

THE SPIRITUAL NEED OF OUR AGE

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WHAT are the peculiar ills of our age? Unrest and discontent are general, and there is much talk about decay and retrogression in the normal and spiritual realm. Yet science is constantly making new conquests and piling marvels upon marvels. Admittedly there is progress in many directions, not all of which are technical and material. The span of human life has been lengthened and is still being lengthened by improvements in sanitation, public and private health, hygiene and preventive medicine. The machine and the automatic tool are emancipating the wage-worker from drudgery and exhausting toil. Never has the average person had more leisure than he enjoys today, and the standards of living were never as high.

The idea of progress has been challenged, yet evidences of progress, illustrations and results of scientific progress, are to be seen on every hand. There may be no "law" of progress, no absolute *quaranty* of progress, but the human animal is so curious, so aggressive, so persistent, so alert and gifted that, with so many problems facing him, he simply cannot help learning, experimenting, applying his knowledge, making it a means of acquiring more and more knowledge. There are in human history periods of comparative stagnation and even of reaction, but, as a matter of fact, even such periods have been misinterpreted. They too had their victories and positive achievements. The stagnation was not complete, the reaction not absolute and hopeless. In the indictments of the present age there is, likewise, no doubt, much exaggeration and injustice. We cannot judge it impartially because we are of it and in it, and perhaps the verdict of the future historians will be far more favorable upon it than the estimate of the contemporary critics, pessimists and philosophers.

However, even sober minded and acute thinkers not addicted to extravagance or phrase-mongering hold that there is *something* wrong with our age spiritually, and it is proper and profitable to glance at some of the more moderate of the indictments in question.

Prof. A. N. Whitehead, for example, who has been endeavoring to give the age a new philosophy and at least the elements of a new religion, diagnoses the troubles of the time in the following sentence: "The new situation in the thought of today arises from the fact that scientific theory is outrunning common sense." Mr. Whitehead's metaphysical religion is itself an excellent example of this gulf between scientific or philosophic theory, on the one hand, and common sense on the other.

What does common sense make of the Relativity theory? How many persons of average intelligence grasp the quantum theory? How many understand the controversy between the new realists and the new idealists? How many study anthropology and the evolution of religious conceptions? How many know the status of the discussion concerning the descent of man?

It may be objected, of course, that the average person—or the mass of humanity—*never* concerned itself with such topics as those just mentioned, and that there is nothing new or disturbing in his or its ignorance and indifference. There is force in the objection, but it does not wholly dispose of the point made by Dr. Whitehead. Dense and childish superstitions are no longer possible to the average person: he is too intelligent to accept traditions blindly and repeat meaningless formulas; but he is not intelligent enough to acquire a scientific and philosophic substitute for the old and discarded superstitions or conventions. A little knowledge is proverbially dangerous, and yet the majority are condemned to the condition of little, unassimilated, useless knowledge.

Ignorance of mathematics, physics, chemistry, mechanics is not particularly harmful, of course. Millions enjoy the benefits of broadcasting without the faintest notion of the principles of wireless telegraphy, just as millions enjoy music without knowing the a b c of musical composition or the elementary principles of harmony, development and form. But in the realm of conduct and ethics ignorance or little knowledge is indeed a dangerous thing. Human beings cannot live without *some* philosophy of life, and those who renounce tradition and dogma need a substitute for the old staff of existence. The alternative to a rational substitute is often a half

formulated philosophy of despair—of pessimism and cynicism. It is a mistake to think that the cynics have no philosophy. They have one, though they deny the possibility of any. Theirs is the old philosophy of indifference and animal pleasure, of "Let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die!"

Science has supplied no new philosophy, and promises none for the near future. It has wrecked a number of pseudo-scientific philosophic systems, and by the very rate of its progress it has made synthetic philosophic systems impossible. How can you have a synthesis when the sciences to be comprehended and drawn upon change constantly and in a revolutionary way.

The bitter cry of earnest and thoughtful persons for a philosophy is heard on every side. In a recent article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, for example, a contributor—Bernard I. Bell—indicted modern education because of its neglect of philosophy. To quote at some length from the article:

"We have too largely abandoned philosophy. We have even degraded the word, until it has come to mean to most people merely a sort of sophistical playing with abstract ideas. Philosophy is properly defined as "a knowledge of general principles as explaining facts and existences." We are not at the moment, in our institutions of higher learning, paying much attention to explaining anything. As a result we are turning out physicians with no philosophy of health; lawyers with no philosophy of ethics; captains of business with no philosophy of industry; parsons with no philosophy of religion; and, in vast numbers, educators with no philosophy of education. * * *

"Inadequately guiding youth in the development of a vital philosophy, we are sending forth graduates with diffused minds, scarcely fit to take command of their own lives or to cooperate in the development of a social state; drifters into conformity and essential human futility; easy victims to specious crowd psychologies; followers of what seem easy ways out; Bolshevik or Fascist in every attitude. They esteem themselves only creatures of their environment and so they tend to become just that. * * *

"Science is only a way to dig out rough material, stuff which can be articulated only by philosophers. The correlation in each student's life of the scientific method and the facts it discovers for us, on the one hand, and the age-long spiritual aspirations and interpretations which constitute religion, on the other hand, is the proper determining purpose of the college. Its religious activity cannot consist merely in conduct-

ing some devotional exercises in the chapel or in giving courses on the literary value of the Bible. In all the teaching in every lecture room, seminar, laboratory, there must be the subconscious thought: 'No facts observed here are worth anything until the students have assimilated them, digested them, interpreted them. It is men and women that we are teaching—not these bits of knowledge. There are ultimates of which all this is only a reflection. Unless our teaching is enabling both us and our students more to understand the ultimates, that teaching is a waste of time.'

Very well said; but where is the scientific school that will venture today to claim knowledge of the ultimates and to teach them to critical minds? Ultimates and a philosophy of them cannot be made to order. We have been assured, indeed, that philosophy is being reconstructed, but, unfortunately, there is no agreement among philosophers either as to process of reconstruction or as to the principles and data to be confidently used in the process. Pragmatism, Psycho-analysis, Behaviorism, Organic Mechanism, the new Humanism are severally influencing the reconstruction of philosophy, but can anyone tell how far the process has been carried, what is supposed to be settled, and where we stand with regard to the ultimates—God, the Purpose of the Cosmos, Man's destiny and his relation to the rest of nature? No; no serious thinker will even try definitely to answer such questions. And some contemporary philosophers assert that philosophy does not and cannot deal with ultimates, and must limit itself to the humble task of helping men to solve their social and moral problems!

Some time ago a small western college, controlled by self-styled Fundamentalists, announced that no member of the faculty would be retained, and no new educator engaged to teach in that institution, unless the following essentials or ultimates were whole-heartedly subscribed to by him—the inerrancy and the inspired character of the Bible, the existence of a Supreme Being that rules the cosmos, the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth and his role as savior, and, finally, the resurrection of the physical body. Well, here is a set of doctrines or beliefs that constitute a solid and sufficient philosophy of life and conduct, *provided you can accept it!* While millions of educated and thinking people did accept it, or imagined they did, no trouble existed for them in the intellectual or moral domain; they had a complete guide to education, to professional relations, to domestic and social activities. But how many cultivated and enlightened persons

to-day really accept the essentials of the Fundamentalist creed? How many who can think at all believe in the inerrancy of the Bible—a proposition too silly to provoke serious criticism, seeing that no Bible writer makes any claim to infallibility? How many believe in the “physical” resurrection of the dead and attach any meaning to the formula?

It is unnecessary to pursue this line of questioning, however. The old anthropomorphic and naive theology is dead, and the philosophy that sprang from that theology is also dead. There is as yet nothing worthy of the name of philosophy to take the place of the one that is discarded and discredited. Teachers cannot teach something they do not themselves believe and grasp. The chaos complained of is inevitable. Yet the situation, as already said, is far from being satisfactory. Can, then, anything be done to end the chaos and solve the problem?

Yes, something can be done, if the orthodox theologian and the various fundamentalists and literalists will face the facts, admit defeat and cooperate with the Agnostics in building up modestly a philosophy and an ethics on the basis of scientific knowledge. It cannot be seriously alleged that Darwin, Spencer, Huxley, Tyndall and scores of other eminent Agnostics of their period had no philosophy to offer to their disciples and to the world, no high and noble principles of conduct, no ideals and standards calculated to elevate mankind to a plane which even the devout Christians would admire and commend. The Agnostic is neither a cynic nor a pessimist; he has no supernatural sanctions for his code, but he finds the natural sanctions sufficient. He believes in rational human happiness as the sole test and criterion of conduct, but his conception of rational happiness is broad enough to include every form of wise beneficence, negative and positive. He does not regard science as an idol to be worshipped, but he knows that most of the attacks upon science, or upon the alleged claims and pretensions of science, are conceived in error and misunderstanding. He is convinced that *science makes for moral order and moral progress*, and that the so called failures of science are really the failures of certain aspects of human nature.

Science cannot create or abolish passion. It can only serve as a guide to those who are able to control passion. Science cannot abolish hate, greed, malice, vanity, arrogance, jealousy, meanness. But it can and does trace the consequences of such attributes, and it can demonstrate the practical superiority of justice, kindness, sym-

pathy, charity. Science appeals to reason, but men blinded by passion and fear, by selfishness and lust, do not follow the light of reason and of science.

Science, for example, tells us that while there has been a definite increase in intellectual power of man in the last 100,000 years, or since Neanderthal times, there is no evidence of development or the socialization of the instincts. Is science to be blamed for stagnation of that part of human nature? Science gives us facts, generalizations, theories, principles and hypotheses: it cannot force us to act in accordance with its conclusions.

What then will modify and improve human nature? The answer is—Experience, individual and racial. Man must learn how to live in a society and how to reap the maximum of benefit from social and economic operation. He must learn to think in terms of international rather than national organization; he must adopt moral equivalents for warfare and wasteful competition. His education will be slow, but there is no known way to accelerate it, and there is no short cut to perfection. It is the business of the more progressive elements to convert the less progressive to sound views and to make it difficult for politicians and diplomats to pursue policies that are repugnant to reason and inimical to justice. Such educational efforts exemplify the best sort of propaganda—propaganda in the service of righteousness and brotherhood.

As to those who assert that neither science nor practical experience will *ever* moralize the individual and improve his conduct, and that religion and philosophy will have to be restored to their old status in order to save society and civilization from destruction, they should ask themselves candidly by what means their desideratum can possibly be brought about. Man has not gratuitously, wantonly, capriciously forsaken the old religion or the old philosophy; *he has simply outgrown them*. He cannot go back; he cannot reject the evidence and the logic which led him to abandon obviously immature, shallow, empty or meaningless phrases and pseudo-ideas. He must go forward, and, if possible, develop a more satisfactory philosophy than that of the Agnostic.

Meantime it is fallacious to complain of the march of science and to say, as a British philosophical writer said recently, that "each fresh advance in the application of science to practical affairs will be fraught with fresh danger to the race." Science cannot be a menace to the race unless intelligence itself is a menace. Inventions

and discoveries are applied constructively as well as destructively. Science makes war more and more horrible, but science also humanizes war and reduces its toll. Science reduces labor to automatism, but science also increases leisure and enriches the life of the humblest worker. Science even improves human nature, though indirectly, as Prof. T. H. Huxley admitted. It has given us Eugenics—as understood by the thoughtful—and enables us to control more and more our physical and material environment. Science furnishes us with powerful machines and automatic tools, but it does not rob human life of color, of variety, of complexity. On the contrary, it causes multiformity, emancipates individuality, stimulates competition by giving more and more human beings time for contemplation, reflection, observation and study.

Science is not enough, but *whatever may be added to science must be sound enough to withstand the scrutiny of scientifically trained minds.* We hear much about new tendencies in science, but these alleged new tendencies must not violate the spirit and methods of science. If they do, they represent reversions to superstition and quackery, and take the name of science in vain.