

A SINGULAR, INADEQUATE CONCEPTION OF PHILOSOPHY

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SOME time ago the present writer discussed in an article in *The Open Court* the status of philosophy in our own day—or the respective views of several eminent and influential thinkers regarding the mission, province and function of philosophy. It was clearly shown among other things, that those views diverge widely; that while some adhere to the opinion of Spencer as to the synthetic character and task of philosophy, others are satisfied that philosophy will decay and die unless it finds and cultivates, in scientific fashion, a *field of its own*,—unless, that is, it takes up real and vital problems *not covered by any other branch of knowledge* or discipline and contrives to deal with them fruitfully and effectively.

It is somewhat surprising to note that Prof. Will Durant, in his fascinating and on the whole deservedly popular though here and there superficial *Story of Philosophy*, a much-needed volume that supplements and in a sense supersedes George Henry Lewes' once well known and widely read scholarly *Biographical History of Philosophy*, advances a conception of philosophy that is strangely unmodern, humble, not to say mean, and certain to be rejected with scorn by most of the scholars who work in the philosophic field and are endeavoring to bring forth solid and wholesome fruit.

Prof. Durant naturally felt that he could not treat philosophy historically and analytically without giving a tolerably exact definition of the term descriptive of his subject matter. Here is his definition of philosophy:

“Science seems always to advance, while philosophy seems always to lose ground. Yet this is only because philosophy accepts the hard and hazardous task of dealing with problems not yet open to the

methods of science—problems like good and evil, beauty and ugliness, order and freedom, life and death; so soon as a field of inquiry yields knowledge susceptible of exact formulation, it is called science. Every science begins as philosophy and ends as art; it arises in hypothesis and grows into achievement. Philosophy is a hypothetical interpretation of the unknown (as in metaphysics), or of the inexactly known (as in ethics or political philosophy); it is in the front trench in the siege of truth. Science is the captured territory; and behind it are those secure regions in which knowledge and art build our imperfect and marvelous world. Philosophy seems to stand still—perplexed; but only because she leaves the fruits of victory to her daughters, the sciences, and herself passes on, divinely discontent, to the uncertain and unexplored.”

Very fine rhetoric, that; but it is even approximately true? Let us see. In the first place, the sciences are not free, and never will be, from “hypothetical interpretations.” Any given science, in addition to “laws”, gives us theories and suppositions. No science is static. No science is “content,” or proud of the far from “secure” regions behind it.

In the second place, no science “ends” in art. We apply science and use it in industry, art and all sorts of practical activities. But no *end* is ever reached. Science continues its researches, frames new theories, modifies old ones, and points the way to new applications and utilities.

In the third place, philosophy is not the *mother* of the sciences. Huxley called science “organized common sense,” which implies, quite correctly, that the sciences are the daughters of observation and experimentation, controlled and uncontrolled. No facts, no science. No sufficient body of facts, no theory worthy of the adjective “scientific.” No repeated and verified conclusions, no definitely and thoroughly established uniformities, no scientific law.

With the foregoing reservations and amendments in mind—and they are almost self-evident—what becomes of Prof. Durant’s definition and characterization of philosophy?

If philosophy is not scientific and knows not the methods and procedure of science, how *does* it frame its guesses or theories? If philosophy is not organized common sense, what is it? Where does it find its premises, and how does it verify its tentative conclusions?

It is true that in the past philosophy has concerned itself with many problems of which several sciences have calmly and cruelly

robbed it. When philosophy was a rag bag, a strange compound, with theology, metaphysics, history, ethics, logic, psychology and other branches of knowledge as its ingredients, it did deal, after a fashion, with scientific theories and scientific laws. Today no science, whether exact or inexact, is in the least dependent upon or in partnership with philosophy. Each science works in its own field and seeks to solve its own problems. If philosophy has problems peculiar to itself, and hopes to solve them, then it follows that philosophy is employing the methods of science and aspires to the position of a tolerably exact science. If its problems are either unreal or insoluble, then it is merely wasting time and energy, churning wind, spoiling ink and paper.

The philosophy that stands still does so because it is lifeless and incapable of movement. The philosophy that *seems* to lose ground always, *does* lose ground always. The philosophy that has been neglected and scorned by men of science and by common sense has deserved neglect and scorn, because it had no beginning, no middle and no goal. Today many philosophers realize that they cannot redeem their corner in the sun unless they make satisfactory progress and accept the canons and tests of science.

Let us take the supposedly philosophical problems mentioned by Prof. Durant. There is first the problem of good and evil. That is not a *philosophical* problem at all. Good and evil are *ethical* conceptions; they imply a human standard, an ideal. There are good economic arrangements and bad, good political institutions and bad, good citizens and bad, good books and bad, good diplomacy and bad. If the golden rule be our social ideal and standard, then we know what we mean when we talk of good and evil. There can be no philosophical formula embracing all the good and all evil in the universe and beyond. Philosophers as such will do nothing with the problem; economists, ethicists, statesmen, diplomats, employers, workmen, neighbors can do much with it and are, in fact, doing something with it all the time.

Or take the problem of order and freedom. The problem is empty unless we ask order and freedom *where, in what sense, in relation to what purpose*. Jurisprudence, political science, economics, art are severally interested in that problem. Society needs order, but the individual needs freedom as well as order. How are these needs to be reconciled? Men must be free to engage in business, to join parties, to remain outside of parties, to study and read, to amuse

themselves, to marry and bring up children. At the same time men must refrain from crime, aggression, nuisances. Here are real problems to be solved by real sciences. Prohibition, punishment, control of certain industries, prevention of monopoly and fraud, regulation of external conduct in accordance with decency and taste—here are significant problems of order and freedom. The philosopher on the other hand may discuss order and freedom in the abstract till doomsday without getting anywhere.

The same observations may be made concerning ugliness and beauty, life and death. Psychological research professes to throw some light on death, but it takes great care to adopt scientific methods. It asks us to examine certain evidence, to study and observe certain alleged phenomena. It does not claim exemption from scientific criticism. It will stand or fall, in the end, by the kind and quality of proof it manages to offer. As to ugliness and beauty, it is clear that psychology, physiology, physics, anthropology and sociology will have to cooperate in solving that problem. Conceptions of beauty and ugliness vary with space and time, with climate and race. Music and painting sufficiently illustrate this truth.

Prof. Durant ought not to have missed the fact that some of the contemporary philosophers long for, but dare not avow frankly that they long for the role which Herbert Spencer claimed for them—that of builders of synthetic systems of thought. The melancholy fate of Spencer's own alleged system does not encourage hopes of other would be synthetic philosophers. Systems are unpopular today, and the revolutionary changes in science are well calculated to make them unpopular. Still, the philosopher vaguely feels that he *must* build systems on the foundations furnished by the various sciences or lose his occupation and function. Prof. Dewey hints at a synthetic philosophy when he says that philosophy deals with human values and is in a sense a branch of ethics. Some of his followers have said that the philosopher is a sort of super-mediator and arbitrator by reason of his detachment, broad culture, insight and wisdom. These utterances point to system building, though, as already intimated, it requires rigorous cross-examination to bring out the claim and the dream. The alternative to synthetic system building, to repeat, is the policy advocated by Bertrand Russell—namely, the selection of some real and important questions and problems *not studied or reserved for study by the several sciences* and the treatment of them, under the label of philosophy, in a strictly scientific manner. If no such prob-

lems exist, according to Mr. Russell, then philosophy had better put up its shutters and go out of business. At any rate, Prof. Durant's idea of philosophy is sadly out of date and out of harmony with recent and current developments in thought.

For nothing that has happened to philosophy, as formerly understood, could have been avoided. Certainly it would have been idle and puerile to ask the several sciences—psychology, ethics, physics, mathematics, history, etc.—to “respect” philosophy by refraining from the study and discussion of such of its supposed elements as severally fell, naturally and inevitably, within their own respective fields. Mr. Durant says in a popular and flippant magazine article that philosophy is unpopular and has had to submit to serious successive losses. The losses are gains to science and to human progress; and, as a matter of fact, philosophy is not unpopular when it attempts to compete with exact sciences in their own domains—a task for which, as Prof. Dewey said, it is woefully unfit.

It has become impossible today for any thinker to take all knowledge for his province. Specialization is inevitable, though it has its recognized dangers. The philosopher cannot permit himself to be ignorant of the science of his time, but he cannot be at home in all the sciences. He must consult the experts and be guided by them. The experts and specialists, on the other hand, are quite disposed nowadays to acknowledge their limitations and to consult the philosophers who evince comprehension of and regard for truly scientific methods.

We may note here that Prof. A. Whitehead, the eminent British mathematician and physicist, who is also a metaphysician and a philosopher, does not share Mr. Durant's notion of the function of philosophy. Although the chapter and paragraphs on philosophy to be found in Mr. Whitehead's new and most timely work, *Science in the Modern World*, leave not a little to be desired, it is not difficult to gather that the author believes in the strictest use of the methods and tests of science by the philosophers. What is valuable in Kant and in Bergson, for example, Mr. Whitehead attributes to the scientific knowledge possessed by those great thinkers. As to the type of problems to be dealt with by philosophers, Mr. Whitehead apparently takes it for granted that no serious controversy is possible over that question. He does not consider it necessary to throw overboard the work of Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Hume and others. The relation between object and subject, the nature of

reality, the validity of human reasoning, the ultimate principles of being, the emergence of value in a world of incessant change and flux—these are the essential philosophical problems to be studied and restudied, according to Mr. Whitehead, in the light of the laws and theories of the exact sciences. This is a tenable position, and it implies at least, that philosophy is *not* a branch of ethics, nor an adjunct to theology, nor a set of mere conjectures incapable of verification, but an independent discipline possessed of a good title to the field it cultivates.