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A Wesleyan Approach to Knowledge

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September 24, 2012

Structure of This Presentation

Philosophical foundations (i.e.,
general approach to knowledge)

Relevant theological commitments

Biblical hermeneutics (i.e.,
interpretation and application)

Implications for faith integration

Wesley's philosophical and theological commitments shaped his approach to scriptural interpretation, and this has particular implications for doing faith integration.

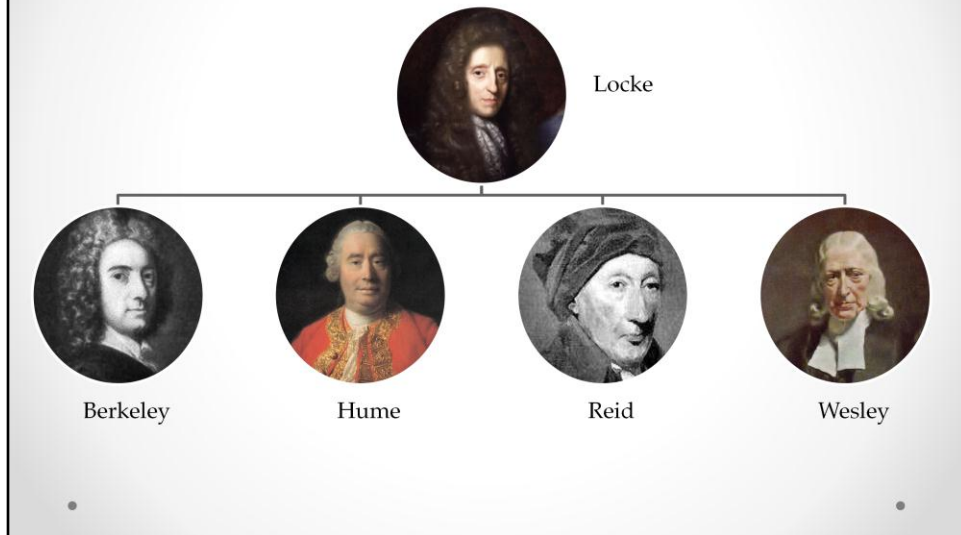
Philosophical Foundations

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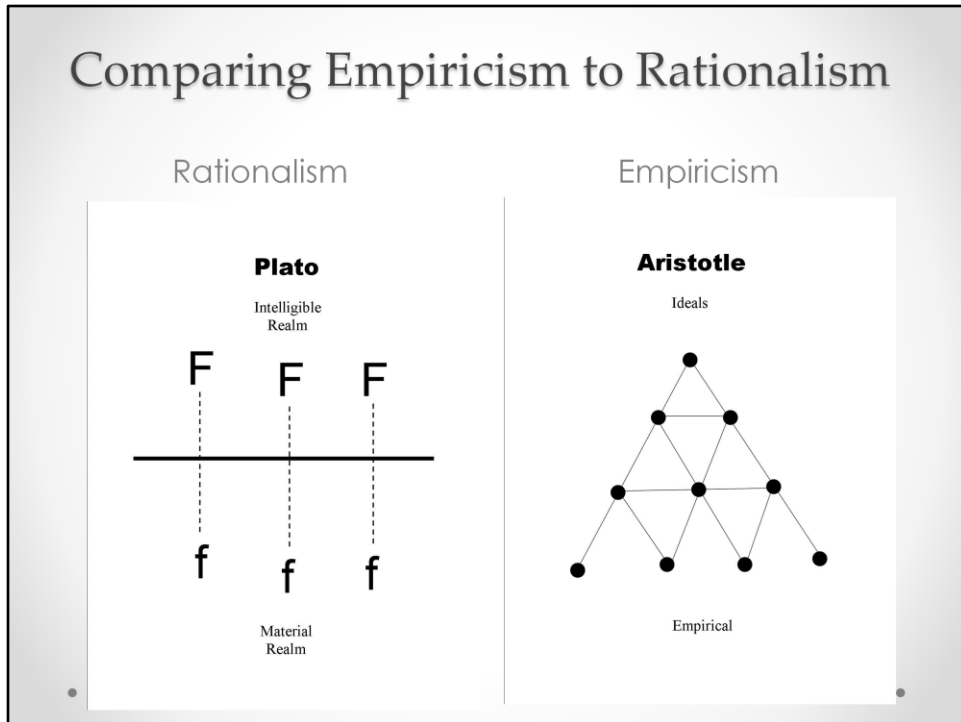
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Wesley was a part of the British empiricist tradition.



John Locke is generally regarded as the "Father of the British Enlightenment." He essentially helped to revive interest in Aristotelianism in 18th-century England. Berkeley, Hume, and Reid all represent different branches of British empiricism, and although Wesley was not a follower of these men, his writing shows that he was engaged with their thought and with the intellectual currents of the day. Wesley was very much influenced by Locke, and he wrote an essay directly responding to Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding*.

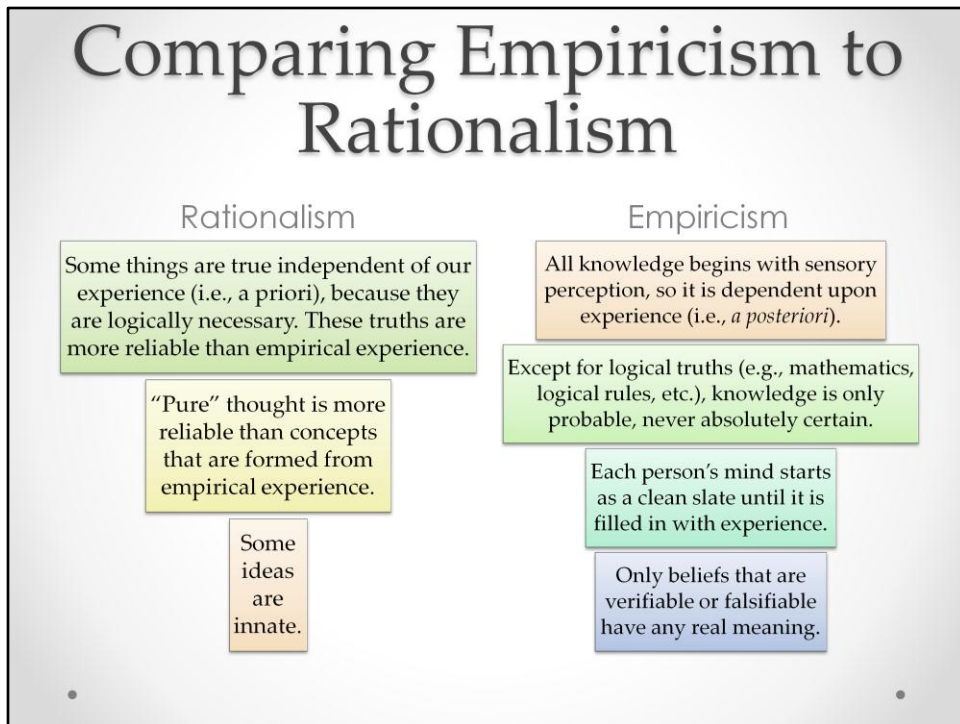
Comparing Empiricism to Rationalism



Although there are various approaches to epistemology, the two most basic schemas are rationalism and empiricism, largely rooted in the differences between the philosophy of Plato and his student Aristotle. Plato advocated a strong dualism separating the intelligible realm (i.e., intellectual/spiritual) from the material realm (of sensory perception). Rationalism is thus founded on the premise that true knowledge (which entails absolute certainty) only exists for purely rational concepts (the truth value of which is not dependent on empirical experience). According to Plato, all empirical experience is merely a shadow of the absolute truth of the Forms/Ideas.

In contrast, Aristotle argued that all of our knowledge is dependent upon empirical experience (i.e., sensory perception). He said, "There is nothing in the reason that was not first in the senses." Aristotle believed that there are absolutes, but since all of our knowledge is dependent upon our empirical experience, we can only approximate the absolutes as ideals. Hence, Plato and Aristotle offer different views of knowledge, and these views form the framework for rationalism and empiricism.

Comparing Empiricism to Rationalism



Of course, rationalists still believe in empirical experience. It's just that they feel there are some things that can be proven through logical deduction, and this is what makes them absolutely certain. Empirical experience can only be probable, so it can never attain absolute certainty. This is not a problem for the empiricist, however, because the empiricist readily accepts these limitations as the reality of human knowledge and understanding.

It should be noted that only some rationalists have believed in innate ideas, and this presumption was generally mediated over time, stressing the innateness of the way humans form ideas, not the innateness of the ideas themselves. Empiricists in general have been willing only to acknowledge the innateness of our general ability to form ideas. However, recent trends in cognitive studies suggest that genetic and other physiological factors may indeed influence the way each person forms ideas and processes information.

Finally, the stress on verification and falsifiability was the greatest among the logical positivists of the early 20th century. Some have referred to this as "radical empiricism," since it insists not only that all belief be ultimately based on empirical experience, but also that beliefs need to be empirically verifiable if they are to be taken seriously.

Comparing Empiricism to Rationalism

Rationalism

Try to prove a priori truths by constructing deductive arguments

Empiricism

Construct arguments inductively by amassing empirical evidence.

Deductive reasoning starts with a general premise and deduces specific implications from that premise. Inductive reasoning works in the opposite direction, starting with specific empirical observations, and inferring more general conclusions from them. We routinely use both kinds of reasoning, so it is not the case that each type of reasoning is the specific domain of either rationalists or empiricists. Rather, the basic difference between the two groups concerns the most basic foundations of knowledge. Whereas rationalists believe that there are nontrivial a priori truths that can be proven to be logically necessary, empiricists deny this, limiting logically necessary truths to the rules of logic (including mathematics, which is quantitative logic). For the empiricist, all nontrivial truths are formed inductively from empirical experience.

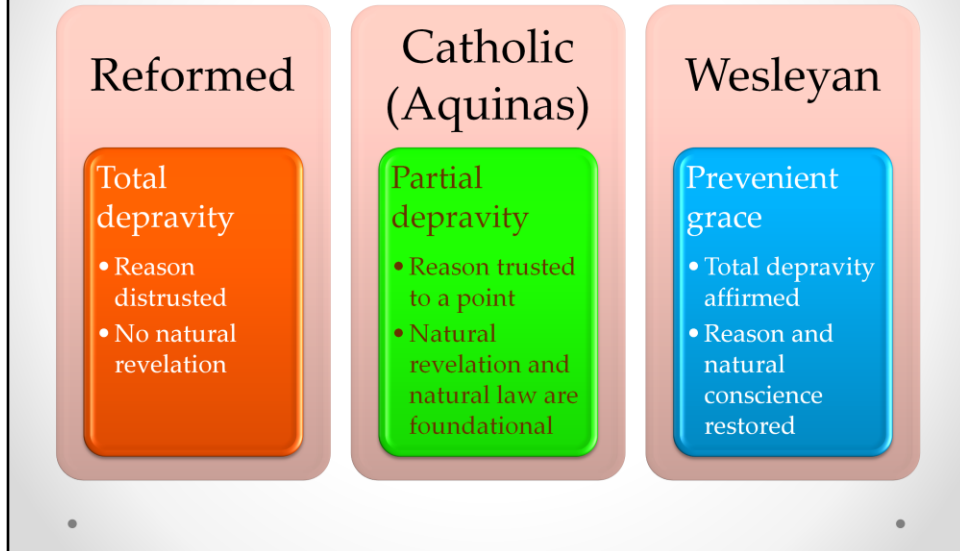
Relevant Theological Commitments

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Comparative Views of Human Nature



The doctrine of total depravity was characteristic of St. Augustine's theology, and this was the standard for Christian theology during the Middle Ages. It fit very well into the Platonic worldview that dominated at the time. It was believed that truth is mediated downward from God through the Church, handed down through the apostolic succession of the Catholic priesthood. Human reason was regarded as inherently corrupt, so individuals were not encouraged to think for themselves and were not permitted to protest official church teaching.

Nevertheless, after Muslim scholars helped Christian and Jewish scholars translate the writings of Aristotle into Latin (around the end of the first millennium), Christian thinkers started to move away from Platonism toward Aristotelian empiricism. This shift eventually led to a complete upheaval of the Medieval authority structure, because knowledge was now viewed as being grounded in empirical experience, and so the experiences and thinking of the average person were now regarded as resources for the advancement of knowledge. Christians began to found universities, because they now saw a benefit in educating the populace. The result of this increased optimism was the moderation of the sinful view of human nature, as reflected in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, for example. This trend essentially ushered in the Renaissance and with it, Catholic humanism. Consequently, the Protestant Reformation was partially a continuation of this movement and partially a reaction against it. The Reformers asserted that each person is directly accountable to God, not to the Church. At the same time, they reverted back to Augustinian theology in asserting the total depravity of the individual.

Wesley's position is very interesting, because he essentially ends up very close to Aquinas's position. He affirmed the Reformation doctrine of total depravity, but he overlaid this with a much broader concept of grace. Wesley borrowed the term "prevenient grace" from Augustine, and he gave it new content. Augustine had used the term to describe God preparing the elect for conversion, as a part of their predestination. In contrast, Wesley envisioned prevenient grace as something that is available to all human beings through the atonement of Christ. It is extended to every person from birth, not only offering forgiveness to those who are not (yet) morally accountable for their sins (e.g., small children and mentally challenged individuals), but restoring a certain degree of natural reason and conscience to each person.

Comparative Views of Divine Providence



Catholic (Aquinas)

- God acts through secondary causes.
- The Church represents Christ on earth.



Calvinist (more so than Calvin himself)

- Power and authority are God's primary attributes.
- God micromanages the universe.



Wesleyan

- Love is God's primary attribute.
- Emphasis on human responsibility and natural means

A comparison between Wesley and the same two traditions reveals a similar pattern in the way each conceives God's interaction with the world. Aquinas emphasized God's indirect activity through the natural, secondary causes he created. The Calvinist tradition instead has tended to view the world as being under the close supervision of God. Many Calvinists have been greatly concerned with upholding God's sovereignty. Wesley is again closer to Catholicism than he is to Calvinism, and he charted out a position in between determinism and mysticism. He clearly articulates this in his sermon "The Nature of Enthusiasm." ("Enthusiasm" was a term coined by Locke to indicate a type of religious fanaticism—specifically, mistaking one's own imagination for the voice of God.)

Wesley flatly rejected a deterministic view of divine providence, and although he believed in the direct intervention of God, he felt that much of God's governance occurs through the natural means he has created for our use. In fact, he contended that it is fanatical to expect God to bring about the end without the means. This basic outlook was reflected throughout his life. For example, the term "Methodist" was attached to him and his cohorts out of ridicule for their systematic approach to the Christian life, evidenced through rigorous adherence to personal and spiritual disciplines.

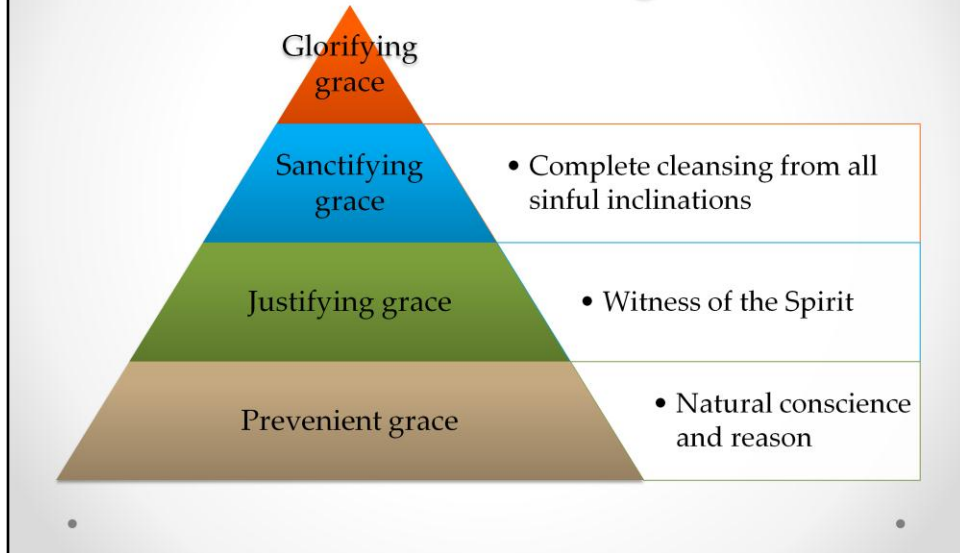
Wesley was a mystic in the sense that he believed that the Holy Spirit directly bears witness to us our current spiritual state, especially at conversion. In addition, like a number of his contemporaries, he utilized empiricism as a model for understanding spiritual knowledge, claiming that we receive a "spiritual sense" at

regeneration. Jonathan Edwards also used this same analogy, and several moral philosophers in that time period (like Hutcheson and Reid) asserted that we have a “moral sense” for discerning right and wrong.

Nevertheless, that is largely where Wesley’s mysticism ends (in the sense of expecting to directly receive spiritual knowledge). For instance, as he grew older, he came to believe that the direct witness of the Spirit must be confirmed by the indirect witness of conscience (through a changed life). In other words, mystical experiences are too subjective to be reliable by themselves. They need to be confirmed and bolstered by empirical experience. In “The Nature of Enthusiasm,” Wesley contends that the “plain, scriptural, rational way to know what is the will of God in a particular case” is to simply ask, “In which of these states can I be most holy, and do the most good? And this is to be determined, partly by reason, and partly by experience ... Instead of saying, on any particular occasion, ‘I want to know what is the will of God,’ would it not be better to say, ‘I want to know what will be most for my improvement and what will make me most useful?’” He assures us that the Holy Spirit will assist us in this inquiry.

In the end, Wesley’s view of divine providence is reminiscent of a saying attributed to St. Augustine (and to St. Ignatius of Loyola): “Pray as though everything depended upon God, but work as though everything depended upon you.”

Wesleyan optimism is expressed in its doctrine of grace.



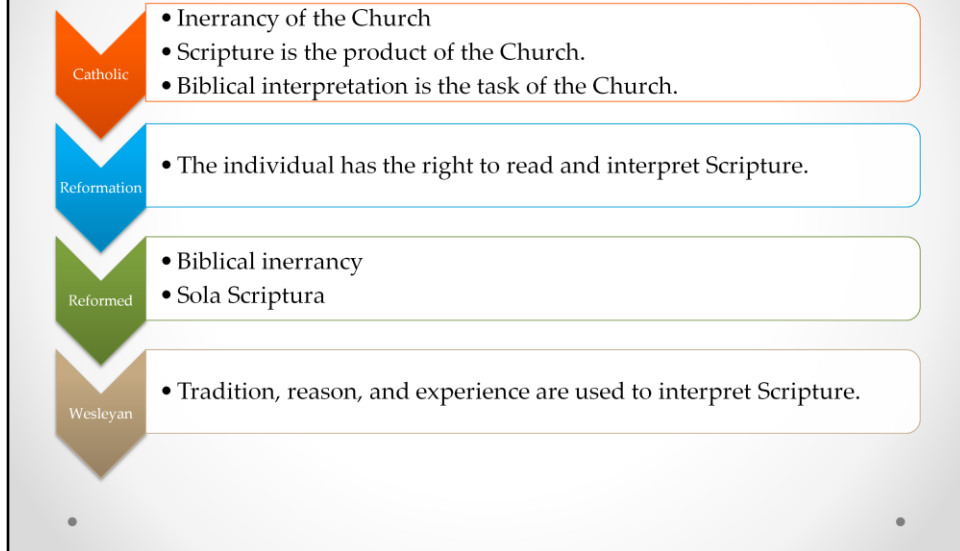
Wesley embraced a synergistic view of grace, which teaches that God and human beings work together. It emphasizes our responsibility to use the gifts that God has given us and to “work out our own salvation” in our daily lives by attending to all the means that God has put at our disposal. The upshot of Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace is that grace is offered “cradle to grave.” As long as we respond positively to the grace that has been extended to us, we can keep progressing through the various types of grace.

Once again, Wesley’s position is very close to that of Catholicism. He affirmed the goodness of the natural gifts that God bestowed on us at creation (especially human reason), and he believed that the Holy Spirit continues to guide us toward truth. However, he was also quick to point out the limitations of reason. Like Aquinas, he asserted that natural reason cannot attain salvific knowledge or develop what Aquinas called the theological virtues (i.e., faith, hope, and charity). These require special revelation and the activity of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, aside from these limitations, Wesley saw no reason to distrust human intellect.

Biblical Hermeneutics

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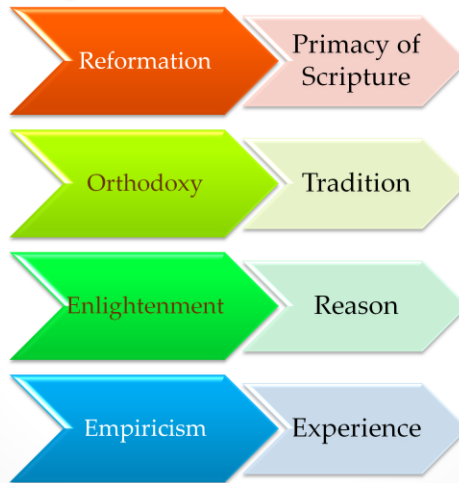
Wesleyan Hermeneutics in Context



In Catholic thought, Biblical hermeneutics falls under the authority of the Church. The individual must ultimately accept official Church teaching. The Reformation rejected this notion, legitimating the right of individuals to read and interpret Scripture themselves. Of course, this opened the door for Protestants to interpret the Bible in a number of ways. It also resulted in a shift in the overall basis for Christian faith. Whereas Catholics trusted in the inerrancy of the Church, Protestants now had to find a new basis of faith, and so the belief in inerrancy was shifted from the Church to the Bible.

Wesley is a part of the Anglican tradition, which developed a broader basis for interpreting Scripture than those who insist on always interpreting the Bible literally. This difference is the starkest with respect to biblical literalists who refuse to allow general human knowledge to inform their interpretation of the Bible. For them, biblical literalism trumps all other claims to knowledge. The Anglican/Wesleyan approach to Scripture is much more holistic and integrative.

Roots of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral



When Wesley is placed in proper historical context, the rationale behind the quadrilateral becomes apparent.

Understanding the Dynamics

Experience

Is the origin of all knowledge, both natural and spiritual

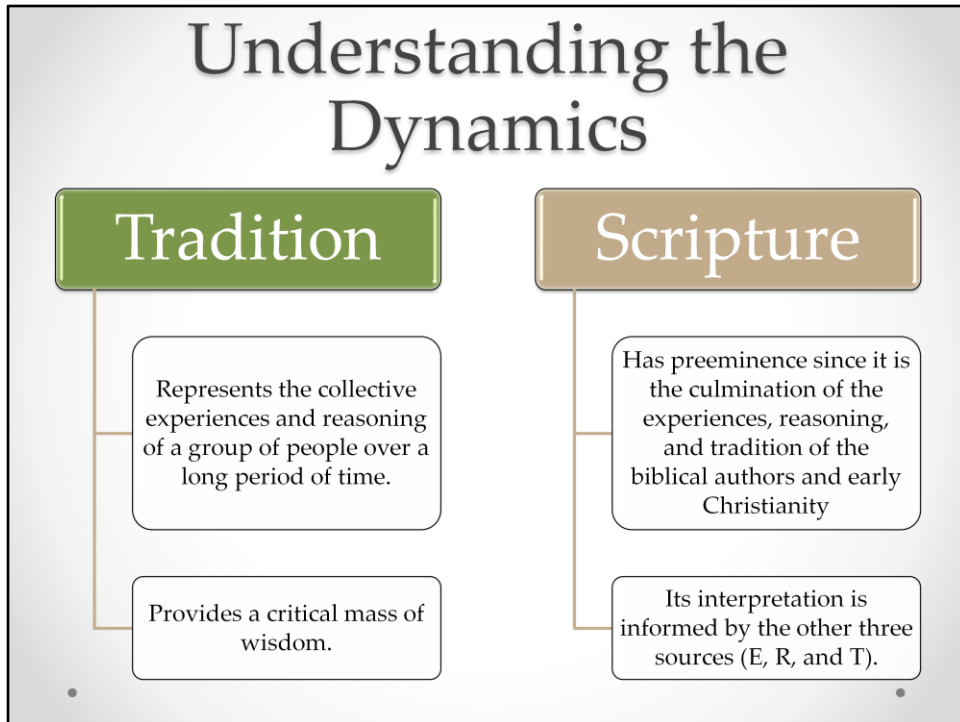
Includes the experience of others, both past and present

Reason

Processes experiences into a coherent whole.

Includes the collective reasoning of others, both past and present.

Understanding the Dynamics



With respect to tradition, two extremes must be avoided. On one hand, tradition should not be simply discarded when it is first challenged. On the other hand, older traditions often need to be replaced by newer traditions that are found to be reliable. For example, when Darwin first introduced the theory of evolution, it would have been foolish to immediately jump on the bandwagon and toss the traditional interpretation of the creation narratives in Genesis aside. However, evolution eventually became more than a mere theory as evidence increasingly mounted up in its favor. In effect, the acceptance of evolution became the new tradition in science, and it would now be foolish to hold onto a literal interpretation of the creation narratives. (Even St. Augustine was unwilling to do this over 1400 years before Darwin!)

In making epistemological choices, empiricists place the greatest weight (sometimes the entire weight) on empirical experience. Consequently, the more something can be empirically observed, the more reliable it is deemed to be. Both the quantity and the quality of evidence are important to consider. Even a consensus must be supported by empirical evidence. In this way, a short period of verifiable empirical observation outweighs centuries of mere speculation. Granted, all belief formation entails a certain degree of speculation, but the speculation is reduced as empirical observation is increased, either in quantity or quality (e.g., its directness).

Implications for Faith Integration

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Genuine faith integration reflects Wesleyan values.

Full use of the quadrilateral

- Proper biblical hermeneutics approaches Scripture on its own terms while acknowledging the guidance of the Holy Spirit today.

Avoid bifurcating into sacred and secular

- “All truth is God’s truth.”

Conviction with epistemic humility

- “In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, but in all things charity” (cf. Meldenius)

Pursuing truth, not formulating apologetics

- Faith integration, not faith infusion

Concern for practicality

Wesleyan values call for an integrative approach to faith, using the various resources that God has given us. Knowledge should not be compartmentalized into sacred and secular spheres, for we believe in both special and natural revelation. Our goal should be to pursue truth more so than to defend our beliefs. This is the only way we can keep growing intellectually. We must admit our limitations and remain open-minded. Finally, an integrative approach to knowledge and faith suggests that we should seek to organize our knowledge and beliefs into a coherent whole, and this implies that there should also be no division between the theoretical and the practical. Both aspects of knowledge are necessary for a full understanding of truth.

Some Closing Quotes from Wesley

"They who stop the workings of their reason
lie the more open to the workings of their
imagination."

"Passion and prejudice govern the world,
only under the name of reason. It is our part,
by religion and reason joined, to counteract
them all we can."

"I wish to be, in every point, great and small,
a scriptural, rational Christian."