

Marcel Viau

What does „practical“ mean?

It seems nearly impossible to speak about the word „practical“ as it appears in the expression „practical theology“, apart from a discussion of the epistemological problems intrinsic to any discourse and its object. Practical theology claims to construct its discourse from practice. This project involves two inter-related concepts: discourse and its object. One can briefly define the word „discourse“ as a body of utterances, and the „object“ as that to which that body of utterances is linked. The word „object“ here entails two different meanings. On the one hand, it means the idea of distance between an utterance and that which is denoted by that utterance (if one can speak of something being denoted). On the other hand, it refers to the goal of utterances when they are employed by a speaker or a group of speakers. Here, one catches a glimpse of the nature of the problems encountered when trying to construct a theology on practice.

At the root of these problems stands a peculiar challenge which can be summed up in the following manner:

- 1) The primary use of practical theology is to build up discourse on Christian faith practices.
- 2) To build up that discourse, it is necessary to have an adequate theory.
- 3) Nowadays, it is generally agreed that practice and theory are by nature dichotomic, a conclusion which would seem to doom the whole project to failure.
- 4) A way out of this dilemma is to claim that practice is an entity which can only be understood in conjunction with theory.
- 5) But this solution forces one to carry out basic research into the criteria for a theological theory which would claim to embody practice.

One can describe this basic research as the critical study of the conditions which allow the production of multiple discourses in practical theology. Its goal is to provide practical theology with those elementary instruments and rules requisite to a true discipline. It is for this reason that basic research does not focus on Christian faith practice itself, but *rather on the way practical theology operates when it tries to understand and account for these practices; in other words, when it attempts to produce a discourse.*

To accomplish this task, research aims to understand one particular aspect of practical theological discourse, that is its *linguistic apparatus*. Is this apparatus consistent and coherent? Is it capable of producing rigorous and relevant discourses? What philosophical and scientific trends does it involve?

A discussion of the problematic relationship between theological discourse and its object hangs upon epistemology, understood as the study of the nature, scope, and mechanism of general knowledge. This discussion touches upon three issues. 1) The first issue deals with the *material* out of which theological discourse and its object are constructed. The concept of *experience* provides the basis for this discussion. 2) A second issue involves the *fit* between a discourse and its object. At this point, the discussion revolves around the concept of *language*. 3) The third issue is the *adjustment* of the theological discourse to its object. Here, the concept of *belief* is central.

1 The issue of experience

It is useful to adopt a special definition for the word experience when one discusses the material from which the theological discourse and its object are made. One can consider experience, not exclusively as subjective, but as a plural and partially undetermined entity. Consequently, experience is a series of natural events in which one finds human beings, their thoughts, and their language. This notion of experience is a common sense one, wherein knowings and feelings are linked. „Concept“ within this notion of experience operates less dogmatically and hence more modestly. Concept and percept can only be understood when considered together, in other words from the moment in which they are in accord with reality. Concept within this notion of experience operates less dogmatically and hence more modestly. Concept and percept can only be understood when considered together, in other words from the moment in which they are in accord with reality. Concept is a „thought at work“ and it can be justified only by the practical results of its work.

Hence, experience is necessary to gain knowledge. When the continuity of experience is broken by an event, the reflective process gets under way and is ready to work its effect. This process is called *inquiry*. Inquiry is a logical operation which uses ideas solely as suggestions for the empirical method, or as a tool which one uses to repair the broken experience. In this way, the experience of a human being forms a whole, and includes scientific, religious and common

sense knowledge. That being the case, it is only by means of experience that human beings approach God.

What forces are at work in experience? Organisms exist which are in interaction with their environment. These organisms adopt behaviors which are the result of natural interaction both on a biological and cultural level. Christian behavior is of this nature. And the fact that an organism wishes to express its faith is only one element of its behavior. Theological discourse takes into account the interaction of this organism engaged in a survival process of image-making which renders these interactions visible through a web of signs.

The sign is the main tool used to set the discourse in motion. By means of the sign, the organism reacts to other organisms in the context of its environment; the Christian establishes the same type of relationship with the signs of theological discourse. The discourse produced by the Christian takes its meaning from its relationship to the behavior of that Christian. Theological discourse is thus engaged in a semiotic process which itself depends upon natural interaction.

This concept of sign is connected to a wider behaviorist perspective which is not without its difficulties. If one is to avoid forcing theological discourse into a straight jacket, one must examine the way which this discourse fits its object; a point which leads us to examine other epistemological elements, this time in relation to language.

2 The issue of language

Fitting theological discourse to its object needs to be considered from the angle of language. To reflect upon the notion of language is to examine the means by which knowledge is acquired. From one point of view, knowledge is neither objective nor subjective. It is above all an experiential process which calls upon the gamut of natural interaction. Given this point, knowledge of a reality implies an involvement in an experience which represents this reality to the mind at the end of a series of intermediate experiences. This leads us to recognize the merits of a theology which tries to attain a certain spiritual reality; on the condition that one accepts that it is not a state of pure knowledge of an object, but only a process which „points to“ that object.

Language is that which allows knowledge to come into existence. Without language, our knowledge of the world is reduced to animal instinct. Words exercise the function of making the act of knowledge effective. The only way it would appear for an organism to know God

is to envisage the word God within a linguistic interaction in a given context. Here, theology is centered on the description on the way in which organisms produce discourse about God. In order to do this, one needs to adopt a non-foundational perspective of language and of knowledge. There are no stable foundations for our words and as a consequence, no permanent truths. One might say that stability relies upon our linguistic behaviors rather than upon our ways of thinking.

In light of this fact, it becomes essential to investigate our linguistic structures. As there exists no common category in language which allows us to identify objects, how can we translate our states of mind or even spiritual states to one another? In order to do this, one needs to give up the idea of the clarity of pure reference in favour of a more vague notion of the object; one which in practice understands the object as „inscrutable“. Theological discourse only understands itself in a „form of life“, in the midst of experience. Theological discourse makes sense from the moment it is integrated into a given language game, which itself is integrated in a given language community. In short, with respect to its use of language, theological discourse may be understood as contextualist, instrumentalist, and pragmatist.

The consequences of this view of language forces us to add precision to our notion of the meaning of words. Theological discourse calls upon a body of utterances expressed by a group of speakers, its object being subject to the hazards of experience. The meanings which emerge are instances of speaker behavior. Language is a learning affair with respect to the behavior of speakers, and meanings are acquired in the same fashion, in other words, in reaction to stimuli. But are we not here confronted with the question of the reference of words?

Reference must always be considered in relation to a word, which inevitably stands within a conceptual scheme. For this reason, coherence between words seems fundamental to understanding reference. Words are not anchored in a hypothetical substance; they are rooted in a „way of speaking“. To know the meaning of a word is not to know the object denoted by that word; it is to be able to use that word in sentences and in discourse. But does this imply that meaning is entirely relative? In relation to language at least, this forces a retreat into a universe wherein the role of reference is recognized. But which kind of reference is being spoken of here? In order to examine this difficult question, one must call the notion of *belief* into play.

3 The issue of belief

Belief is at the heart of experience and of language, and may be understood as the state of an organism which has ceased to doubt. Acting as a rule of action and even engendering it, belief is central to all human interaction. Christian religious belief participates in the same movement. Christian religious belief, which forms the hard core of theology, has as its task the production of discourse comprized of instances of Christian belief which are embodied in experience.

Before being an internal state, belief is an attitude towards a sentence. The two elements of this attitude are entertainment and assent. Entertainment relates to the attitude of the listener when she is considering a speaker's sentence, while assent refers to the decision to be made with respect to this sentence. This decision is more than an act of will, it implies being disposed to take action. In this sense, there can be no difference between Christian religious belief and any other kind of belief, be it scientific or philosophic in nature. Belief is a state in which organisms find themselves and in which certain information is conveyed. Here, belief is connected to the environment which caused it and allows it to function.

Religious belief belongs to a web of beliefs which dispose the organism to act. In this sense, the organism may be seen as an intentional system whose behavior may be theoretically predicted, on the condition that one attributes to the system a certain form of rationality. However, the belief as such remains forever indeterminate for the listener who seeks to localize it. All the listener knows about the speaker are the utterances which the latter emits and it is thus only via these utterances that he may know anything of the speaker's beliefs. This phenomenon may explain the interaction of the organism with its environment. But what of the linguistic interaction *between* organisms in this regard?

The linguistic interaction between interlocutors takes place in large measure thanks to belief. The process begins with the presumption of the verisimilitude of the sentences pronounced by the speaker: this is the principle of charity. Linguistic interaction can only be established if a listener presumes that the sentences held as true by a speaker are generally true. Thus the sentence of any speaker which has the character of a religious utterance can only be understood on the condition of invoking the principle of charity, otherwise the linguistic interaction risks serious disturbance. Since the speaker who states the sentences inevitably positions herself in the linguistic interaction, the listener presumes the sentence to be held as true by the speaker. It is

on the basis of that presumption that interaction is established. For this to be possible, the listener must impute a rational character to the speaker and assume, in a general way, the same web of beliefs.

The first stage in this process is that of entertaining the sentence with help of a theory of entertainment. The principle of charity being preserve, a sentence becomes an entertained utterance for an interlocutor when she is able to identify the cause of this belief. These causes are the events situated in the interaction between the organisms and their environment. The interlocutor can not do this, however, by relying on the so-called empirical evidence or on sensations heard as objects of belief, since the object of belief is not a content but the utterance which stands to the right of the epistemological function: „I believe...“. The belief is transferred from the speaker to the listener when the latter assumes the utterance of the former, that is when she is in a position to assert it sincerely or, in other words, to appropriate the speaker's utterance as her own.

The assent to an utterance by an interlocutor is the second stage of the process of adjustment of a discourse to its object. It is governed by a theory of the assent wherein the listener carries the burden of analysis of the causal and linguistic interactions. She establishes the relationship between the events which cause the belief in the speaker with the events which cause her own belief. Next, the listener integrates the whole into her web of belief. The process is accomplished with the help of a deductive inquiry made up of two moments: an integration of the information conveyed by the utterances and a decision whether or not to act.

In conclusion, practical theology now possesses all the epistemological elements necessary to undertake the production of theological discourse appropriate to its object: adjusted and fitting materials. The key notions of these elements are experience, language and belief. Discourse produced in this way becomes a body of utterances governed by the rules of semiotic process which uses signs as instances of belief embodied in experience.

Who could imagine that the word „practical“ employed in relation to „theology“ would challenge so much of theology as a whole?