

WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY?— TAKING STOCK

BY VICTOR S. YARROS

OURS is not a purely scientific age. In the first place, scientific men to-day are, as a rule, more modest than they were forty or thirty years ago, and claim far less for Science, with a capital S, than was the fashion during the last decades of the nineteenth century. In the second place, and largely because of the limitations frankly acknowledged by men of science, there has been of late a veritable renaissance of philosophy, if not of religion. Certain conceptions and assumptions in the domain of the natural sciences are so "idealistic" that the term "materialist" has lost its meaning. Science itself, in a word, has destroyed that narrow, superficial materialism which once so aggressively claimed the sole right to consider itself rational and scientific.

Once more, then, there is a field and a function for philosophy. But it is becoming increasingly difficult for the earnest lay inquirer and student to find in current philosophical writing a clear and sound definition of philosophy, and a satisfactory delimitation of its scope and province.

We have been told again and again that philosophy to-day is humble and does not pretend to explain the infinite and unknowable. We have also been told that philosophy has become practical and anxious to give aid in solving social and moral problems. We are told, half facetiously and half seriously, by Professor Bertrand Russell and the Pragmatists, as well as by the Neo-Realists and the Critical Realists, that in the older systems of philosophy there was a heavy admixture of humbug and barren dialectics. One is willing to grant all this, especially if one remembers that science and theology have also had their worthless ingredients. But the men who have much to say on the negative and critical aspects of the subject have strangely little to say on the simple, natural questions as to the mis-

sion and field of the new, the pure, the modest and practical philosophy. One sometimes doubts whether in the process of whittling down, clearing away, rejecting and disavowing, the modern philosophers have left themselves anything substantial and worthy of the name.

Philosophy once dealt with ethical, psychological and ontological problems. To-day it wisely leaves moral issues to the science of ethics, questions in psychology to the science of psychology, metaphysics to the professional metaphysicians, and so on. This policy we can all praise unreservedly. What we cannot praise is the reticence or silence of many philosophers on the type and kind of problems claimed by the philosopher *as solely or peculiarly his*. What does he do which the sciences cannot do and do not undertake to do? What, in short, is his contribution *as philosopher*?

Herbert Spencer, we may recall, regarded unification and synthesis as the mission of philosophy. Each science, according to him, solved certain problems and formulated certain laws and working theories. None of the scientific specialists—and all men of science are now specialists—attempt synthesis or unification; if such tasks are possible and profitable, some one not a specialist must attend to them. That some one, Spencer held, was the philosopher. It is he who co-ordinates, combines, harmonizes the respective conclusions of the several sciences, and it is he who, in the light of his synthesis, puts and answers certain questions not tackled by any science or group of allied sciences.

This was a very alluring theory respecting the function and mission of philosophy. But, alas, facts have played with it. The sciences have made wonderful progress since Spencer's day, but where is the philosophic synthesis, the unification? Spencer himself failed to produce any really synthetic philosophy; for some of his conclusions and convictions were too arbitrary and ascribable to temperament, mental habits, prejudices and environmental influences, and not at all to strict logic working objectively in the domain of science or philosophy. Spencer had definite views on politics, economics, ethics, social organization, education, religion. Other evolutionists, who started from the same premises as Spencer's biology, psychology and other sciences, arrived at political, or economic, or social, or moral conclusions radically, or totally, different from his. This, obviously, could not happen if the several sciences really imposed certain respective principles or deductions, and if the proper union of those principles and deductions imposed a certain philosophy of life and human conduct!

Spencer has few followers to-day as a philosopher. Some sort of philosophical synthesis is longed for and dreamed of, to be sure, but it is undeniable that those philosophers who claim to have made the greatest advance and to have attracted the most converts among instructed and cultivated men have refrained from encouraging such hopes and dreams.

There has been, from one point of view, striking progress in philosophy, but in what direction?

To answer this question, let us glance at the respective positions of three modern and influential philosophers—the late William James, Professor John Dewey and Professor Bertrand Russell.

James left no systematic, ambitious treatise on philosophy, but no attentive student of his stimulating and fascinating books and essays is in doubt concerning the essential elements of his philosophy. Moreover, an excellent summary of it is appended by Professor Perry to his work on *Present Philosophical Tendencies*. In Professor Perry's words, James, as a radical empiricist, a pluralist and a realist, could not but "abandon the easier and more high-handed philosophy of abstractions for the more difficult and less conclusive philosophy of concrete particulars." To him, then, philosophy was "the study of man as he works out his salvation." Keenly interested in humanly important problems, James "sought to answer for men the questions which exigencies of life led them to ask; and, where no certain answer was to be had, he offered the prop of faith." His philosophy "was his way of bringing men to the wisest belief which in their half-darkness they can achieve."

But it is necessary to bear in mind that the salvation James concerned himself with, the issues he faced, the faith he encouraged all had to do with the ethical, spiritual and religious values of human life. God, immortality, freedom, human destiny, truth, the nature of knowledge, the relation of object and subject, or thing and idea, the meaning of evil, the essence of good—these were the themes of James' philosophy. Politics, economics, administration, organization, mechanism, institutions interested James only insofar as they embodied ideals derived from philosophy. Like Tolstoy, James regarded "the meaning of life" and the purpose of God as man's greatest problems. In all this James, despite his strikingly original ideas and style, remained true to philosophic tradition. He was not an Agnostic in philosophy, any more than in religion. He sought his answers in human experience and he did not admit that they could be found outside of that experience. He staked everything on the

right interpretation of human experience—religious, spiritual and moral. To those who could not accept his interpretation he said frankly that he had no “message” for them. He merely admonished them to continue their search and their contemplation of experience. He could not guarantee the supremacy or triumph of good; God was to him only “one of the claimants”: the belief that the world is divine may not be susceptible of scientific proof, but it is as likely to be true as not, and, in any case, it helps humanity in the effort to make the world divine—that is, good.

Now, there is much in James that is tonic and inspiring, but it is evident on reflection that what he offers is not a philosophy, but “a second best,” a provisional substitute for philosophy. Indeed, by implication James denies the possibility of a *system* of philosophy. A few ideas about method, knowledge, mind, experience, function, activity are not sufficient to build up a philosophy in the proper definition of the term. Perhaps no coherent, true philosophy is possible, according to James, but he never said so.

We turn to Professor Dewey, who deals more fully and explicitly with the subject.

Professor Dewey deals with the mission and function of philosophy in several books, but nowhere more directly and elaborately than in his popular volume on *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. According to him, philosophy is not properly concerned, and cannot profitably concern itself with “puzzles of epistemology and the disputes between realist and idealist, between phenomenalist and absolutist.” It is, he says, the preoccupations of modern philosophers with alien and empty problems which have made that branch of knowledge and study “so remote from the understanding of the everyday person and from the results and processes of science.” Facing boldly and squarely the question what would be left to philosophy were it to renounce and abandon metaphysical and epistemology tasks, Professor Dewey writes in answer:

“Would not the elimination of the traditional problems permit philosophy to devote itself to a more fruitful and more needed task? Would it not encourage philosophy to face the great social and moral defects and troubles from which humanity suffers, to concentrate its attention upon clearing up the causes and exact nature of these evils and upon developing a clear idea of better social possibilities; in short, upon projecting an idea or ideal which, instead of expressing the notion of another world or some far-away, unrealizable goal, would be used as a method of understanding and rectifying specific social ills?”

That the foregoing statement is vague and incomplete, Professor Dewey is prompt to admit. But he seeks to amplify and clarify it by several "burning" illustrations. He refers to the world war, to the antagonism between capital and labor, the conflicts between social classes generally, the failure of the social sciences and the fine arts to keep pace with the exact sciences, with technique, with physical command of nature, and asks whether there be not to-day urgent need of more fundamental enlightenment and guidance than we possess—whether the time has not come to make a serious attempt—by means and methods peculiar to philosophy—"to find an intelligent substitute for blind custom and blind impulse as guides to life and conduct."

We have sufficiently indicated Professor Dewey's mature view of the province and mission of philosophy. Is it an altogether satisfactory view? Take his own illustrations. The question of war and peace is primarily an ethical question. It is also a biological question. It is, finally, a question of practical statesmanship, upon which history is capable of throwing much light. It is desirable to abolish war? If so, is it possible to do so? If possible, what are the most effective means to that end? Why have men fought; what have they fought for; what instrumentalities have they used to avoid war and settle disputes peacefully? Surely these questions will never be left to the philosopher. As intimated, biologists, sociologists, psychologists, moralists, theologians, economists, statesmen and writers of government are severally seeking and giving answers to them. They will continue to do so. If they shall fail to furnish the intelligent guidance needed, how will the philosopher furnish it, and what will be *his* data and materials? They cannot be different from those available to, and employed by, the sciences just named. There is, by the hypothesis we are discussing, no additional source of knowledge and wisdom open to philosophers. What, then, is to be their particular contribution?

Perhaps Professor Dewey implies—he does not say so explicitly—that the philosopher will assimilate and use the information and the inductions of all other sciences and build up a synthesis of his own. If so, he consciously or unconsciously reverts to the Spencerian idea of the task and business of philosophy, an idea, we repeat, which has not "marched" either in theory or in practical life.

What has been said about the war-and-peace problem may also be said about the capital-and-labor problem. Economists, moralists, theologians, historians, engineers and—of late—even psychologists

have been wrestling with that vexed and intricate question, and, as we know, nothing like a consensus of opinion has as yet developed even among advanced thinkers save, perhaps, to this extent—that the present system, mainly competitive, will be superseded in the course of time by a co-operative system largely if not entirely voluntary. Now, what can the philosopher add here to our knowledge? He must do what the humble lay person does—read Marx, Mallock, Hyndman, Kropotkine, Webb, Fabian literature, Cole, *et al*, and attempt to find a way of reconciling individualism with socialism, liberty with justice, progress with stability, private judgment with social control. And what are the chances of success in that attempt, or of agreement, among philosophers? It is perfectly certain that some philosophers will lean toward individualism, others toward Socialism, some toward conservatism, others toward radicalism. Our last state will be no better than our first. In addition to controversies among economists, moralists, theologians, etc., we shall have controversies among economists, moralists, theologians, etc., we shall have controversies among self-styled philosophers, would-be builders of synthetic systems!

Professor Dewey, we fear, claims for the philosopher at once too much and too little; too much, because Professor Dewey's philosopher would have to master all the sciences, keep abreast of the leading specialists and evolve a synthesis for the guidance of mankind; too little, because Professor Dewey's philosopher would have no corner, no patch of his own, no set of questions definitely assigned to him for investigation.

Yet Professor Dewey is most instructive and suggestive in that part of his volume in which he emphasizes and drives home the fact that "philosophy originated not out of intellectual material, but out of social and emotional material"; that "it has sprung from a clash of social ends and from a conflict of inherited institutions with incompatible contemporary tendencies": that under disguises and seeming abstractions unrelated to reality it "has been occupied with the precious values embedded in social traditions," and that the history of philosophy must be studied "not as an isolated thing, but as a chapter in the development of civilization and culture." It is certainly true—though often overlooked—that philosophy never really confined itself to ultimate and absolute reality—whatever that may be—or to things-in-themselves, or to entities above and beyond all human experience. We moderns want philosophy to deal frankly and directly with human experience, with reality, with the drama of

existence, with the moral and spiritual forces and the intellectual conceptions that produce that drama. But the question remains, has the philosopher a corner of his own to occupy and illuminate, or is he a sort of general manager, or chairman of the board of directors, in the house of the sciences, the arts, the religions and the politico-social systems of the world?

If a lay lover of philosophy may venture to express an opinion, philosophy cannot afford to abdicate, to renounce all territorial claims, to limit itself to the supervisory and co-ordinating function simply and solely. The philosopher should indeed be wiser, broader and more learned than any specialist. But he must in a sense, and to some extent, *be a specialist himself*. He should know everything about something that other savants neglect or study only superficially. We must have problems specifically and particularly his.

Moreover, there can be but little doubt as to the type and kind of problems that are philosophical in character. Man's relation to the universe is essentially a philosophical problem, though man's place in nature is primarily a biological problem. The test of truth is a philosophical problem, and so is the nature and meaning of reality. So is the "meaning of meaning," a subject about which a remarkable work has just been written. Realists, Pragmatists, Neo-Realists, Neo-Idealists, Critical Realists as well as unattached thinkers and writers of ability and erudition are not open to censure or ridicule for the subject-matter of their investigations or the methods they adopt. They have not strayed from their proper province; they are at home, engaged in the work assigned to them by tradition, by reason, by scientific classification of the activities of the human mind.

And assuredly the problems just specified as being strictly and unmistakably philosophical are not divorced from life, not empty, not trivial, not imaginary. They are, on the contrary, problems which even common sense now recognizes as possessing significance and sustaining vital relations to morals, religion, economics and politics. As to science, what specialist absorbed in biological, psychological, geological, anthropological, historical or other problems ever stops to consider the questions above defined as philosophical? On the contrary, the scientific specialists eagerly disclaim any competence or disposition to deal with those matters. They must be studied and discussed and settled by philosophers, if at all. And it is perfectly safe to say that they will be studied by the philosophers of all schools, though perhaps not in the same way, or under the same method.

It is gratifying to note that Professor Bertrand Russell, the iconoclast in philosophy, as in politico-social speculation, takes substantially the same view as we have just expressed, even though he, too, may be charged with unduly narrowing in one respect the scope and mission of philosophy. Mr. Russell is one of the thinkers who, to use the words of another philosopher, give mathematics "a sort of central position in philosophic speculation." He has been greatly impressed by, and has aided in furthering, the use of mathematics by, and the penetration of mathematics into, philosophic studies and modes of approach. In a sense, therefore, Mr. Russell's views of the subject we are discussing in this paper are even more interesting than those of Professor Dewey or of William James. In dealing with the ideas of the school of mathematical philosophers we have a feeling of thorough-going modernity and of intimacy with the scientific spirit. And what does Mr. Russell tell us in regard to the jurisdiction and proper claims of philosophy? This, in the briefest possible but rigorously correct summary:

That the true aim of philosophy is a "theoretical understanding of the world"; that philosophy is a highly refined, highly civilized pursuit, whose objects are "strange, unusual and remote"; that philosophy can do nothing to satisfy our more human desires, or to help demonstrate our world has this or that "desirable ethical characteristic; that the differences between good and bad are not sufficiently abstract to come within the province of philosophy; that love and hate are, from the philosophers' viewpoint, closely analogous attitudes toward an object; that while a vague sort of ethical interest may prompt philosophers they must beware of any ethical bias and take care to keep the results sought by their studies free from any ethical admixture; that philosophy must not hope to find any answer to the practical problems of life, but content itself with dry and abstract issues; that its hopes are "purely intellectual," and based on the ultimate intrinsic value in the contemplation of truth; that philosophers must acquire the disinterested intellectual curiosity which distinguishes the genuine man of science.

How different, how startlingly different, these ideas are from those of James or of Professor Dewey! What is the poor layman to think in the presence of such disagreements and contradictions!

But on one point Mr. Russell is staunchly orthodox. Philosophy, he says, must have a province of its own and aim at results which the other sciences can neither prove nor disprove; it must consist of propositions which could not even occur to the other sciences. The

essence of philosophy is logic, and it is modern logic—one part of which merges into mathematics—which has rendered philosophic discussion scientific and significant.

The foregoing requires no elaborate comment. Mr. Russell, though hoping for much from the new conception, the new start, in philosophy, promises little of a tangible character. He has scant respect for philosophic stocks—traditions, postulates, ideas—if, indeed, any stocks are left on the shelves after decades of mutually destructive criticism by the philosophers themselves. What he is certain of is that, at last, philosophy can forge ahead with confidence. What its field is, however, Mr. Russell does not tell us in clear language. He has definite ideas as to what philosophy cannot and should not undertake to do, but he gives us no definite idea as to what that branch of science and knowledge can and should endeavor to do. He is sure the philosophic output of the future, provided mathematics and logic control it, will be excellent, dependable and enduring, but he is vague concerning the nature and complexion of the product to be offered to the world by philosophers of the right school. Perhaps he is not willing to commit himself too far, seeing that the present period is one of transition and reconstruction in philosophy. Be this as it may, the lay student and the general public, who are being urged constantly to cultivate philosophy and encourage it by seeking its guidance and marrying it to life, will be more intrigued by Mr. Russell than enlightened.

The educated and reflective lay public has never doubted the fact that philosophy deserves a place in the sun. It has never doubted that philosophy aims to minister to the higher needs of man. But it is watchfully awaiting developments in philosophy, especially the emergence of a consensus of opinion as to the mission, function and exact province of philosophy.