

THE PATTERNS OF PHILOSOPHIC THOUGHT

BY CLARENCE ERICKSON

THROUGH the tremendous vogue of Spengler's *Decline of the West*, the theory that history repeats itself has again climbed to par. Whatever one may think of the validity of Spengler's attempt to reduce history to a series of recurring cycles, the method has rendered history easier to grasp, and has put some semblance of order into what once was a trackless, uncharted confusion of dates and events. Even if Spengler has substituted the concept of fatality for that of causality, as one of his critics has put it; even if he sometimes strains or even garbles the facts to make them fit his theory, he has given the mind a grappling hook with which it may easily apprehend the once chaotic panorama of history.

The history of philosophy also may be rendered more intelligible if some sort of mental tool be devised with which to classify and put into orderly array the present Babel of conflicting theories and speculations. The idea of cyclic recurrence may with equal profit be applied to the development of philosophy through the ages. It is the purpose of this paper to do for the history of philosophy, on a small scale, of course, what Spengler has done for world-history.

Philosophy is the subject that is least of all studied by the average person. Professors of economics often complain that their science is the most flagrantly neglected of all studies, so that an appalling lack of influence and understanding exists between them on the one hand and industrialists, legislators, and the general public on the other. But their claim for sympathy is feeble compared with the plight of the philosopher. Someone has said that less than one-hundred people in America have read the books of John Dewey, our foremost American philosopher, and that perhaps only about

forty-thousand Americans have ever heard of the man. It is certain that there is no subject about which the man on the street knows less than philosophy, no subject in which there is such a tremendous gulf between the initiated and the uninitiated.

This situation is very unfortunate, to say the least. The complete lack of philosophical training or knowledge on the part of more than 99 per cent of the population allows all sorts of false and ridiculous ideas and superstitions to pass muster. Witness the credulous avidity with which the public swallows the philosophical speculations of automobile manufacturers and business men. The critical training given the mind even by the smallest smattering of philosophic knowledge would be a vaccine against these infections of the popular mind with superstition and buncombe.

The chief reason for the widespread neglect of philosophy is the apparently hopeless difficulty of the subject. The field of philosophy seems, and there is a measure of justification for the belief, a bedlam of conflicting speculations and theories. It has been said that all the philosophers in the world could not fill a single page of a note-book with the truths on which they are universally agreed. Thus, it would appear, that the study of a given philosopher does not lead to a permanent addition to our knowledge, because the next philosopher we study will, in all probability, shatter everything we have learned from the former. Add to this the proverbial obscurity and difficulty of understanding philosophy, and we see why philosophy has been so neglected by the average reader.

As a matter of fact, the chaos and confusion reigning in the field of philosophy can be reduced to simplicity and order, by means of a little analysis and probing beneath the surface of the many apparently conflicting systems. The multiplicity of systems of philosophy can be reduced to a few persisting, easily understood types, which have retained a remarkable intactness throughout the centuries. Equipped with the knowledge of these simple, persistent pigeon-holes of philosophy, all the thoughts and speculations of the many philosophers can be placed with ease into one or another of the several compartments. There is no reason why the man of limited leisure cannot read philosophy with understanding, provided he learns the few simple molds into which all philosophic thought from Thales to John Dewey has been cast.

The conception of the ninety-two elements in the science of chemistry has proved a wonderful aid to man's grasp and control of what once seemed a baffling variety of substances. Any substance, no matter how complex, can now be analyzed into two, three, or four simple chemical elements. Simplicity can likewise be introduced into what appears to be the chaotic, disorderly confusion of philosophic thought. With a little practice, the cursory reader should be enabled to take any philosophic idea or speculation, and subsume it under one of the permanent elemental patterns.

What are these persistent patterns, these chemical elements as it were, which are the building blocks out of which the most baffling and involved metaphysical systems are constructed? These patterns are five fundamental world-views, or interpretations of the whole of reality. They are Materialism, Spiritualism (Idealism), Dualism, Monism, and Phenomenalism. Any given philosophical system can be reduced to one of these elemental patterns, or else demonstrated to be a compound of two or more of them. If the reader of philosophy knows these five fundamental patterns, and recognizes them beneath their raiment of philosophical verbiage, the task of understanding philosophy is immeasurably simplified, and is rendered a positive delight. We shall consider each one of them in order.

We shall begin with Materialism, not because of any prejudice in favor of it, but because it is the easiest system to understand. Our line of attack will always be from the easy to the more difficult.

The universe, according to Materialism, consists of nothing but matter and its motions. The All, or matter, is generally conceived of as being distributed through space in the form of tiny indivisible particles, or atoms. Every phenomenon, whether physical, chemical, biological, or psychological, can ultimately be resolved into a change of position of material particles or atoms, on this hypothesis.

The first consistent system of atomic Materialism was put forward by Democritus, the Greek philosopher who was the immediate forerunner of Plato and Aristotle. He got his atomism from a still earlier Greek philosopher, Leukippus. It will be seen, then, that the atomic theory of modern physics and chemistry goes back to the sixth century B. C.

The atomistic Materialism of Democritus was adopted by the

well-known and much maligned ethical philosopher, Epicurus, of the fourth century B. C. The celebrated ethical principles of Epicurus, that happiness (as distinguished from sensual pleasure) is the chief object of life, and that enlightened self-interest is the guide to moral conduct, have been a potent influence in all later philosophy. Moral law is social or human law, ethical conduct is that conduct which enables men to live together with the maximum of harmony and happiness. The Utilitarianism of the last two centuries of English moral philosophy, and the Humanism of which we hear so much today, are modern versions of the Epicurean ethic.

Lucretius, the Roman poet flourishing immediately before the beginning of the Christian era, is the next important name in the history of the Materialist tradition. His wonderful poem, *De Rerum Natura* (The Nature of Things), presents a philosophy so modern, except for a few poetic licenses and exaggerations, that much of it might pass for the work of a modern popularizer of science. Evolution, natural selection, the nebular hypothesis as to the origin of the earth and the stars, and many other conceptions generally supposed to be peculiarly modern are to be found in this extraordinary philosophic epic.

Coming down to more modern times, we find a partial acceptance of the Materialistic tradition in the great scientific and philosophic contemporary of Shakespeare, Francis Bacon, who many critics contend was the real Shakespeare. Bacon expressed his preference for Democritus over the more spiritual Plato and Aristotle, and held that knowledge must emancipate itself from the Aristotelian tradition and return to the sounder principles of Democritus.

Thomas Hobbes, the next English philosopher of note, was a simon-pure Materialist. Even God was a material body with him. This inclusion of a Deity in a system purporting to be a thoroughgoing Materialism is an inconsistency. If reality consists of nothing but the action and reaction of material particles upon one another, there can be no God, unless of course one maintains that matter is God. This is purely a question of words, however. If matter is all that there is and we choose to call it God, we are expressing a purely verbal proposition. The problem of consciousness Hobbes disposed of by saying that thought consists in the movement of the particles or atoms making up the brain.

John Locke, the famous author of the *Essay Concerning the Human Understanding* and one of the founders of modern philosophy, although generally a Dualist, in one passage advanced the speculation that it was not impossible that God may have added to matter the faculty for thinking. The French Materialists and Voltaire derived one of their fundamental principles from this passage in Locke's *Essay*.

Up to this time the Materialist philosophers had never adequately realized the difficulty, if not utter impossibility, of accounting for the phenomenon of consciousness under the assumption that material atoms are the sole reality. Furthermore, the problem of knowledge, which in materialist terms amounts to the question, how does matter become conscious of itself? had never been faced, or even asked. It remained for the Idealist philosopher Berkeley, whose influential work, *The Principles of Human Knowledge*, appeared in 1710, to render the older forms of Materialism absurd and untenable. Berkeley demonstrated, with a line of argument that never has been successfully refuted, that all we can know or experience is of the nature of sensations, perceptions, and mental states, and that matter has only an inferential existence. He held that this inference was a faulty one, and that matter, as distinct from our own states of consciousness, did not exist. Thereafter, matter has led a very precarious existence among philosophers. The very name Materialism is no longer in good standing in strict philosophic usage. The mind-body problem, the puzzle of consciousness, the critical analyses of Berkeley and his successor Hume, have rendered the old-fashioned Materialism of Democritus, Hobbes, and Holbach obsolete. The modern representatives of the Materialistic tradition now call themselves Naturalists. Still, practically speaking, Naturalism amounts to much the same thing as Materialism, in that the essential thing involved is the denial of a supernatural or spiritual order existing above the natural or material order.

Naturalism to-day recognizes the impossibility of accounting for the appearance of consciousness out of a collection of dead atoms. The atoms, electrons, or whatever the ultimate unit of matter may be, is given the attribute of mind, or sensation, in a rudimentary form by modern Naturalists, such as Haeckel and Lester

Ward. Another form of Naturalism conceives of matter and energy as being the dual manifestation of an Unknowable Power or Force. Mind is considered a form of energy. (Herbert Spencer.) Still another type of Naturalism regards experience, or the actual perceptual flux that is immediately known, as the stuff out of which reality is made. Matter and mind are but mental tools or conceptions abstracted from reality for the purpose of better apprehending and controlling the flux of "pure experience." (John Dewey.)

The evolution of the Materialistic attitude shows that the lines of thought of the various philosophers are not completely out of touch with one another, as is commonly supposed. We have seen how Materialism, through the influence of Spiritualism, has been forced to alter some of its basic conceptions. In truth, every philosophic system, every individual philosopher, influences every other system, sometimes profoundly, broadening its viewpoint. There is an unmistakable convergence of the once sharply severed, antagonistic rival philosophies. Perhaps the day will come when one philosophy will gain complete control of the field, after having enriched and expanded itself from all the converging philosophies of which it will be the synthesis.

We shall next consider Spiritualism, as it is the direct antithesis to Materialism. *Idealism* rather than *Spiritualism* is the term more generally applied to this philosophy, but *Spiritualism* is to be preferred, because of the popular confusion that exists between philosophic and ethical idealism. But there is danger in the term *Spiritualism* also, as it is liable to be confused with the popular superstition of that name, which pretends to hold communicatoin with the spirits of the dead. One of the greatest tribulations of the philosopher is the fact that many of the terms he uses are also used popularly in an entirely different sense from the philosophic sense.

Spiritualism contends that reality consists of nothing but spirit, or spiritual substance, in flat contradiction of Materialism, which asserts that reality consists of nothing but matter, or material substance. But do we directly sense and experience matter every moment of our lives? we may ask. Matter is but an illusion, the external appearance of that which is really spiritual, answers the Spiritualist. The appearance of things are the symbols by which they are known to us. The fundamental principle of Spiritualism

is thus seen to be essentially the same as the contention of the Christian Scientists, that matter and body are delusions, and that only spirit and soul are real. Christian Science indeed is a variety of Spiritualistic philosophy, but a corrupt variety in which there are many misunderstandings and inconsistencies.

The philosophical basis of Hindu Brahmanism, as presented in the Upanishads, is the most ancient prototype of Spiritualism. Reality is the dream of the Absolute Mind, Brahma, who creates the universe by thinking or dreaming it. All appearances, the material world, our own personalities, are but illusions, the sole reality being Brahma, the Eternal God. Needless to say, this is not the Brahmanism of the masses of Hindu people; it is the doctrine of the Hindu philosophers and scholars. The popular Brahmanism is a gross, polytheistic superstition, holding several hundred-million people in the densest ignorance.

There is no exact prototype of Spiritualism among the Greek philosophers. Plato is generally spoken of as a Spiritualist, but he was, more properly speaking, a Dualist, in that he acknowledged the existence of two fundamental principles, Spirit or Idea and Void or matter. Spirit, according to Plato, exists in the shape of the famous Platonic "Ideas," which are abstract virtues, such as goodness, temperance, wisdom, and courage, given a substantial existence. The Ideas also consist of perfect divine models of all things, of which earthly realities are more or less imperfect copies. The Ideas realize themselves in our world of sense through the refractory, coarse medium of matter. The grossness of matter renders it impossible for the Ideas to realize themselves perfectly; hence the imperfection and evil of the world of existence. Above this disappointing world of sense exists the supernal, spiritual world of Ideas, the haven of the philosopher, and the solace offered by reason to the soul jaded by the cares and evils of the material world.

The first pure form of Spiritualism in European philosophy was the philosophy of the German mathematician and scientist Leibnitz, a contemporary of Isaac Newton. According to Leibnitz, reality consists of a large number of spiritual, spaceless, centres of force, which he called Monads. Matter is an aggregate of Monads of the lowest order, having a confused perception and no reason. The souls of animals are Monads having a somewhat

more clear perception. The soul of man is a Monad having clear perception and the faculty of reason. God is the supreme Monad, having perfect perception and perfect reason. Each Monad mirrors the whole of reality more or less clearly according to its status as matter, animal soul, or the soul of man. All our perceptions are internal, proceeding from this mirroring of the universe by the Monad which is our soul. The realities and the perceptions are made to occur simultaneously by means of a principle of pre-established harmony.

This fanciful doctrine, one of the favorite objects of ridicule of the vitriolic Voltaire, had little influence on future philosophy, and it remained for Berkeley, the Irish bishop of the early eighteenth century, to present the first influential system of Spiritualism in European philosophy. The external world, and the thing we call matter, consist only of our own sensations of space, location, hardness, weight, pressure, color, sound, touch, etc. But each of these sensations is a state of consciousness, not a property of something external to our mind. Hence our knowledge consists only of mental states, and matter cannot be known to us. Indeed, said Berkeley, matter is a superfluous entity, since we derive it from a faulty inference, namely, that we really experience something outside our own states of consciousness. Therefore matter does not exist as a substance, and mind or spirit alone is real. The external world consists only of sensations and perceptions given us directly by God. The only reality is spiritual substance, in which the sensations and ideas making up the world inhere. Myself, otherselves, and God are the three spiritual realities making up all of existence in Berkeley's system.

This triumph of the Spiritualists over the Materialists was short-lived, for soon after Berkeley had undermined Materialism by destroying matter, David Hume, the Scotch skeptical philosopher did to Spiritualism what Berkeley had done to Materialism. He cut the ground from under Spiritualism by showing that spiritual substance is as much a faulty inference as material substance. Berkeley had pushed matter out of existence by saying that it is only the sum of its properties, i. e., hardness, extension in space, resistance, etc., and that there is no substance underneath in which these properties reside. Hume, using the same line of argument,

said that neither could we find a "spiritual substance" underlying the sensations, ideas, volitions, and memories making up spirit or mind. Both matter *and* spirit then are faulty constructions of human thought. Sensations are the sole reality! A material body is a complex of sensations having a more or less persisting identity, to which we have given a name. Similarly, an ego or soul is but a complex of sensations, ideas, and memories also having a more or less persisting identity. Hume's doctrine is known as Phenomenalism or Sensationalism. We shall consider it in greater detail later.

Modern Spiritualism has evolved out of the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, the great German thinker whose work was largely an attempt to refute Hume's uncanny Sensationalism. Kant held that the raw sensations are worked into perceptions and conceptions, and that these conceptions are in turn organized and synthesized into knowledge, the various sciences, and complete systems of thought. There must be something that performs this transforming work. This something Kant called the "transcendental ego of apperception." For our purpose it is sufficient to know that this formidable phrase represents Kant's resuscitation of the ego and spiritual substance, which Hume had so cruelly slain.

Furthermore, according to Kant, the mind or ego renders the sensations, which Hume had said make up the world, intelligible by means of the "forms" of space and time. These forms are not from the sensational world, but are tools of the ego, which enable it to grasp the sensations. The chaos of the sensational world is further reduced to order by means of the "categories," that is, the ideas of cause and effect, sequence, totality, modality, etc. Like the forms of space and time, the categories are also "intuitive." By intuitive is meant beyond experience, not derived from the senses, but inherent in the mind. Locke, Berkeley, and Hume made up what is known as the "empirical" school, in that they held that all knowledge was ultimately derived from sense experience. Kant was a "rationalist," in that he maintained that some knowledge is not derived from experience, but is intuitively known to the reason. The forms, the categories, and truths of mathematics are intuitive truths.

Kant thus rehabilitated spirit. Furthermore, he also rehabilitated matter by his doctrine of "things-in-themselves" or *nouomena*,

the realities giving rise to our sensations or *phenomena*. These noumena, or things-in-themselves, are beyond our experience and unknowable. Kant was, then, strictly speaking, a Dualist, since both matter and spirit were admitted in his system. But because of his profound influence on later Spiritualist philosophers he is commonly called a Spiritualist or an Idealist. His entire system is known as Transcendental Idealism.

Kant's German successors, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, dropped Kant's notion that there are things-in-themselves. This was somewhat of a return to Berkeley in denying the substantial existence of matter. Spiritualism now became a pantheism, strikingly like the Hindu Brahmanist philosophy. Reality is one self, Absolute Idea, all including mind, of which our finite minds are partial expressions. The Absolute Idea creates reality by thinking it. The evolution of reality is the unfolding of a logical reasoning process on the part of the Absolute. Hegel reduced reality to logic, which ever advanced by means of his famous "triads." A triad is a series of three steps; *thesis*, *antithesis*, and *synthesis*. Something is asserted by the divine logic, that is, comes into being, and then is contradicted. These two steps are thesis and antithesis respectively. A higher union of the two contradictories then takes place, and this constitutes the third step of the logical and evolutionary process, synthesis. Reality is a logical evolution progressing by means of these triads, said Hegel. For example, the Russian Revolution swept away capitalism (thesis) and set up pure communism (antithesis). With the passing of time, the Russian State has been obliged to make concessions to capitalism. The result is a synthesis of capitalism and communism. Everything that exists is a blend or synthesis of two opposites, the resolution of previous contradiction.

Another representative of Spiritualistic philosophy is Schopenhauer. With this celebrated pessimist reality is the expression of a blind, unconscious Will to Live. Schopenhauer differed from Hegel in that he substituted a voluntaristic for and intellectualistic conception of reality. Reality is thought or intellect, said Hegel. Reality is Will, and intellect is but a product derived from the Will, said Schopenhauer.

A word as to the famous pessimism of Schopenhauer. Since Will is the basic reality, the fundamental fact of existence is a

constant striving to satisfy some desire. But desire is a condition of want and dissatisfaction. Existence leads to misery because of the constant pain of desire which the Will seeks to satisfy. But assuming that every desire is finally satisfied, then a still greater unhappiness befalls the Will, the misery of inactivity and boredom. Therefore the Will, in its effort to conquer the pain of desire only succeeds in achieving a still greater pain. All existence, then is a stark tragedy, according to Schopenhauer. But the greatest tragedy of all was when the Will became fully conscious of itself and its futility in man.

The philosophy of Hegel, or Absolute Idealism as it is called, is still a live doctrine. Indeed, until about twenty-five years ago Absolute Idealism had most of the philosophers in its camp.

One of the principal causes for the present reaction away from Absolute Idealism, is that philosophy's inability to find a satisfactory explanation for the existence of error and evil in the world. If reality consists of nothing but an all-including mind or God, of which our personal, finite minds are partial expressions, where does error come from? No fact is more obvious than the tremendous amount of error and illusion in the world. And worse still, we know that the world is full of evil, which we are constantly striving to overcome. But according to Absolute Idealism, this evil must be a part of the divine plan, must proceed from the source of all being, the Absolute. It becomes almost impossible to build a satisfactory ethical theory out of such a philosophy. The house of ill-fame, the gambling hell, are as much parts of the divine plan as the music-dramas of Wagner, the statues of Praxiteles.

We have somewhat anticipated our discussion of Dualism in our previous discussion of Spiritualism. The truth is that the development of each of the fundamental philosophies carries with it implications influencing all the other philosophies. We have seen how Materialism has been profoundly influenced by developments in the Spiritualistic type of philosophy. The Dualists, Plato and Kant, have left their impress on all later philosophy, regardless of its type. Therefore, it was impossible for us to outline the growth of Materialism and of Spiritualism without bringing in something of Dualism.

Dualism, as its name implies, holds that reality is made of two

independent substances. Matter cannot be reduced to spirit, and spirit cannot be reduced to matter, says the Dualist. The mind is not a mere aggregate of material atoms, but the manifestation of a spiritual principle, the soul. Neither is the material body an illusion of the soul. Both soul and body exist in their own right in Dualistic philosophy.

The most common example of Dualism is ordinary Christian theology, of course. Of late some of the more intellectual Protestant clergymen have accepted the Hegelian Absolute Idealism, but the rank and file of the Christian clergy, both Catholic and Protestant, still cling to the Dualistic interpretation of reality.

(To Be Continued)