conception of a techne is, the less the concept of techne is likely to fit within conventional categories (such as carpentry); but even if our conception is narrow, mastery of a techne might still require anthropological grasp and enable understanding, within frameworks of means-to-ends, that amounts to a sort of general human wisdom. Zagzebski’s reasoning might suggest that life itself can be conceived as a techne.

Zagzebski’s contention that understanding does not exclusively arise as a result of treatment of propositional factors is important. If we accept such a notion, this will inevitably make understanding a somewhat elusive concept. Particular understandings will be virtually impossible to neatly and exhaustively conceptualise propositionally; or, if, in theory, exhaustively conceptualised, probably impossible for any living human being to understand. Yet, it does not follow that it becomes impossible to explain the ‘concept of understanding’, or to form general ideas of particular understandings. Conceptualisations of particular understandings – theories – will necessarily be simplifications. I accept this notion as entirely plausible.

Elaborating on Zagzebski’s ideas, I suggested that mastery of a techne might require, or enable, a good deal of accurate anthropological understanding. Interpreting Zagzebski with a popperian bias I ventured to suggest that Popper’s logic of scientific discovery is similar in structure to a hypothetical evolutionary logic of understanding. Whether Zagzebski would approve or not, I am tempted to consider the following hypothesis: If and when one understanding is increasingly found wanting (because of the many contradictions arising from it), subjects will be increasingly open to test new waters if and when a new and more promising understanding arises. An old understanding experienced as falsified might then give way to a new and better one.

The simple answer to the first part of my question suggested by Zagzebski is that new understandings are rendered possible, somehow, by activities that are at least partially non-cognitive; thus some non-cognitive factors might engender new cognitive states, i.e. new understandings. The nature of such understandings is the main interest of Zagzebski’s article. The question concerning how we can know that new understandings are better than the ones that preceded them would, in Zagzebski’s framework, get a simple answer based on a practical truth criterion: the new ones work better than the old ones. Presumably, the only persons who in her view should be able to know such a thing would be masters of one or several technai.

Zagzebski’s means-to-ends framework allows for elegant and intelligible explanations. But is it entirely satisfactory? Is ‘better’ simply to be understood as a measure
of how well something works? The next section will suggest that ‘workability’ often tends to be tied to misunderstandings, that ‘truth’ is the criterion for a new kind of understanding, and that ‘truth’ might in fact be detrimental to ‘workability’. In fact, it may turn out that Alison’s framework may be more germane than Zagzebski’s to the falsification-pattern discussed in this section.

**Alison**

Zagzebski’s understanding of ‘understanding’ is broader and perhaps somewhat different to the one most germane to my question. Alison’s understanding of ‘understanding’ would (he does not use the word ‘understanding’) perhaps be narrower than the one germane to my question. In this section, I shall first examine mimetic theory, as understood by Alison. This will give us an idea how certain understandings might be formed ‘naturally’ based on patterns of desire. Mimetic theory suggests that understandings so formed are based on false assumptions. *True* understandings about such deluded understandings are difficult to come by; yet insights, based on evidence, may, according to Alison’s terminology, trigger *subversion from within* of old understanding, preparing the way for new and more truthful understanding. Second, I will comment on one of Alison’s examples of this subversive process, the *subversion from within of judgement*.

**Mimetic Theory**

Alison, in his representation of mimetic theory, begins by contrasting the psychological approach (which is individual and conceives of problems as ‘in there’) with the sociological approach (which conceives of problems as ‘out there’). He invites us to consider the importance either point of view has for how we conceive of theology:

consider the way in which the discourse about sin used to be confined to the world of the
“personal,” and then how there was an attempt to rescue it from that sphere so as to emphasize it as something “structural,” an attempt which, for reasons that may become clearer as we progress, has not yielded the fruit that was hoped for.\(^{92}\)

Mimetic theory, on the other hand, ‘proposes a way of understanding humans which is simultaneously personal and social, since it treats the person as absolutely dependent on the other, both social and personal, who is previous to it.’\(^{93}\)

\(^{92}\) Alison, James: *Raising Abel*, p. 18.

\(^{93}\) Alison, James: *Raising Abel*, p. 18.
There is one fundamental question that mimetic theory proposes to answer: How do we desire? The hypothesis is that we desire in imitation of someone. ‘For something to have value or interest for me,’ Alison writes, ‘someone, another, has to have given it that value or interest.’

Alison then carries on to show how this process begins in infancy, where ‘the capacity to repeat sounds’ leads to ‘the formation of memory, and thence to language, since there is no language without memory.’ Thus ‘the very possibility of our being conscious creatures at all is owed to the mechanism of imitation.’

I, then, according to Alison, desire in imitation of my perception of someone else’s desire. Alison uses the term ‘gravitational pull’ as a characteristic of mimetic desire. The mimetic mechanism is not ultimately to be understood as necessarily prompting persons to imitate what other persons do (in fact, it seems human beings often make efforts not to do what others do, so as to appear original) or even of imitating desires in relation to desirables; in the end we are motivated by a desire to be. Alison goes on to explain how the child is absolutely dependent on the persons who surround it in order to receive its sense of being:

This means to say that our desires are acquired in imitation of the desires of others, that the “I” who is called into being depends entirely on the others who surround him or her. The “I” which nurtures the mirage of its own originality, blind to its dependence, is perhaps the one who is most dependent on the desires of others, but in hidden and compulsive ways.

Two problems are understood to be associated to this state of affairs. First, nobody wants to admit to either him- or herself or others the he or she imitates anybody; human beings, especially in our individualist culture, generally yearn to be seen as original. This predisposes us to conflicts:

if I recognize my absolute dependence on the other for my desire, in both the personal and the social sphere, then I am at peace with the other. However, the moment I seek to affirm that my desire is previous and original, then I am in a conflictual relationship with the other.

Alison goes on to give a humorous example of his buying the same kind of jeans as a friend Tom, upon which he is accused of imitating Tom. Alison declares:

Now, if I were that extraordinarily rare and sane thing, a humble and simple person, I’d reply: “Yes, you’re right. I like Tom, and I’d like to be more like him.” However, it’s more probable that 99 percent of us would reply: “You’re crazy; no way am I imitating him. I saw these jeans in the shop, or on TV, before he even suspected their existence. I just didn’t
have the money at the time.” So I affirm that my desire was previous and original, and I deny my real dependence on the other. This is something absolutely simple, and is well understood by the world of advertising, which rarely seeks to leave you with a simple description of a product.

If this were all there was too it, things would perhaps not be so problematic, but what if, Alison asks, it is not Tom’s jeans he desires, but Tom’s girlfriend? This brings us to the second and potentially more dangerous problem, which has to do with migration of desire.

As persons grow and mature, they will usually have had time to conquer many or at least a few desirables, yet those conquests will have left them unfulfilled, or else they would not carry on to continually invent new treasures at the end of an ever receding rainbow; but this, mimetic theory suggests, is what we do. Our desires do not settle on one set of desirables and remain there for the rest of our lives. As desirables are acquired, their prestige diminishes and the deluded fancies concerning their perceived value are revealed as illusion; but instead of giving up, our desires migrate to ever more prestigious and scarce objects. Tastes will be acquired: Maserati for the Wall Street financier, a seemingly carefree yet paradoxically original slobboness for the punk rocker, knowledgeable cleverness for the wannabe professor, individual freedom for the libertarian, social justice for the Marxist, and so on. In the end our desire will tend to direct itself toward objects that can only be obtained by a very small minority, or toward even more abstract ends that cannot be obtained at all.

Girard, in his seminal work on the subject, suggests that in the end, the apparent diversity notwithstanding, there is only one metaphysical desire: the desire to escape the unbearable confines of human existence and become another. The model for this ‘other’ is generally one that is perceived to be on top of things, who seemingly glides through life smoothly, a master of the domain, who is perceived to be appreciated, loved and adored by his or her peers; individual experience will engender different groups of reference and thus give this character various forms – a successful financier, punk rocker or professor, a libertarian trixter or a Marxist agitator. In reality, of course, our perception might be grossly mistaken.

If desire tends to migrate toward scarce objects in which not everybody can participate, this intensifies the risk for conflict; and as conflict intensifies the scarce and indivisible object – like Tom’s girlfriend – increases in prestige. Should anyone, however, renounce the claim to the desirable, so Alison suggests, the desirable will lose prestige,

---

99 Alison, James: Raising Abel, p. 19.
100 Girard: Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque, p. 101-113 (Chapter 3).
because ‘we all desire through the eyes of another.’\textsuperscript{101} The more scarce and prestigious the desirable objects, the more we tend to relate to our peers as to obstacles, as potential or actual enemies who stand in our way and prevent us from partaking in perceived salvation. The scenario with Tom includes the perhaps most paradoxical element of this process: Tom has become both model and obstacle. Tom and his friend desire the same thing. As long as it is the same style of clothes or the same genre of music it is fine – they can both participate and even bond together; but once the object has become exclusive and indivisible – there must be a winner and a loser. Thus their relation is ambiguous.

If this were accurate, then it would seem that human beings have no choice but to perpetually live on the verge of conflict. And this is exactly what mimetic theory suggests. But does this correspond to human experience? Do we not frequently manage to live peacefully with each other? If desire were to migrate as sketched above, the logical outcome should be a perpetual Hobbesian war of all against all, should it not? The second question mimetic theory attempts to answer is the following: Why does perpetual battle to the last blood drop not always become the case?\textsuperscript{102}

According to mimetic theory, there is one peace-making mechanism: the exclusion, or scapegoating. Alison demonstrates by a teacher-pupil relationship in which the pupil begins to rival the teacher for mastery. Teacher and pupil have become rivals. They even begin to hate each other. Yet, suddenly they both get the insight that it is the visiting professor from Venezuela that is to blame, and they unite in their exclusion of what to them, correctly or falsely, appears to be the instigator of all troubles.\textsuperscript{103} Alison declares:

\begin{quote}
there we have mimetic theory. It says that all human culture and society are like that, that all humans desire in this way, and that the way by which we produce peace is by the expulsion of someone held to be responsible for our conflicts. That is to say we are all, always and everywhere, immensely violent creatures, and the only way which we have to control this violence is the search for collective unanimity against a victim. We can imagine a founding murder of this type, of the sort that can be detected in much human mythology, and so observe the process in its entirety. A group enters into conflict and there is a threat of chaos. Mysteriously there occurs a spontaneous movement which unites everybody against someone who is easy to victimize (that is, who can’t take vengeance). That person is killed, and immediately peace is restored. The group cannot perceive that it is its own
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{101} Alison, James: Raising Abel, p. 20.
\textsuperscript{102} A detailed answer to this question is demonstrated by Girard in La Violence et le Sacré (transl.: Violence and the Sacred), Éditions Grasset et Fasquelle, 1972, namely that human beings have learned, by complex and conflictual processes centred on the scapegoat mechanism, not to let their desire roam freely, i.e. to control it and, for the sake of peaceful living, keep it off certain objects.
\textsuperscript{103} Alison, James: Raising Abel, p. 20-21.
unanimous violence which has produced the peace, because that would be to recognize the
innocence of the victim, and the chance, random nature of its selection.\footnote{Alison, James: *Raising Abel*, p. 21-22.}
All culture, the theory suggests, is a product of this process: the victim is divinised and rituals
and, if need be, new instances of sacrifice are instituted in order to maintain the peace; and
prohibitions are instituted in order to prevent desires to be lured by objects that have been
understood to be at the origin of conflict. This cultural solution lays the foundation of a
relatively stable order; but it is not absolutely stable, and when social crisis erupts anew and
the order brakes down there is only one way to unite and make peace – against an other.

The implication of this is not only that our culture is based on a lie (a common
ideological assumption), but that all our solutions to problems of social disturbance within
and arising from our culture (and by ‘our solutions’ Alison would mean what *we* who
conceive of *ourselves* as intelligent, moral and righteous people propose as solutions)\footnote{The assumption being that this ‘*we*’ is anthropological, i.e. that *all* humans tend to consider themselves to be
on the good side (or at the very least to have a righteous reason for their views or causes of action) and their
opponents to be on the bad side.} tend to be structured according to the same deluded conception of reality: What is needed,
regardless of our particular ideology, to right all wrongs is a good and thorough purge.

If we are inherently immensely violent creatures, and if a large chunk of our
understandings are based on misconceptions arising from a culture founded on murder, then
what hope is there? Alison answers that:

There is, of course, only one way by which it can come to be perceived that an entire
culture is founded on a lie that is related to a murder. That is when someone with an
entirely different perception, someone whose perception is not formed by that lie, comes to
the group, and points this out to them. In the case of our human history there has only been
one perception which has genuinely flowed against the current of all the other stories and
myths, and that is the Jewish story, which consists in the long, slow discovery of the
innocence of the victim.\footnote{Alison, James: *Raising Abel*, p. 22.}

To illustrate, Allison compares the myth of Romulus and Remus and the founding of Rome,
with the story of Cain and Abel and the foundation of human culture, availing himself of a
comparative method frequently used by Girard: the comparison of Judeo-Christian stories to
non-Jewish mythology. The thesis defended by such comparisons is that the Judeo-Christian
story goes against the flow, or against intuition, in exonerating the victim from the charges
brought against him or her. Mythology would have God on the side of Cain, the founder of
culture, and ascribe all sorts of crimes to his victim, Abel. Alison is careful to note that,
although these particular biblical stories share an identical structure with mythological stories there is:

  a difference of interpretation, and it is all the difference in the world. God says to Cain:
  “Where is your brother? His blood cries out to me from the soil.” That means that the murder is nothing more than that: a sordid crime, impossible to justify; and God is on the side of the victim and doesn’t help to mystify Cain’s self-deception.¹⁰⁷

Alison brings up the stories of Joseph, Job and the Suffering Servant as biblical examples of a cultural counter-story that undermines previous understanding; this counter-story reaches its climax in the New Testament, in which the same old story is told once again:

  a time of crisis, an attempt to save the situation by producing the unanimous expulsion of a victim, and then the semi-legalized lynching of the victim. The structure is identical to that of the very many myths and stories of foundation which we could examine. There is one single difference: exactly the same story is being told from the inverse perspective. It is the story from the perspective of the victim. The victim is proclaimed innocent. We are told that it was envy that led to his death. […] His lynch-death would not produce a new peace and social order as his executioners had hoped, with their magnificent motto: It is expedient for us that one man should die for the people and that the whole nation perish not. (John 11:50)¹⁰⁸

Thus, Alison concludes, ‘[t]he murderous lie is exposed in its entirety.’¹⁰⁹

Alison summarises this process in three steps: First comes the mimetic triangular desire, which generates conflict; then comes the scapegoat mechanism, by which conflict is resolved by means of expulsion. The third and final step is represented by the counter-story and is to be understood as:

  the subversion from within of this universal mechanism by the slow irruption within human history of an “Other” of a different sort than the violent “other” which normally forms our desire, culminating in the visible acting out, the mise-en-scène of what that “Other” really is by a man who goes to his death so as to un-cover the founding lie.¹¹⁰

This counter-story, then, undermines certain previous understandings based on inaccurate grasp of evidence; it undermines those understandings and prepares the way for new understandings, understandings that concern the old understandings and that imply that the old understandings are not true or accurate.

My question concerns how new understandings come about and how one can – if one can – know that they are better than those that preceded them. This framework

¹⁰⁷ Alison, James: Raising Abel, p. 23.
¹⁰⁸ Alison, James: Raising Abel, p. 23.
¹⁰⁹ Alison, James: Raising Abel, p. 23.
¹¹⁰ Alison, James: Raising Abel, p. 24.
attempts to give an answer to both. The answer to the first question is not that difficult to grasp. But what about the second? I refer back to the scenarios in my introduction (see page 4), especially those involving victims: the reformed bully and the reformed slave-owning society. Let us consider those understandings not morally or ethically, but only with respect to how they relate to an actual state of affairs, that is reality or truth. It is by no means clear that the understandings of the reformed bully or the reformed slave-owners can be said to be better than the understandings that preceded them. But notice that their understandings presuppose a means-to-ends framework: the end has something to do with how to serve one’s self-interest. If, within this framework, we want to argue that their understandings are not better than the ones that preceded them, then do we not have to make the case that human self-interest is served by bullying and slavery, or at least that human self-interest is not harmed by bullying and slavery? But is this so absurd? Might such a claim not even be considered perfectly reasonable? Alison indeed suggests that relative stability and peace is created by the expulsion mechanism, and this might well be an argument against the thesis that the reformed understandings are better than the ones that preceded them. But this would be a bad argument, for Alison holds that peace thus formed is possible only as long as the persecutors are convinced that they are on the side of justice; as soon as that delusion is dispelled, the benefits of expulsion will tend to evaporate, and there will be no peace.

Alison invites us to consider things that seem natural to us, but that might not be so natural and that might in fact be culturally determined:

For example, when we read an account of a great disaster, we don’t ask, “Who is responsible?” but “What happened?,” expecting a scientific answer rather than that some victim be sacrificed to placate the disaster. This attitude, the search for causes other than those that can be remedied by a little expulsion, a little lynching, seems obvious to us. However, we’re unique in this, even in our wars, military and economic, when we think that victims have rights. We are not very effective when it comes to making their rights worth something, but even the less sensitive among us would be shocked by life in a society like that of ancient Rome where the defeated would be killed or enslaved without further ado. They had no rights: that’s what “being defeated” meant.111 Can our understandings concerning peace and human worth be said to be better than the understandings on which the society of Rome was based? I think something should be beginning to dawn on us as we consider these examples: the understandings we are discussing are not necessarily primarily concerned with morale or ethics – they are better understood as

111 Alison, James: *Raising Abel*, p. 25.
means-to-ends, where the end is some kind of stable peace or agreeable state of affairs which must be perceived as reasonably just. Understandings of the kind discussed, understood as means to such an end, function fine as long as they are perceived as just; when old perceptions are undermined and they begin to be perceived as unjust, they cease to function.

_Falsification and replacement of understanding – the subversion from within_

The irruption of something entirely different has, according to Alison’s reasoning, triggered a series of slow subversions. That which, in his view, is being subverted is old understanding, based on expulsion. Alison gives several examples of how subversion from within may proceed, both within the realm of the individual and the cultural. What all examples have in common is that something that is radically different, which we may construe as pieces of evidence, is understood as trigger of the subversive effect. I choose to comment on Alison’s demonstration of subversion from within of judgement, because it exemplifies both subversion of a cultural understanding and the subversive effect this may have on actual human behaviour, and it does so, at least in my opinion, to a somewhat astonishing theological effect.

Alison posits that much biblical material gives expression to an apocalyptic imagination which supposes that God will, at the end of time, judge and mete out reward and punishment. Such imagination tends to be germane to binary understandings that conceive me/us (the righteous ones) as waiting for a promised and merited reward, and them (those who for whatever reason have scandalized us and are therefore deemed unrighteous) as waiting for their deserved punishment. What Alison attempts to demonstrate in chapter seven is how, surreptitiously, a criterion of judgement is introduced into a biblical narrative, subverting the apocalyptical imagination (which functions as foundation for a particular kind of understanding) and preparing the way for eschatological imagination (which may serve as foundation for a new understanding). I will comment on his treatment of ‘meditations on judgement’ in the Gospel of John.

The apocalyptic imagination prompts a visualisation of a future judgement, meted out by almighty God in power and glory. Alison invites us to consider the following biblical verses:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not judged; but he that believeth not is judged already, because he has not believed in the*
name of the only begotten Son of God. The judgment consists in this: that light is come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.\footnote{112}{Alison, James: \textit{Raising Abel}, p. 139. Quoting from John 3:16-21.} 

The one who does not believe is ‘judged already’ because he or she has ‘not believed in the only begotten Son of God’, and the judgement has something to do with the fact that ‘light is come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light’. Does not this sound awfully intolerant, that we are already judged, for reasons that do not seem altogether clear? Have we no chance to modify our behaviour? But Alison bids us to pay attention to a pervasive theme in the Gospel of John, namely that the judgement is already realised, and that God does not want to judge anybody – both statements seem contradictory in relation to one another, and they each appear to contradict the apocalyptic imagination as described above. Alison’s interpretation of the passage is subtle: Since light has come into the world (a new understanding) those who truly believe in the light have left the world that judges (according to the old understanding):

Such people will not be judged, for they have left the world which judges, condemns, and casts out, in order to begin to live according to God who neither judges, nor condemns, nor casts out. Those, however, who do not accept the light, who do not want their complicity in the order of death to stand revealed, preferring the shelter of the old and murderous lie, such are indeed judged, for they have remained entirely within the system which judges, condemns, and casts out. For people like this, the light is a threat to be detested, as the police battalion detests the officer who gives witness that all were involved in conspiring to fabricate evidence against a supposed delinquent, […] … Such dissidents must go.\footnote{113}{Alison, James: \textit{Raising Abel}, p. 139.}  

Is this convincing? Are we judged because we choose to remain within a system that judges? Can we just choose to walk out and leave that system, and then, suddenly, we will not be judged, even though we, somehow, have already been judged? According to Alison, the key to understanding John’s reasoning concerning judgement is to be found in the following passages of the Gospel:

For as the Father raiseth up the dead and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will. For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgement unto the Son: that all men should honor the Son, even as they honor the Father… Verily, verily I say unto you, he that heareth my word and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come unto judgement, but is passed from death unto life… For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself; and hath given him
authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man… I can of my own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not my own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me.114

Alison invites us to consider the contradictions in these statements:

On the one hand it says that the Father judges nobody, but the Son does; then it seems that the Son exercises this judgement (and let us remember that the Father did not send him to judge the world), but not according to his own criteria, but according to what he hears from the Father (who, let us remember, judges no one). All this is part of the process of bathing the language of judgement in irony or, said in other words, the process of the subversion from within of the concept of judgement. The Father, in fact, does not judge, but the Son, absolute witness to the life and effervescence of the Father, comes to be Judge in the measure in which he obeys his Father. What he does in obeying his Father is to reveal the murderous lie of the world, and it is as victim of that murderous lie that he becomes the Judge. That is, Jesus did not come to judge, but, insofar as people reject him, he, as the victim who reveals the dominion of death and is the criterion by which its mechanism is understood, comes to be its judge.115

Jesus, then, has given us a criterion according to which human beings will be, or rather are, judged. What has this biblical commentary to do with my question? How do new understandings come about, and how can we know that they are better than the ones that preceded them? In a somewhat mindboggling sequence Alison posits that this criterion of judgement has been amply demonstrated in history ever since the time of the Gospels. I have already quoted Alison’s suggestion that we would be shocked by the total absence of mercy shown to defeated enemies in the ancient world by the Romans. But ever since a certain understanding took root round the Mediterranean – that a man who was crucified like a loathsome criminal had risen from the dead and ascended into the sky – it appears, according to Alison, that it has become more and more difficult to judge people. Alison mentions several historic incidents – expulsion of Jews, witches and other liminal people – where judgment has been attempted: ‘We have an accused and a lynch mob; placed between them we have a judge and a jury who give legal cover to what the mob wants.’116 Alison then comments in somewhat more detail on the trial of Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer in the French army, who was found guilty in a rigged trial and was later sensationnally exonerated; he likens the case of Dreyfus to the contemporary case of Oscar Wilde who was found guilty of the crime of sodomy. Dreyfus was clearly innocent of his crimes; Wilde was perhaps guilty as

---

115 Alison, James: *Raising Abel*, p. 140-141.
116 Alison, James: *Raising Abel*, p. 141.
charged (he was a homosexual) for what was then considered to be the crime of sodomy: but, Alison declares, what both Dreyfus and Wilde have in common with Jews in European society, witches and other liminal people is that it is, finally, not the accused who have been judged; instead the judgement has fallen on those who expelled them. Though the actions against unjustly designated criminals or heretics are often all too effective, judgements against them no longer stick, because, given our new understanding of our persecuting nature, it:

will not be long before a journalist or historian draws the obvious conclusions: in what seemed to be a judgement of the society against an infractor, it was in fact the society which was being judged. In the long run the victim of that trial, being innocent, comes to be the criterion by which the hypocrisy, dirt, and mendacity of the society in question is judged. That is, the victim is judge as victim. By being the innocent victim, that person becomes the criterion, the principle of judgement, of the lynching society. The whole society of the era is under judgement for its blind participation in that lynching.¹¹⁷

Must not the understanding engendering such inquisitive search for truth and exoneration be a far cry from the understanding of the friends of Job (if bad things happen to Job, Job must have sinned and ought to admit his crime), the contemporaries of Jesus (a man who is executed like a common criminal cannot have been the Messiah) and the Romans referred to earlier (people who are defeated have no rights but deserve their slavery)? I believe it must. Has such understanding, as Alison suggests, been triggered by subversion from within of cultural notions and understandings? In order to answer this question we must resort to historical research: Were the kind of exonerating processes discussed above common in pre-Christian societies? To my knowledge they were not.

How can we know that such understandings are better than the ones that preceded them? Just what kind of understandings actually were common in various eras and geographical areas will no doubt always be open to debate; all we can do is to attempt to reconstruct historic mindsets. Yet, if we posit a tribe with a persecuting (what we might term superstitious) mindset, and understandings that correspond to such a mindset, who, slowly, begin to give up seeking remedies for unnatural weather phenomena and social disturbance in the identification and expulsion of culprits, and instead begin to seek remedies based on scientific explanations – can we plausibly deny that the new understandings enabling the latter state of affairs are better than the former? We may be able to do so, plausibly, if the criterion for what is ‘better’ is merely ‘functionality’ of means (action) to an end (social peace): then it might well be argued that a good old persecution is what is required for uniting

¹¹⁷ Alison, James: Raising Abel, p. 141-142.
the tribe. And yet, Alison would object, those kinds of remedies function fairly well as long as people in general believe or understand that such persecution is in fact righteous; the problem is that, because of subversion from within, such beliefs are gravely undermined, and thus the effect of the remedies will be counter productive: those who expel will be judged. One might still argue that the old understanding was better as means to the end of social peace before the new understanding intruded and subverted everything: yet, in that case I cannot see how one would not end up defending the practices of slavery and lynching.

Conclusion
According to this outlook, the germ of a counter story began to emerge long ago in Jewish tradition. The germ engendered more instances of this counter story, the evidence of which was first culturally recorded in oral tradition, then in scripture, thus prompting a subversion from within of Jewish cultural understanding. This evidence triggers subversion from within of both individual and social understanding, which in turn engenders more instances of the counter story.

In answer to my question concerning how new understandings come about, Alison replies that evidence triggers a subversion of old understanding and imposes new understanding. How can one know that the new understanding is better? It depends, of course, on the criteria by which one measures ‘better’. There are three important aspects to take into account in answering this question.

First, from an ethical point of view, it seems very difficult to deny that old understandings of the particular kind discussed in this section are not much worse than the ones that succeeded them. Ethics, however, is perhaps not that central to this paper.

Second, from the point of view of means to an end, once the true nature of old understandings has been exposed, the old understandings tend, according to Alison, to malfunction; thus, whether or not old understandings were good enough or even better than the ones succeeding them, from this point of view, once the counter story has begun to operate, they simply do not work anymore. ‘Workability’ is not irrelevant; but since ‘truth’ trumps by undermining ‘workability based on misunderstanding’, ‘truth’ and not ‘workability’ becomes the supreme criterion of evaluation.

Third, from an epistemological point of view, one could venture to suggest that old understandings simply have been falsified. Possibly, the new understandings can even be accepted as truthful, in the sense that they posit that old explanations are not true; either such claims are true, in which case the new understandings are to be understood as better in
reference to a criterion of truth, or they are not true, in which case the new understandings cannot be understood to be better in reference to a criterion of truth. In this respect, all appears to depend on the actual truth value of particular understandings, something concerning which we may never be able to claim absolute certainty.

We can understand this as a journey from ‘Understanding One’ (based on distorted self-knowledge and distorted worldview) to ‘Understanding Two (based on truer self-knowledge and truer worldview). But we can also understand this journey with a somewhat different nuance, as implying a slightly more modest claim: from ‘Understanding One’ (based on distorted self-knowledge and distorted worldview) to ‘Understanding Two’ (the experienced falsification of the claims generated from the previous understanding, namely that the claims concerning cause, effect and designation of guilt that the old understanding produce have been demonstrated, in human experience, to be generally false.) This last understanding is the one I find most promising; its claims for the present state of knowledge are relatively modest.

Toward an Evolutionary Model of Understanding

In this section, I shall first, based on the analyses of Wainwright, Zagzebski and Alison, formulate three hypotheses. Second, I shall attempt to test these hypotheses against a criterion of experience derived from the method of literary criticism. Third, I shall propose an explanatory model, based on the three hypotheses, as answer to my question.

Wainwright has alerted us to the potential importance of a ‘rightly disposed’ mind. A mind not rightly disposed will, so it is assumed, produce a distorted evaluation of evidence; to the extent that a mind is rightly disposed it will be able to grasp the full meaning of evidence. Furthermore, we may then expect that a mind not rightly disposed will tend to yield distorted understandings, whereas a mind rightly disposed will tend to yield new and better understandings. In the latter case, the understandings will be new because the assumption is that the mind is not rightly disposed from the beginning, but that it has the potential to become rightly disposed at the end of a process; the understandings will be better because of the assumption that the mind rightly disposed will be able to grasp things more as they are than is the mind not rightly disposed: thus new understandings will be in more accurate correspondence to reality than old understandings.

The crucial component borrowed from Wainwright will be ‘state of mind’. I will test, against a criterion of experience, whether it is reasonable to accept Wainwright’s idea that ‘state of mind’ could have a crucial impact on whether or not we grasp the full meaning.
of evidence. I am not here interested in scientific detachment, which is also a state of mind and which can definitely be beneficial in assessing certain kinds of evidence; I am interested in Wainwright’s contention that other, non-rational qualities could be decisive in the assessment of certain kinds of evidence.

Zagzebski has alerted us to the importance of mastery of a given domain as means to achieving a desired end. Mastery enables understanding of both the domain and the end produced. Though Zagzebski’s interest in ‘understanding’ as phenomenon is broader than the kind of understanding that pertains to my question, I believe we can learn much from her ideas. She alerted us to the similarity between understanding and theory, and I, probingly, attempted to fill in blanks in order to steer the reasoning towards a direction I deemed germane to my question. Summarising Zagzebski we get 1) a means-to-ends process, about which we can, through mastery, get understanding; our understanding can 2) be simplified and formalised in theories: I assume 1) that both understandings and theories attempt to explain certain given phenomena and that they are 2) accurate or truthful to the extent that their explanations correspond to things as they are, i.e. to objective reality. The assumption is not, of course, that we, by means of understanding and theory, can learn to absolutely know things as they truly are; the assumption is that we, by means of understanding and theory, can get closer to and improve our grasp of reality. I shall attempt to test the following hypothesis against a criterion of experience: We can, by means of understanding and theory, discard certain ideas and notions concerning reality as falsified by experience, and thereby improve our grasp of reality.

Zagzebski suspects that understanding arises from as yet unrecognised virtues. She believes that people are educated in these virtues when they are taught a techne. Yet she does not specify just what such virtues might be.118 The notion of mastery of a means-to-ends process suggests, however, that the virtues should be trainable skills: if this conjures up pictures of confident and over-gifted masters in all sorts of trades, we should perhaps attempt, as a counter point, to picture before us ascetics, saints and martyrs – men and women whose virtues might be no less trainable than those of a shipbuilder, yet perhaps are of a different order. I mention this as a caution that we do not jump to conclusions.

What Alison suggests is in fact that skills or virtues pertinent to the problem he is interested in are to a large extent formed by interaction with the environment. Evidence, the example of the radically different ‘other’, might trigger the mind to reassess old

---

understandings. The reassessment prepares the mind for new understanding, which necessarily implies the falsification of old understanding. The new understanding might then enable a rightly disposed mind to discern the full force of evidence. I will attempt to test, against a criterion of experience, the hypothesis that evidence may act as trigger, enabling subversion from within of old understanding.

I propose the following hypotheses:
1) Disposition of mind, in terms of extra-rational factors, matters for our ability to accurately grasp the full force of certain kinds of evidence.
2) We can, by means of understanding and theory, discard certain ideas and notions concerning reality as falsified by experience.
3) Evidence may act as a trigger, enabling subversion from within of old understanding.

I shall attempt to test these hypotheses against a criterion of experience.

Theoretical assumption of an “ultimate” end

Before we begin, there is something missing. I have discussed the means-to-ends framework. Zagzebski has suggested that the reliability in ‘carrying out the goals of a techne can be verified within the techne.’ Is it plausible also to consider the phenomenon of ‘understanding’ itself as means to an end? Understanding of shipbuilding would then be a significant means among other means to the end of building really good ships. What I want to suggest is that the reliability of human understanding might not always, in practice, ultimately be verified within the means-to-ends process of a particular techne. Primarily, they no doubt tend to be corroborated or falsified within the particular means-to-ends process to which they pertain. But in the examples we shall look at, it might be useful to consider that there might be an ultimate end toward which human beings strive, and that the extent to which this ultimate end is being met might have impact on whether or not we consider our understandings to be corroborated or falsified. I will borrow from Pascal the assumption that ‘[t]ous les homes recherchent d’être heureux.’ That is All human beings endeavour to be happy. A similar assumption might be formulated negatively: All human beings desire to escape suffering. I shall assume, with Pascal, that human beings, including literary characters realistically portrayed and interpreted, endeavour to be happy. On this view, life itself may be conceived as the ultimate techne.

---

120 Pascal: Penseés, p. 128 (fragment 138).
Evolution of State of Mind and Understanding in Literary Structure

Now, consider the following resentful statement by the ugly hunchback Gloster in Shakespeare’s play *King Richard III*:

Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature,
Deform’d, unfinish’d, sent before my time
Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
And that so lamely and unfashionable,
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them; –
Why I, in this weak piping time of peace,
Have no delight to pass away the time,
Unless to see my shadow in the sun,
And descant on mine own deformity:
And therefore, since I cannot be a lover,
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determined to prove a villain,
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.¹²¹

Gloster then, in a ruthless quest, goes on to manipulate and murder all who stand between him and his desired throne. Though he is characterised as an ugly hunchback, he does neither lack wits nor charms: all his resources, all his cunning, which is considerable, is employed with the intent of acquiring the desired goal.

In certain respects, the mindset of Gloster is similar to that of detachment. When Anne accuses him ‘Villain, thou know’st no law of God nor man: No beast so fierce but knows some touch of pity.’ Gloster retorts: ‘But I have none, and therefore am no beast.’¹²² Pity is a passion, and thus not commensurate with scientific detachment, so in this respect Gloster conforms to the ideal of scientific detachment. Of course, resentment and hate are hardly commensurate with scientific detachment, so with respect to those passions, Gloster clearly does not conform to the ideal of scientific detachment. If he were to feel neither resentment nor hate, then perhaps. The question presently before us though is whether the disposition of extra-rational factors decisively matters for our ability to accurately grasp the full force of certain kinds of evidence. Gloster consciously pursues an end: the conquest of the throne of England. But, according to Pascal, we should also assume that Gloster, being a man, also desires an ultimate end: to be happy. Gloster no doubt have one or a few Machiavellian theories to apply as means to his conquest of power, his fundamental assumption being that

power will help him escape misery; as it happens, he conquers power, but Shakespeare never for a moment allows us to assume that he has escaped misery.

So, how may disposition of mind, in terms of extra-rational factors, matter for our ability to accurately grasp the full force of evidence? Gloster – an angry, resentful and hateful person interprets evidence concerning human affairs so as to equate conquest of power at the expense of everybody else with happiness; others are analysed as obstacles to power (primary end) and, ultimately, to happiness (ultimate end). Is this good understanding on Gloster’s part? In terms of power analysis it no doubt is. But how is it that power has become so desirable?

During Gloster’s unhappy days, power may well have appeared glorious from afar; imbued with supernatural prestige, the throne may have become the imagined portal out of misery and into glory: the detainer of power is, in his eyes, far above the misery in which he himself wallows and as detainer of power he too will rise above misery. The disposition of mind of Gloster may lack the extra-rational factor of pity, but it contains a number of others, such as anger, resentment, hate and, no doubt, shame. Do these extra-rational factors predispose him to make a certain kind of interpretation of evidence? They might. And those passions might, because they continually incite him to prove himself and eliminate threats, prevent him from questioning his fixation on conquests of power and honour as conducive to the ultimate end of happiness.

Are we able, by means of understanding and theory, to discard certain ideas and notions concerning reality as falsified by experience? Gloster, having conquered power, ought to have, according to his own understanding of things, escaped misery. The occasional agreeable power trip notwithstanding, he has not escaped misery. Therefore there ought to be something wrong with the understandings and assumptions on which he based his venture.

Yet Gloster never reaches a second understanding. Instead, the infernal logic which dictates his understanding of reality steers him into ever deeper depths of frenzy:

I must be married to my brother’s daughter,
Or else my kingdom stands on brittle glass. –
Murder her brothers, and then marry her?
Uncertain way of gain! But I am in
So far in blood, that sin will pluck on sin.
Tear-falling pity dwells not in this eye.¹²³

Instead of reconsidering his preconceived ideas and notions, he grows ever more grounded in the old understanding: If he, in spite of all his success, has not yet escaped misery, it is because malicious forces are still lurking in the shadows, conspiring to remove him from the throne. No means must be spared in order to establish security. His reasoning my be accurate, according to the objectives dictated to him by his understanding, and his cunning acute, but can we believe that such reasoning is in any way conducive to happiness? Gloster appears to be too far gone. Though he conquers the throne, he is never rid of fear. Enemies – real and imagined – are everywhere. Even ghosts of those he has slain torment him in his sleep. Before he knows it, he is killed. He does not get the time to realise the error of his ways.

King Richard the III is a power play, yet the plot is not devoid of repentance. The best example is perhaps provided by one of two murderers hired by Gloster to kill his brother. The second murderer finds himself in need to negotiate with his conscience in view of the crime he is about to commit. The first murderer attempts to persuade him, reminding him of the desirable reward:

1 Murd. Remember our reward, when the deed’s done.
2 Murd. ’Zounds! he dies: I had forgot the reward.

[...]
1 Murd. When he opens his purse to give us our reward, thy conscience flies out.
2 Murd. ’Tis no matter; let it go: there’s few or none will entertain it.
1 Murd. What if it comes to thee again?
2 Murd. I’ll not meddle with it; it makes a man a coward; a man cannot steal, but it accuseth him; a man cannot swear, but it checks him; a man cannot lie with his neighbour’s wife, but it detects him: ’t is a blushing shame-faced spirit, that mutinies in a man’s bosom; it fills a man full of obstacles: it made me once restore a purse of gold, that by chance I found; it beggars any man that keeps it; it is turned out of all towns and cities for a dangerous thing; and every man, that means to live well, endeavours to trust to himself, and live without it.¹²⁴

The second murderer is negotiating with his conscience, contemplating an action (murder) as means to an end (a reward). Yet the ultimate desirable end, we must assume, is happiness; in the prospective murderer’s understanding, happiness is associated with the desired reward. Yet, when the first murderer undertakes the task, the second murderer is filled with remorse, and he does not participate:

1 Murd. How now! what mean’st thou, that thou help’st me not? By Heaven, the duke shall know how slack you have been.

What triggers the remorse? Fear of punishment of eternal torment? Perhaps. Yet, even if remorse is only triggered by such fear, I believe that the second murderer might have taken the first few steps necessary in order to reach a new understanding, an understanding that implies the falsification of an understanding that held happiness inexorably tied to monetary rewards gained at the expense of fellow human beings; there are, the reformed murderer is beginning to discover, more important things in life. Shakespeare’s play does not demonstrate any clear case in corroboration of my second hypothesis. But the embryos are there.

As for the third hypothesis, that evidence may act as trigger and thus produce subversion from within of old understanding, I cannot find any clear instances in the play that demonstrate such a process. In Alison’s terms, Gloster could no doubt be described as a scandalised creature who has not been fortunate to receive a sense of being from other human beings. Being has thus, to Gloster, become something that must be conquered at the expense of somebody else’s being. What kind of evidence could possibly trigger subversion from within in a man as resentful and determined as Gloster? It would, according to my understanding of Alison, be the kind of evidence that suggests a counter-story, namely that being does not need to be conquered at the expense of somebody else’s being, but can be received gratuitously from God, in much the same way as a child that is loved into the world is not, ideally, required to conquer its sense of being at the expense of its sibling’s sense of being, but can learn to receive it gratuitously from its loving parents. Such a counter-story is not perceived by Gloster, nor is it obvious to the reader of the play. The mere presence of such a counter-story might, in any case, not be sufficient to trigger an effect. It may be that Gloster is too hardened, his mind too blunt, for any counter-story to trigger anything whatsoever that runs against his preconceived notions.

Now, let us consider an extract of Alyosha’s farewell speech in The Brothers Karamazov. I will quote it in some length, since it contains several elements that will be of importance. Alyosha is addressing a group of children to whom he has become an important figure. One of the children has just died.

Boys, […] soon I shall leave this town, perhaps for a long time, so we shall part. Let us make a compact, here, at Ilusha’s stone that we will never forget Ilusha and one another.

And whatever happens to us later in life, if we don’t meet for twenty years afterwards, let

---


A staging of the play, however, might accentuate certain aspects of the manuscript so as to make such a counter-story more salient to the spectators.
us always remember how we buried the poor boy at whom we once threw stones, do you remember, by the bridge? and afterwards we all grew so fond of him. He was a fine boy, a kind hearted, brave boy, he felt for his father’s honour and resented the cruel insults to him and stood up for him. And so in the first place, we will remember him, boys, all our lives. And even if we are occupied with most important things, if we attain to honour or fall into great misfortune – still let us remember how good it was once here, when we were together, united by a good and kind feeling which made us, for the time we were loving that poor boy, better perhaps than we are. My little doves – let me call you so, for you are very like them, those pretty blue birds, at this minute as I look at your good dear faces. My dear children, perhaps you won’t understand what I am saying to you, because I often speak very unintelligibly, but you’ll remember it all the same and will agree with my words sometime. You must know that there is nothing higher and stronger and more wholesome and good for life in the future than some good memory, especially a memory of childhood, of home. People talk to you a great deal about your education, but some good, sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education. If a man carries many such memories with him into life, he is safe to the end of his days, and if one has only one good memory left in one’s heart, even that may sometimes be the means of saving us. Perhaps we may even grow wicked later on, may be unable to refrain from a bad action, may laugh at men’s tears and at those people who say as Kolya did just now, ‘I want to suffer for all men,’ and may even jeer spitefully at such people. But however bad we may become – which God forbid – yet, when we recall how we buried Ilusha, how we loved him in his last days, and how we have been talking like friends all together, at this stone, the cruellest and most mocking of us – if we do become so – will not dare to laugh inwardly at having been kind and good at this moment! What’s more, perhaps, that one memory may keep him from great evil and he will reflect and say, ‘Yes, I was good and brave and honest then!’ Let him laugh to himself, that’s no matter, a man often laughs at what’s good and kind. That’s only from thoughtlessness. But I assure you, boys, that as he laughs he will say at once in his heart, ‘No, I do wrong to laugh, for that’s not a thing to laugh at.’

I will now reverse the order and begin with the third hypothesis, that evidence may act as trigger and provoke subversion from within of understanding. When Alyosha first learned to know them, the boys were throwing stones at Ilusha; before Ilusha is buried, they all love him and each other. We may understand the triggering evidence as the actions demonstrated by Alyosha. When he intervenes in order to help the persecuted Ilusha, Ilusha, who has reason to resent the Karamazov family, throws stones at Alyosha and bites him in the finger. But instead of the ‘natural’ violent reaction expected by Ilusha, he gets to witness something rather unexpected:

At last Alyosha raised his gentle eyes and looked at him.

127 Dostoevsky: The Brothers Karamazov, p. 878.
“Very well,” he said, “you see how badly you’ve bitten me. That’s enough, isn’t it? Now tell me what have I done to you?”

The boy stared in amazement.

“Though I don’t know you and it’s the first time I’ve seen you,” Alyosha went on with the same serenity, “yet I must have done something to you – you wouldn’t have hurt me like this for nothing. So what have I done? How have I wronged you, tell me?” Instead of answering, the boy broke into a loud tearful wail and ran away.128

Where Alyosha walks, charity results. In fact, Ilusha is a fierce boy, not completely unlike Gloster. Scandalised on account of insults to his father, he has learned to understand others not so much as obstacles to happiness as actual threats to honour and safety, which may be a good deal worse. In perfect accordance with his tit for tat understanding of reality, he utterly expects Alyosha to react naturally, i.e. violently. Using Alison’s terminology, we could say that Ilusha has not had the occasion to sufficiently receive his sense of being gratuitously. Thus he has instead learned that being, like honour, must be conquered. But the little boy is still too weak for conquests of that kind. Perhaps, if a boy such as Ilusha were to endure within a tit for tat understanding for a sufficiently long time, he might grow into a more able power player. Instead, he is confronted with evidence that triggers subversion from within not only of his understanding, but also of the understanding of the boys who were united against him.

A process is enabled, which falsifies the previous understanding of what is natural, and renders a new understanding of what may be natural possible. Notions according to which being needs to be conquered at the expense of somebody else are also falsified. All the boys learn to receive their worth freely, first from Alyosha who gives freely, then, – at this stage it is up to the reader to fill in the blanks of the story – to a larger and larger extent, as they are becoming more like Alyosha, from each other.

As the disposition of mind changes, resentment, pride and anger give way to forgiveness, reconciliation and charity. We may expect that, after the change in disposition of mind, much evidence concerning human nature will remain the same as before, yet the meaning of that evidence might be different to the reformed person. I revert now to the means-to-ends framework and to the assumption that the ultimate desired end is happiness. Before the change in disposition of mind it is likely that the children understood each other ambiguously in terms of potential allies and potential obstacles in a quest for happiness or safety. Not everyone can be a winner. Nature is cruel. Etcetera. Thus the ganging up of six

128 Dostoevsky: The Brothers Karamazov, p. 199.
children against one makes sense, i.e. it is understandable in terms of real politics: in order to secure the peace, or even a good fun, it may be expedient that we gang up against a disturber of the peace. Yet this kind of peace is a fragile thing. Disturbance is always near. Who knows who might be excluded next? By Alyosha’s examples, the persecutors manage to learn that their victim is a child just like them, and Ilusha manages to learn that his persecutors are children just like him. Indeed, none of them turn out to be, perhaps, what they first thought themselves to be. In the new framework there is no room for monsters, just fellow human beings.

Does a new disposition of mind enable a different and fuller grasp of evidence concerning human nature? It appears that experience and changes in state of mind matter as to which means are perceived as conducive to happiness. Before the change among the children, those means might have been identified with ‘togetherness against another’ and ‘conquest of prestige’. After the change the understanding of means conducive to happiness might be less exclusivist and less individualistic. In the long speech quoted above, Alyosha admonishes his audience to pay attention to the present moment, when, they are ‘together’, ‘united by a good and kind feeling’, ‘loving that poor boy’, and therefore rendered ‘better perhaps than [they] are.’ Because of their love they are rendered better perhaps than they are. Does Alyosha’s speech suggest that the means conducive to happiness might be something as banal as humble charity?

Is it reasonable to accept Wainwright’s idea that the disposition of extra-rational factors could have a crucial impact on whether or not we grasp the full meaning of evidence? It is reasonable to assume that the amount and quality of evidence concerning human affairs may remain more or less the same throughout a human life in a given culture. Both Shakespeare and Dostoevsky lived within Christian cultures, and their characters are commonly understood as realistic within Christian culture. Yet characters portrayed realistically can apparently interpret evidence in opposite ways. Is one interpretation better or truer than another? Wainwright has already pointed out to us that hatred may, on the one hand, lead us to ‘exaggerate the force of the evidence for our enemy’s guilt’, but on the other hand hatred may also make us more apt to ‘notice weaknesses in the case for our enemy’s claim to innocence’¹²⁹ that might otherwise be overlooked. It appears difficult to contradict this two-sided propensity of hatred to both blind our vision with respect to some things, and to sharpen it with respect to other things. Does it not seem plausible that a quality such as charity

¹²⁹ Wainwright: Reason and the heart, p. 151.
would suffer from the same ambiguity? If it does, then it may appear doubtful that the presence of such a quality can predispose us to a truer understanding of evidence. Yet I believe that the preceding analyses have suggested, if not decisively proved, that a quality such as hate may direct behaviour in such a way as to make reality correspond to the kind of tit for tat understanding in which hate may be understood as a valuable means to a desired end (an end which ultimately might be revealed as unfulfilling), whereas a quality such as charity may direct behaviour in such a way as to transform reality into its own image, thus creatively creating the conditions in which love and not hate is more reasonably understood as a valuable means to the ultimate end. Which state of affairs corresponds to a more genuine reality? I do not think anybody can tell for sure. Perhaps reality is not static, but, as Alison suggests, eschatological? I am nonetheless willing to bet on the second case, for the following reason: It is easier to imagine somebody (such as Ilusha in The Brothers Karamazov, the second murderer in Shakespeare’s play, or even Gloster) making the journey from the first kind of understanding to the second kind of understanding; it is difficult, however, to imagine someone (such as Alyosha) making the journey from the second understanding to the first understanding. The understanding of Alyosha and the boys contains the first understanding: they have been there, done that (throwing stones at their fellow human beings in order to reach a desired but ultimately futile end) and they have discovered or are beginning to discover the contradictions of the assumptions that have led them to their previous conclusions; the understanding of Gloster, however, does not contain the understanding of Alyosha, because for him the world of Alyosha is a reality yet utterly un-experienced and, therefore, utterly unimaginable.

I conclude that, based on the analyses in this paper, the hypothetical importance of extra-rational factors in regard to whether or not we are able to grasp the full meaning of evidence is becoming more and more plausible. This phenomenon should be explored further.

Can we, by means of understanding and theory, discard certain ideas and notions concerning reality as falsified by experience? I have discussed the journey of Ilusha and the boys. Can we imagine Gloster as discarding his anthropological understanding as falsified? I think it is possible. Something would have to happen in the life of Gloster that makes him question his understanding of others as obstacles on his way to the ultimate desired end of happiness. It would probably be necessary to also reconsider the primary end of power. If Gloster, for whatever reason, began to consider others not as obstacles, but as valued and dear companions (means) in his quest of happiness (end), then he would have to choose between the old and the new understanding. But since he would, in this case, already
be beginning to experience reality from an entirely new perspective, it would perhaps not be a choice: the old understanding would already be experienced as falsified. For such a reformed mind, there is no way back, it is already alive in a new reality.

I conclude that that, based on the analyses in this paper, the hypothesis that we, by means of understanding and theory, can discard certain ideas and notions concerning reality as falsified by experience, is becoming more and more plausible. This phenomenon should be explored further.

What is required to save a Gloster? If his mind were not too blunt, then perhaps a certain kind of evidence could do the trick, and trigger subversion from within of his understandings, preparing the way for new understanding. To accept this as plausible does not necessarily contradict Wainwright’s hypothesis, that a ‘rightly disposed mind’ is required in order to grasp the full force of evidence. A wrongly disposed mind might be impervious to influence, and thus, while evidence may in some cases act as trigger, in other cases minds might be so blunt that no evidence in the world may trigger anything unexpected in them.

I conclude that, based on the analyses in this paper, the hypothesis that a certain kind of evidence can trigger subversion from within of understanding is becoming more and more plausible. This phenomenon should be explored further.

I propose the following model in three stages:

1. Evidence may trigger a process that affects the disposition of mind by setting off subversion from within of old understanding. A new understanding, which implies the falsification of the old understanding, is formed, rendering the mind more disposed to grasp the full meaning of evidence through a more accurate perception of reality.

2. This process may enable further eschatological transformation of the person into a living instance of the evidence that triggered the change to begin with.

3. From a purely means-to-ends perspective, the new understanding may be known to be better than the old understanding, if it functions better as means to the ultimate end of happiness, an ultimate end more and more dissociated from other partial ends which have been revealed to be non-conducive to the ultimate end.

This, based on the analyses in this paper, is what I propose in answer to my question.
I wish to suggest a continuum from simpler and practical understandings concerning ‘good’ or ‘delightful’ living, to more anthropologically profound understandings such as Alison’s hypothetical insights concerning ‘truth’ in regard to a ‘victim’. Examples of the simpler kind may be found in the genre of wisdom literature. They convey, for instance, commonsensical insights akin to overindulgence in wine and sensual pleasures does not constitute good means to happiness. Examples of the heavier kind can be found, for instance, in Isaiah 53 and the Gospels: these examples imply that those whom we exclude or persecute as villains are not in fact, as appear to have been widely believed by the contemporaries of those stories, suffering a punishment from God; they are suffering because of us.

Alison’s approach, in which evidence triggers, does not reduce the role of the mind to nothing. Evidence of the radically different reveals a new possibility. It is up to the mindful person, with or without divine assistance, to attempt to figure things out. Yet, as should by now have become obvious, the reaching of new understandings that we have treated are not mere intellectual affairs. As Wainwright suggests, they involve something more. The heart, yes, to be sure. But all these new understandings, from the simpler ones suggested in wisdom literature to the more profound anthropological insights, demand the full attention of the entire person: the act of reaching them simultaneously requires a change within the person, that which Alison terms subversion from within, which entails a change of perspectives and objectives. The quotes from Dostoevsky whisper of an untold, great struggle against old habits, a struggle concluded in a renewal of perspectives and objectives – a rebirth, in a way. Thus, while it would be nothing but gibberish for the adult Gloster, even the small children in The Brothers Karamazov may have been rendered capable to understand the message of Theodoros the Great Ascetic:

The goldsmith purifies gold by smelting it in a furnace. And a novice must surrender himself to the struggle for obedience and to the fiery ordeals of a holy life, learning with toil and much patience the practice of obedience. And once his old manners and habits have been melted down and he learns true humility, he becomes radiant, fit for heavenly treasures, for a life of immortality and a blessed repose whence ‘pain and sorrow have fled away’ (Isa. 35:10, LXX), and where gladness and continual joy flourish.130

Conclusion

This paper may suggest a potential grand anthropological narrative: From an infinite amount of possible ‘pseudo-environments’ to one truthful and, possibly, commonly shared understanding. A correctly disposed mind might be able, by grasping the full force of evidence, to disengage from ‘pseudo-environments’ and begin to live more in accordance with reality. Just what conditions must be met for this to happen, Wainwright does not tell.

The epigraphic quotes from Heraclitus, Florensky and Eckhart all assume the existence of truth. They differ slightly, however, in how they conceive of our ability to grasp truth. Heraclitus, in my view, appears to assume that most human beings are drones, each living in a dream world of their own; only those specially gifted and ready to make the effort to remain awake are to be understood as able to live in a common reality. Florensky suggests that change may dawn upon us unexpectedly, even in our sleep, and that when we do in fact change our convictions, we often tend not to even notice the actual sources of our change. Eckhart further suggests that it is when we are in darkness, or sorrow, that we are most apt to grasp the truth. This paper has, I think, said something in favour for each point of view. Perhaps there is untold profit to be had in staying awake, being asleep and suffering grief.

Though the concept of ‘understanding’ as understood by Zagzebski has been shown to imply that particular understandings may not be translatable into prepositional language, the concept of ‘understanding’, as she understands it, has nonetheless been demonstrated to be understandable. I have borrowed from Zagzebski the overall means-to-ends framework and, with a few modifications, found it fruitful in the attempts at answering my question. I have suggested that life itself might be conceived as an ultimate techne germane to the ultimate end of happiness, and I have argued for the plausibility of an evolutionary logic of understanding. Within the framework of the ultimate techne (life) and the ultimate end (happiness), one understanding may be found increasingly wanting, because of the contradictions arising form it; persons may then become increasingly open to test new waters if and when new and more promising understandings arise.

If we merge the framework above with Alison’s, we can posit a more explicit falsification of understanding: New understandings concern the misunderstandings we harbour concerning the ultimate techne (life) and the ultimate end (happiness). New understandings of this kind, that implies truth claims concerning previous understandings, must themselves, at least with respect to those truth claims, be either true or false.
I have examined the problem of progression of understanding from cognitive, epistemological, interactive and even eschatological points of view. The question I set out to answer is the following: How, in what ways, is it possible to comprehend how human beings, by means that are difficult to conceptualise, can reach new understanding and know that the new understanding is better than the one that preceded it? I propose the following model as answer to the question:

(1) Evidence may trigger a process that affects the disposition of mind by setting off subversion from within of old understanding. A new understanding, which implies the falsification (truth claim) of old understanding (which is based on ends that have been perceived as desirable but that are ultimately revealed as deceptive), is formed, rendering the mind more disposed to grasp the full meaning of evidence through a more accurate perception of reality.

(2) This process may enable further eschatological transformation of the person into a living instance of the evidence that triggered the change to begin with.

(3) From a purely means-to-ends perspective, the new understanding may be known to be better than the old understanding, if it functions better (practical truth criterion) as means to the ultimate end of happiness (desirability), an ultimate end more and more dissociated from other partial ends which have been revealed to be non-conducive to the ultimate end.

Most of the matter on which I have endeavoured to shed light no doubt remains largely unlit. The model I propose does contain many loose ends. But it does, in a tolerably consistent and coherent manner, suggest possible answers to my entire question. The purpose of this paper was to raise questions concerning the concept of ‘understanding’, and especially concerning a hypothetical progression of understanding that might be based on experience of ‘desirability’ and of ‘truth’. I have now suggested a provisional model from which it ought to be possible to deduce various hypotheses. Such hypotheses can be more or less ‘testable’: to the extent that they are empirically testable they may serve as tools in empirical science; to the extent that they are not empirically testable they may serve as tools in non-empiric speculation. This model can itself be understood as a theoretical representation of a particular understanding; as such, in accordance with the arguments of this paper, it ought to be open to critique, amendments and, if experienced as irremediably inaccurate, falsification and refutation.
Bibliography


Florensky, Pavel, Jakim, Boris (ed.): *At the Crossroads of Science and Mysticism*, Semantron Press, 2014.


