

SOME PRESENT PHILOSOPHICAL TRENDS

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IT WOULD seem that the normal way for philosophy to develop would be as an effort to guide the thought of the age. It should be a growth, as it was in Greece, and not a disputation about and about. Doubtless, it is always this to some extent, but there is a strong tendency to permit its tasks to be defined by merely traditional problems rather than by the problem of present living.

There is evidence today that philosophical interest is developing, not alone by the conscious effort of philosophers, but by the inner demands of many forms of human activity. This brings hope to philosophers, and they stand in need of it if one is to take much current discussion at its face value. For in recent years philosophy has seemed to be a disappointment to its friends and much has been said about its failure.

There have been various opinions as to the causes of this supposed ineffectiveness of formal philosophy and some advice as to what should be done about it.

One reason for discouragement has been the seeming failure of philosophy when compared with the evident success of science. Science bakes bread and does many other useful as well as ornamental things. Science is regnant and radiant. Philosophy, however, shows some signs of developing an inferiority complex.

Some have thought that the discrepancy in the results of the two is due to the fact that philosophy has not adopted the method of the sciences. The advice sometimes is to merge philosophy with science. The Mother of the Sciences having nothing now to live on must go to live with her children. True to experience, the children do not always appear to want her enough to make it wholly comfortable. But there is reason to believe that the poverty is only temporary and that a better living is in prospect. This is well, for philosophy is really, and rightfully, proud.

Others have thought the difference is due to the failure of philosophers to co-operate in working on special problems. Something to be sure, has been done along this line, the results being perhaps in some doubt.

Recently it has become increasingly clear that philosophy should not only learn more science but to some extent should make science the point of departure in approaching its tasks. This appears necessary if for no other reason than that many scientists are undertaking the philosophical task. They may come to think that they themselves may as well do what little is needed of philosophizing and see that it is done well! And philosophers must confess that some things are being done very well; others not so well.

Still others have emphasized the need for philosophy to resume intimate relations with movements of the age in social, economic, and political fields, making its approach from their materials. Much has already been done in this way and more will be done. Philosophy is in this way coming into close touch with the realities of present-day living.

Philosophy, since the late war experience, has profited also by a certain check to the optimism based upon modern material civilization. There is much scepticism, some feeling of the ineffectiveness of our control of the ends of life, an openness to a new valuation of things not found before. There is an accentuated demand for the extension of social control over the materials of living. Along with this has gone perhaps an even stronger tendency toward conservatism, even toward a loss of fundamental ground with respect to liberty. It appears certain that we shall not escape a candid discussion of basic questions in politics, economics, and in morals. Philosophy would naturally find itself responding to such demands. It is in reality not the nature of philosophy to seek the shelter of a wall when a dust storm comes up. Its natural and habitual abode is among men with vital problems.

Among the significant movements outside of philosophy tending toward philosophical thinking is the movement within science itself. Certain scientists, as Thomson, for example, recognize the necessity of a consciously philosophical approach toward the materials and the results of science. In the *Outline of Science* and elsewhere Professor Thomson has attempted to use the synoptic method and he accepts the synoptic view as a necessary one. This would seem to be the viewpoint represented in other efforts such as Well's *Outline of History*. Indeed, the demand for books which make an attempt,

however, unsuccessfully from the standpoint of the specialist to give a synthetic or a synoptic view of large fields of knowledge is very significant for philosophy. Here is a popular demand for philosophy in at least one fundamental sense. Philosophers cannot afford to ignore it and are under obligations to meet it.

Certain dangers, to be sure, have already appeared in various attempts by scientists to influence the public with respect to questions which are essentially philosophical. This has been shown notably by Professor Otto ("A Forgotten Service of Kant," *Journal of Philosophy*, July 31, 1924). The responsibility of philosophy is also clearly stated.

This trend to philosophy is a notable phase of the present demands for educational reform. Among the efforts now being made in an experimental way, to vitalize the education of the college student are the so-called Orientation Courses, for freshmen in particular. The very need for orientation itself is a philosophical need. Orientation courses are philosophical introductions and if given as designed serve very well as introductions to philosophy. Such courses aim to give to the student a synoptic view of man and his world. They should give the student a philosophical approach from the beginning of his college work.

Not only this but orientation courses aim to introduce a philosophical element into the present curriculum, which at present is devoid of any philosophy as a whole. In some cases the orientation course for freshmen is designed specifically as a beginning in the reorganization of the curriculum upon philosophical principles. For the present curriculum has grown up—rather, has just happened—not in any rational way but as a result of the struggle between traditional forces and the demands of the new necessities of modern life. It is an aggregation of specialties. The teaching is controlled largely by the interests of specialists in highly specialized subject-matter. It is rigidly departmentalized. To be quite up-to-date, it is an aggregate of complexes of the water-tight variety. The competitive motive is determinative. The student learns something of many things, much of some things, perhaps, but has little opportunity of seeing things whole, of getting a synoptic view, of synthesizing the knowledge he acquires. If he get a philosophical viewpoint, to say nothing of a philosophy, it is in spite of the drive in his education, not by design, perhaps not by desire.

An examination of other experiments now being made would reveal something of the same philosophical motive in operation. The

general examination would appear to be an example of this. Independent reading courses, and honors courses especially have something of this in them, or are out-growth of conditions demanding philosophical treatment.

In fact, it would seem that the attempts being made to encourage superior scholarship are conditioned upon philosophical principles. Our present excessive and exclusive emphasis upon subjects and departmental expansion appears not to give the best stimulus to superior scholarship. In attempting to find ways of encouraging superior scholarship therefore we find the emphasis being placed upon methods of teaching which lead to comprehensiveness as well as a detailed study of narrow fields. Perhaps we shall find that the student will go deeper if given wider and freer range, more independence and responsibility. Perhaps we shall find that linkages, connections, relationships, and wholeness will bear fruit in a better grasp of facts and things.

Man cannot live intellectually on specialized knowledge alone, no matter how efficient it may make him in a practical way. He needs, as the present cravings would seem to show, not simply a knowledge of things, of matters-of-fact, but a knowledge of wholes, a synoptic view. This seems necessary to adequately fertilize the mind. It seems evident, too, that in an age of centrifugal tendencies the mind needs unifying, synthesizing conceptions and methods. This is to say that he needs, not philosophy perhaps, but synoptic philosophy at least. The inveterate analysis of all things into forces, impulses, or whatnot and the unrelenting drive for mere facts cannot be all that is needed. It is the business of philosophy to correct this one-sided emphasis.

Although it is a philosophical impulse which is operating to bring about a reorganization of the curriculum, philosophy itself seems to be little concerned with it. Philosophy however might consider not only its function in bringing about a curriculum based upon rational principles but also its own place in that new curriculum. Perhaps the department of philosophy has often been as unphilosophical in its approach to the problem of education as other departments. The tendency is to follow the trends of the sciences. Philosophy has too often neglected its essentially orienting function both for the student and the curriculum. Traditionally it was the function of philosophy to interpret the results of the sciences. The growth of the so-called social sciences has vastly increased the amount of material which needs to be interpreted. But it must be

done. Philosophy might as well do the work it was meant to do. Whoever does the work of synthesis, of interpretation of the currents of present living will be our philosophy teachers whether they are scientists, sociologists, or philosophers.

It may be that we are entering a period in which philosophy will find itself the hand-maid, not of theology or of science, but of a common effort of men today to solve the difficult problems of successful living in an age which is successful above all others in material achievement, but which is morally and intellectually somewhat confused and blundering.