

# Knowledge and Belief according to Lanza del Vasto

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## 1. Religious belief and scientific knowledge

In past millennia religious traditions suggested a kind of wisdom from which science divorced since its beginning, belief being then considered as a backwards attitude with respect to the triumphant scientific reason. Apparently, no sacred text suggested an adequate analysis on both the admirable intellectual construction built by scientific reason and modern way of life, essentially advantaging progress with respect to all traditions.

Since one century a new attitude on scientific knowledge was proposed by a particular renewal of religious belief, the non-violent philosophy of life suggested by Tolstoy (Tolstoy 1880), Gandhi (Gandhi 1908) and Lanza del Vasto (Lanza del Vasto 1959). All they criticized Western science inasmuch as it is severed from both ethics and common life of mankind. The criticism was qualified by Lanza del Vasto (= LdV, 1901-1981, graduated in Philosophy at Pisa University in 1928) through an analysis of two Christian texts, i.e. Genesis 3 and Apocalypse 13, in the same years Catholic Council Vatican 2 instead accepted modern science as an ineluctable modernity (incarnationist thesis vs. apocalyptic thesis).

## 2. Lanza del Vasto's interpretation

Let us remark that LdV considered the two above-mentioned texts as substantially shared by a great number of religious traditions; the first text concerns what is commonly called the problem of theodicy; the second one describes a period of social persecution of religious belief.

The following synthesizes chapter I of LdV's main theologico-social analysis of Western society (LdV 1959). Essentially, he changes the traditional interpretation of the word "original"; he locates the original sin not at the temporal origin of mankind, but at the origin of the widest aggregation of men in a society, i.e. whatsoever civilisation. This sin is defined as a diversion of the human being from the direct knowledge on the intimate nature of every being - God first -, to an interested knowledge-calculation upon all beings, in the aim to exploit them. In a social aggregation a man/woman tends to hide under some conventional or legal customs his relationships of exploitation. In the historical development of a civilisation a lot of formal rules and artefacts are introduced, that expand monstrously the artificial level, at the expenses of both the natural level and the super-natural level of personal life. By shaping the main structures of a society, mainly those of the widest society as possible, i.e. a civilisation, the original sin is thus characterised as a structural sin. Sharing common customs, both evil men and benevolent ones are evenly merged in the original sin; at last, all they sustain the pyramidal structure of our society, where weakest and naive men/women are forced to support heaviest social weights.

In the latter text two monstrous animals grow up respectively from sea and earth. They subdue all peoples, till up to impress a seal on both the mind and the hands of whatsoever person. In continuity with previous interpretation, LdV sees the two monsters as two social structures substantiating in a given civilization the social result of the infinite collective multiplication of original sin. Through a

communitarian interconnection of several minds this original sin grows up to become two specific social institutions for exploiting Nature, that is Science and its application, Technology. By means of such two actors LdV vividly illustrates the advanced life of modern times as already represented by the biblical story. In fact, in modern times they gained, more than any cultural force of modern society, an unprecedented authority on all peoples; till to lead them to entry in a society subjugated by the spirit of possession.

According to this interpretation LdV holds, in a parallel way to Induist tradition and some other religious traditions too, that present Western civilisation represents the greatest renewal of the original sin, since for the first time it was institutionalized in Science and Technology and then it was applied world-wide.

## 3. The suggestion of LdV for instrumentalizing scientific knowledge

Science and Technology are condemned by LdV not forever, but only in the particular Western civilization, owing to the specific finalization it gives them. This appraisal is corroborated by the meaning LdV gives to the final words of latter text. They suggest to the reader a way for saving himself from this kind of structural sin; this way consists in gaining the knowledge of the nature of evil, which is symbolised by the name of the latter beast; which is a number, i.e. 666. LdV interprets this enigma (LdV 1959, p. 39-40) according to the main notion of Western science (Koyré 1957), the limit of a series. In other terms, he subdues an element of the basic science, Mathematics, to suggest a spiritual hint; hence, he instrumentalizes scientific knowledge to know the path of salvation.

He reads 666 as an infinite series of the same cipher 6, i.e. as 666..., a series of 6 tending, at the right hand, to a limit number. In agreement to the meanings that all peoples give to numbers, 6 is then intended as representing a man/woman. Hence, the number 666 represents an infinite expansion of the man/woman on a merely natural level; yet, this series is unable to reach the number 7, i.e. the typical number of a spiritual man/woman.

By means of the oldest Western science, Geometry, I suggest one more interpretation (Drago 1997). Three ciphers 6 joined in one number means three men wanting to reach unity, likely as three vertices shape a triangle; just the figure Christian tradition and by other religious traditions attribute to God; actually, in Genesis 3 to become similar to God was the promise by the snake. Actually, the efforts to reach unity through merely natural drives (6) in a long-term perspective is doomed to fail to achieve a higher spiritual status.

Among past Christian interpretations of Apocalypse 13, LdV's one has to be qualified as the first structural interpretation, since the two social actors are no more recognised as celebrated evil personalities (e.g. Nero), but as specific social structures (after forty years an encyclical text joined the notion of a structural sin), i.e. Science and Technology; and even the salvation is intended in structural terms.

#### 4. The conversion of religious belief

Although, to my knowledge, in no other religion some authoritative scholar interpreted sacred texts with reference to modern Science and Technology, after this interpretation, no more Science and Technology are allowed to consider belief as essentially unable to understand the modern way of living. Hence, LdV gave again authority to old sacred texts with respect to modern Science and Technology.

By a comparison of the two texts, we see that they represent the same kind of sin, yet in two different civilisations, a primitive one and a mature one. In fact, LdV's main category is the notion of a civilisation, which is narrower than metaphysical and ethical notions, and broader than society and other political notions. It leads LdV to characterise anew ancient theological notions, mainly the sin, now intended even in a structural sense, and the correlated notion of a conversion from this kind of sin, as a conversion from even social structures.

By following Gandhi's attitude, LdV's interpretation offers an unprecedented linkage between Eastern and Western religions, concerning both the interior life and the active participation, inspired by the awareness of social structures, to social life. But this new attitude converted a religion, in agreement with Gandhi's teachings, to mainly an ethical commitment for improving not only the welfare of our little neighbourhood, but the whole mankind; a welfare to be obtained by even fighting against oppressive social structures. Indeed, while in the past religions suggested efforts addressed to mainly achieve transcendental life, by non-violent teachers they are thus converted in a creative effort for substantiating inside the present society God's kingdom as best as possible; or even, in layman terms, a free, peaceful and just society. As a consequence, this new attitude does not belong to any specific religion; rather, it can be shared by whatsoever person, even a person not believing in God, provided that he is believing in the essentially positive nature of each man/woman; i.e. in the infinite potentialities of a person.

This attitude was illustrated by the first European non-violent, the philosopher Aldo Capitini. Inside the historical development of Western philosophy he focussed his attention on Kant's crucial step. By recognizing the failure of a millennial effort elicited by mankind to know the "thing in itself", Kant suggested to regain reality by means of a different effort, the ethical one, to be performed through an "adjunction" of ethical nature. This adjunction then originated Hegel's notion of *Aufhebung*, representing a move of Absolute Spirit. Rather, it was intended by Capitini as the proposal, inside a given unsatisfactory situation, for an immanent ethical effort, performed by whatsoever person sincerely wanting to produce transcendent values inside a community; that means "to do oneself a centre" in order to achieve the "compresence" and at last that "you-all people" which constitutes a "freed reality" substantiating an "omnicracy", where life is developing in a "choral way" and "politics is religion at the highest level". Capitini's philosophy can be defined as a pan-personalist philosophy (Bobbio 2002); I add, as a personalist left of Hegelian philosophy (Drago 1998).

#### 5. Generalizing the main suggestions to religious teaching, scientific knowledge and philosophy

According to non-violent teachers, both science and technology, when scrutinized under an ethical viewpoint, present, contrarily to a *prima facie* appraisal, an essentially double nature: good and evil. In synthesis, the ethical nature of science too is a conflict; just the opposite of the common image, according to which science is capable to solve almost all conflicts.

Moreover, both the above-illustrated interpretations of the structural evil, symbolized by 666, suggest that the failure, and hence the salvation too, has two dimensions, i.e. infinity and organisation. Upon each of the latter ones a man can take his two basic choices.

These two dimensions are relevant in theology too. For instance, out of the ten commandments the first three concerns infinity and the last seven one the (familial and social) organization. The same holds true for Christ's synthesis of them in two commandments only; as well as for the prayer Our Father. According to Bagavad Gīta, human hearth includes two chords, Infinity and Unity, i.e. a unitarian organization (quoted by LdV 1993, p. 18).

In my opinion the best hint for revealing in science the basic option on the infinity was Koyré's analysis (Koyré 1957), which emphasized Newton's option for actual infinity in opposition to both Descartes' and Galilei's choices for potential infinity only. Moreover, by following d'Alembert, L. Carnot (Carnot 1783, 102-105; 1803, xiii-xvii.) supported the view that there are two kinds of organisation of a scientific theory, i.e. an "empirical" one and a "rational", deductive one. I characterised the foundations of science as constituted by these two options. By means of them I interpreted Koyré's characteristic statements "Dissolution of finite space and geometrisation of space", and then generalized them in new categories capable to interpret the history of modern science. Moreover, I interpreted all the categories suggested by previous historians of science. (Drago 2001)

In recent philosophy, Levinas emphasized both dimensions (Levinas 1961). But already Leibniz emphasised the two labyrinths of human reason, i.e. the notion of infinity and the dilemma on freewill or law (truly, a dilemma on the two kinds of organisation, as they are viewed from a subjectivist viewpoint). They can be associated respectively to the two great principle Leibniz recognized, i.e. the principle of non-contradiction and the principle of sufficient reason. When interpreted through the two basic options, Leibniz' program for a metaphysics of science - i.e. his *Scientia Generalis* - results to be successful (Drago 1994). This fact gives new relevance to his philosophy of science and moreover it suggest to change the common interpretation of the historical development of philosophy.

Moreover, the two basic options suggest a general theory of conflict resolution (Drago 1996). According to it, the non-violent attitude makes appeal to the principle of sufficient reason, governing a heuristic method for solving the conflict at issue. The rational reason for associating non-violence and that principle is their common feature to be double negated sentences, to each one of them correspond a positive sentence lacking empirical, operative support. Since the failure of the double negation law characterizes intuitionistic logic, all that means that they essentially pertain to a different logic to common one; or even, they open the minds to see a new world. Remarkably, in Capitini's philosophy of non-violence the main characteristic words are double negated words. Moreover, in agreement to his characteristic way of arguing, he proposed a reform of dialectics (Capitini, 1959).

In sum, we obtained a structure of knowledge constituted by two dimensions; each one can be considered as splitting in two dichotomic choices; in total, four pairs of choices, giving up to four models of theory (Drago 1991), to be considered as the four cardinal point for our knowledge inside an essentially pluralistic framework (just in the spirit of non-violence).

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