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“What Are the Causes of the Certitude of Doctrine?”

By Philip Melanchthon

(b. 1497–d. 1560)

[Philip Melanchthon, “*Quae sunt causae certitudinis doctrinarum?*” (“What Are the Causes of the Certitude of Doctrine?”). *Liber de anima. Philippi Melanthonis Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*. Edited by Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider. Halis Saxonum: C. A. Schwetschke and Son. 1846. 13: 149–153. Translated from the original Latin by the Witherspoon Institute. 2015.]

Sometimes the translator has indicated in italics within parentheses the original Latin word that the English translates. Sometimes the word in parentheses is Melanchthon’s original Greek that is transliterated in the text into Latin characters; at other times a Greek phrase is translated into English and set in parentheses, though not in italics. In the text the Latin noticia is always translated as “notion” and the Latin norma is always translated as “norm.” The Latin sententia and vox/voce (literally “voice”) are translated in different ways in different places, but the original Latin is always noted in parentheses. Brackets ([]) enclose text that is implied in the meaning of the Latin but requires added words to make sense in English. –Site Editor

God wishes that some notions (*noticias*) be certain, so that they may both make him manifest (*monstrent*) and be norms (*normas*) for human life. For God wants us to know for certain that there is one divine essence that establishes [all] things; that he is wise, truthful, most generous, kind, chaste, the judge of men, and the punisher of crimes. He by no means wants us to embrace (*recipi*) the opinions of the Epicureans; he by no means wants us fashion a throng of gods. Then he wishes that the following notions be most sure (*firmissimas*), because they are the rule of life: you shall not kill the innocent; you shall not lie in giving witness and in contracts; you shall not seize another’s spouse or means. He wishes the notions of numbers to be sure, that we may understand that God is one, not countless, and in order that in all of life we may distinguish (*discernamus*) [the concept] “one,” and be able to consider “many” and “order.” He wishes that in physics we understand for certain the distinctions between heat, cold, dampness, dryness, and heavy and light bodies, because the life of men cannot be preserved unless they can distinguish these things from each other. I leave out many examples, and moreover I strongly beseech those who seek learning for the glory of God—who loves the truth and commands it to us—that they learn true judgments (*sententias*), recognize the truth and embrace it constantly, and then, according to God’s will, put it to use. For instance, seeing as it is certain that human bodies cannot remain alive without food, drink, and sleep you should use these things in a just way, recognize the order that has been so established by God, and, because he gives these good things, you should praise him with a thankful (*grata*) mind and with preaching. In the same way because these notions are certain—you shall not kill, you shall not commit adultery—recognize this divinely sanctioned order and

submit. Do not like the skeptics (*Pyrrhonio more*) seek after sophistry (*cavillationes*) to upend knowledge that is certain.

Now copious amounts are spoken among the logicians concerning the norms of certainty, which the Greeks call *criteria*. (And here I admonish the young only in passing, that they should consider more what the nature of the natural light in the intellect is, and what the rule of judgment is, and from where the strength of assent comes.)

According to philosophy there are three norms of certainty: universal experience, notions of principles, and the understanding of the order in a syllogism.

Universal experience is [that which] all those who are sane judge in the same way concerning those things that are perceived by sense: that fire is hot; that woman gives birth; that in the life of animals there is sense and movement; that death is the destruction of animals. Now universal experience shows that a notion is certain because if you were to wish to experience the opposite in practice the destruction of nature follows. For example, if anyone who denied that fire burns were to put his hand into flames, he will sense for certain that it is being consumed. Therefore it must be stated that nature has been established that way, and that this is God's doing (*opus Dei*). Nor must one look further for another proof (*demonstratio*). To dissent from universal experience is to wage war against God himself and to deny that this order has been sanctioned by God, such as if anyone were to deny that a woman gives birth and [then] try to carve up live human beings.

Principles are notions that are in us from birth. They are the seeds of each of the arts divinely placed in us, in order that from them we may construct the arts whose use is necessary for life. Such [principles include] the notion of numbers, of order, of proportions, and of many propositions: anything either is or is not; the whole is greater than any part of it; God is a mind that is eternal, wise, truthful, just, chaste, and kind; he establishes the world; he maintains the order of things and punishes crimes. The human mind has been established in the likeness of God's mind. Therefore let man be truthful, just, kind, [and] chaste. To submit to this norm is to act (*facere*) rightly. To deviate from this norm is to do what is displeasing to God and foul. And he who does deviate from it invites punishment upon himself. Many things are said about principles among the logicians.

The third criterion is the understanding of the order in syllogisms, when their parts are rightly put together, as is discussed at length among the logicians. In the Stoic doctrine the criteria are named by the following three words: *aesthesis* (αἴσθησις), *prolepsis* (πρόληψις), and *gnosis* (γνώσις). And there is no doubt that "experience" is meant when they say *aesthesis*; and "principles" when they say *prolepsis*; therefore *gnosis* is "judgment," that is, understanding of order, sequence, or connection.

In the Church we have also a fourth norm of certainty, namely, divine revelation (*patefactionem*), made by clear (*illustribus*) testimonies that do not deceive, and which exist in the books of the prophets and Apostles. But although the human mind more easily and firmly assents to those things that it discerns by its natural light, nevertheless all rational creatures ought to assent with a like constancy to the judgments (*sententias*) revealed by God, even if we do not see them to be true and sure by our natural light. Just as without doubt we insist that two times four is eight, so we must declare that God will raise dead men, adorn the Church with eternal glory, and cast out the impious into eternal punishments. But many very rashly resist the divine oracles, such as the Epicureans and others. Some part of the human race, however, does assent, because they are moved by the testimonies of miracles. By the proclamation (*voce*) of the Gospel the Holy Spirit enkindles this light and bends the mind to assent. The mind then submits to the Holy Spirit, it embraces the proclamation of the Gospel, and fights off doubt. And this assent which embraces the judgments (*sententias*) revealed by God is called Faith, which is stronger in some. And let us not esteem the kindness of God lightly, which has come forth from his hidden throne, has revealed himself to us, and has testified by that revelation that he truly cares for the human race. So then let that revelation be the principal light of our life and govern all our actions and all our decisions. And in our daily prayer let us think about the testimonies of revelation, that faith may be enkindled, and that we may gratefully acknowledge and praise the goodness of God.

Here it is also very useful to consider a distinction. Some things have been handed on by the word (*voce*) of God which are also known by nature, such as the precepts of the Decalogue. But God wanted his word to come near to us (*accedere*), that he might show that those same natural notions were imparted of themselves (*a sese*) in our minds, and so that he might sanction the law by a new testimony. Now the confirmation of the truth is pleasing (*Grata*) to a good mind, when it understands that God's word has approached a natural notion. Reason grasps that the earth stands unmoved, and that the sun moves. But when we hear that the same thing has been handed on from God, we assent more firmly.

Now there are some other judgments (*sententiae*) handed on by God, which before had been absolutely unknown to all creatures, such as what the Gospel says concerning the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, concerning reconciliation for sins, and concerning eternal rewards and punishments: "He who believes in the Son has eternal life. But he who does not believe in the Son, shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains against him." (John 3:36) "As I live," says the Lord, "I do not wish the death of the sinner, but that he convert and live." (Ezek. 33:11) Because you have believed for certain that your own (*Credito tibi ipsi certo*) sins are forgiven because of the Son of God, believe because of the Son of God that your groanings, your prayers are accepted by God. These things have been embraced by firm assent. And let the cause of the assent be God's authority, by which these judgments have been handed on to us and confirmed by clear testimonies, such as the raising of the dead and other things. So when the mind thinks about why these judgments are immovable, let it gaze upon their author, God, who wishes that he be recognized and called upon, for he has revealed himself. Nor does he wish that we with human brazenness play games forming opinions about him, as the Nations or the Philosophers did.

I have reviewed briefly these things concerning the causes of the certainty of doctrine, because this consideration illustrates the limits of understanding and shows from where the sureness of notions comes. Now this care in distinguishing certain from uncertain notions is necessary for all of life, for often men call forth great calamities upon themselves and others when they assent to false or uncertain things that they think to be true and sure. [Take,] for instance, when Antony with insufficient cause reasons that he can gain power over the whole empire because, he thinks, he is a more experienced commander than Octavian and has bigger armies. It does not follow, however, as a necessary consequence that he who is more experienced and has bigger armies will be the victor, because many obstacles can be thrown in the way of even a cautious leader. And God is the principal cause because he governs events. There are many such errors in life—even among the wise—and they are often the causes of great calamities. This warning is set forth in many sayings, such as *mataioi mataia logizontai dia epithumias* (Greek: "the vain reason vain things because of their desires"); and Theognis says, *pollaki teen gnoomeen exapatoos ideai* (Greek: "Often appearances deceive judgment"). As much as possible then let us search out certain things, and above all in life's decisions let us follow the divine norm, and seek that our minds and events be ruled by God, just as God frequently commands, as in Deut. 6: "You shall follow the commands of the Lord your God, that it may be well with you."

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