

A HISTORICAL EXPOSITION OF MAN'S PERENNIAL SEARCH FOR CERTITUDE

Susan E. Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise? The Search for Certainty in the Early Modern Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), ISBN-13: 9780195313420, ISBN-10: 0195313429, pp vii-480

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The age we live in is no less tormented by the search for certitude than all the previous historical attempts to justify and enforce one culture or another. Moreover, our inability to ground any epistemological, theological and moral assumption in the realm of certitude resembles the early modern quest for truth and assurance, being nevertheless “more radical than anything found in our past” (p. xii). Undertaking an inquiry into the past might, in Susan Schreiner’s opinion, satisfy our need to look for solid proofs of objectivity and might give us an insight into the epistemological settlement of men living in times of inconsistency and uncertainty. In her vast study, Schreiner is first of all looking for the origins of the individual’s struggle with his lack of cognitive capacity to acquire certainty. She acknowledges a particular image of reality characterizing the High Middle Ages which offers man the capacity to acquire epistemological certainty because God has given him access to his creation through his creative rationality. This triangular relation between creator, cosmos and its interpreter suffers irretrievable fragmentation once the *via moderna* becomes part of the academic institution curricula. Ockham turns Nominalism against the vain speculation of the *via antiqua* causing a deep rift inside the Scholastic philosophy. Scholasticism and Humanism - both originating in thirteen-century Italy - pose different solutions to the problem of certitude: according to the Schools, the study of logic rescues the scholar from the pit of doubt, while “good arguments” (p. 140) pervade the humanist search for assuredness. The “rhetorical humanism”¹ grounded in the view that the individual is characterized by his historicity turns his back on the notion of absolute, eternal and rational truth promoting a type of certitude founded in the concrete, experienced world. The increased interest for the writing of national histories, and the translation of various philological and legal works determines a search for righteous examples and directions in ancient writings, such as that of Cicero, Halicarnassus and Dionysus.² On theological grounds, certitude is searched for in the doctrines of salvation and authority, the doctrines that enforce the individual’s assuredness that he will be saved and direct him towards the authority he must turn to and which will guide him on his path of redemption.

The longest and central part of Schreiner’s volume deals with this theological notion of certitude. The author analyses the way the concept has been defined and used in various defenders of religious creeds. She presents their arguments and debates as well as their harsh criticism and invectives towards their ideological enemies. The focus on certitude and attaining it through the Spirit of God was commonly dealt with, in catholic as well as reformed theological circles, and it implied assessing different sources of theological authority. The sacrament of penance was the path to salvation in medieval theology. The catholic doctrine of salvation permitted only conjectural certainty to the Christian and the only true understanding of the Scriptures relied in the mediating guidance of the Church. Against a suppositional certainty of hope, Gabriel Biel and Johann von Staupitz, clear the way for the Lutheran doctrine of *sola fide*. In Martin Luther’s view, the sacrament of penance made certainty not only impossible, but also

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contributed to the “ever-dangerous” abyss of self-deception. Luther’s assuring discourse, that the Spirit of God would illuminate the elect and that only the chosen ones were entitled to preach, was based on the assumption that the visible Church represented the seat of the Antichrist and the true Church laid within the Christian’s heart, being invisible and resting solely on faith. The Catholics’ reaction was predictably linked to the problem of visibility, authority and implicitly, certitude. Not only did the burst of various reformed sects clinging to different understanding of the means toward certitude inflame the trenchant response of the Catholics, but it legitimated the question that More had asked: “Luther, are you alone wise?”

Susan Schreiner does not stop however at singling out the debates between Catholics and Reformed theologians regarding the aspects of certitude and authority. She rejects the charge of subjectivism that has been brought to Reformation theology, bringing forth various scholarly analyses that justify Luther’s commitment to the importance of an external authority through “the self-authentication of Scripture” (p. 210). Also, the role of experientia in the reformer’s scriptural interpretations is localized by the author in various works of not only protestant actors outside the main-stream Reformation, but also in works belonging to various movements that Luther has been thought to directly influence – like the Italian spiritualists and the Spanish alumbados, as well as founders of the Discalced Carmelites movement like St Teresa of Avila. To all these religious groups immediate experience of the Spirit in one’s soul was the indubitable sign of certainty of one’s salvation and allowed the illuminated ones to contemplate the authentic truth. Schreiner also underscores the vital importance of avoiding idolatry embodied in all these doctrines of the Spirit, a topic that will later figure as starting point for acquiring true scientific knowledge as well.³

In the final chapter of her book, Schreiner tackles with the problem of certitude in the works of three different representative sixteenth-century figures: Martin Luther, Michel de Montaigne and William Shakespeare. She highlights a theme that emerges from the debates over certitude: the problem of appearances as opposing reality by bringing forth a particular account of perspectival comprehension of reality that relies on Karsten Harries’s account.⁴ For Luther, man has been imbued with the worst sin, after the Fall: idolatry. He cannot free himself from the self-love while believing that God can be appeased with good works. He has to free himself and achieve spiritual discernment by abiding to the Scriptures alone and by believing in the true God. Montaigne is a humanist whose entire work is based on the skeptical treatment of the humanist tradition of rhetoric, yielding the ethic of incompleteness. The striving for certainty is a foolishness that Montaigne dismisses in favor of the normal life of epistemologically limited human beings. A much darker vision appears in Shakespeare. An analysis of Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth reveals Shakespeare’s obsessive concern with the impossibility of discerning reality from appearances and thus deception from truth. We find in his plays an “overwhelming and majestic portrayal of the profoundly tragic existence of humanity” (p. 356).

Thus, Susan Schreiner manages to bring forth the problem of certitude in the sixteenth-century scholarly debates concerning authority, knowledge, assurance, experience, discernment and the constant effort for distinguishing reality from appearance. The outcome of these discussions might lead to an attempt to recognize truth precisely in the middle of the Shakespearean, tragic reality of our fallen nature. Today, the voices that have cautioned against the tyranny of certitude might still be seen as guidelines of our own struggle with personal idols. Her concluding claim, that the dangers of the constant search for certitude and not the revived skepticism of the sixteenth-century, might have brought about the debate over tolerance and might still leave further questions that scholars of Early Modern Philosophy will need to answer to.

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References

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- ⁴ Harries, K., *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), xi-374.