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XXII. Philosophical Meaning

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XXII. Philosophical Meaning

Abstract

As we have seen, philosophy was one of the major contributions of Greek Civilization. It was the Greeks who gave it its first major impetus as well as its name, "the love of learning." This very phrase embodies the most important aspects of their contribution to the West: the love of the best or most excellent; the search for something beyond a description of immediate experience; and the attempt to grasp, in some comprehensive fashion, both the actual and the ideal, both the given and the possible. In order to accomplish this task philosophy has, as we have seen, traditionally included the following major subdivisions: epistemology, the study of how we know; logic, the study of how we think; ethics, the study of how we act; aesthetics, the study of what we enjoy; and metaphysics, the study of what is real. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Philosophy, Epistemology, Logic, Ethics, Aesthetics, Metaphysics

Disciplines

History of Philosophy | Philosophy

Comments

This is a part of [Section XXII: Philosophical Meaning](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

Authors

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XXII. PHILOSOPHICAL MEANING

As we have seen, philosophy was one of the major contributions of Greek Civilization. It was the Greeks who gave it its first major impetus as well as its name, "the love of learning." This very phrase embodies the most important aspects of their contribution to the West: the love of the best or most excellent; the search for something beyond a description of immediate experience; and the attempt to grasp, in some comprehensive fashion, both the actual and the ideal, both the given and the possible. In order to accomplish this task philosophy has, as we have seen, traditionally included the following major subdivisions: epistemology, the study of how we know; logic, the study of how we think; ethics, the study of how we act; aesthetics, the study of what we enjoy; and metaphysics, the study of what is real.

Philosophy can be, and often has been treated in isolation from the periods of history in which it is found. It can be studied as concerned solely with its own problems. Treated this way, its life can be read as a series of constructions, followed by criticisms of those constructions, which in turn yield still other constructions, in a somewhat dialectical fashion. In this manner it is possible to study Hegel's thought as both a criticism of Enlightenment epistemology and ethics, and a reconstruction on a new basis.

It is, however, just as possible to treat philosophy as an integral part of the period of history in which it appears. It can be studied as concerned primarily with the problems of its time, as attempting to solve the practical problems with which its time is faced. Read this way, philosophy can be treated as a series of answers to the questions which civilization asks of it. In this manner it is possible to study Hegel's philosophy as an attempt to answer the questions raised by the events of the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon. And each of these two interpretations would be as valid an approach to philosophy as the other, a fact which gives one a clue as to its very nature.

The basis for such a dual attitude can be seen from the side of philosophy as well as from the side of civilization. Because philosophy is an attempt to give a total world picture,

it cannot help but include within its range all of man's concerns: his economics as well as his aesthetics; his politics as well as his religion; and his technology as well as his ethics. Philosophy brings to bear on all of man's interests both its critical and its constructive attitudes. Furthermore, and this is particularly true in the West, where it has been interested in the actual as well as the ideal, it evidences that same dynamic restlessness which has been true of our civilization from its very beginning. It is therefore quite normal for Western philosophy to make common cause with civilization in the interests of progress, reform, and improvement.

On the other hand, there have always been some Western philosophers who have refused to accept the mantle of cultural counselor, or attendant in some intellectual service station. As soon as philosophy accepts such roles, they argue, it can at best produce nothing more than a few specifics for its society's ills. This interpretation of its role would, they insist, deny philosophy's high calling in a number of ways. First, it would be a rejection of philosophy's primary work, which is to understand, rather than to try to change, things. Second, it would involve philosophy in a concern for partial and immediate problems, and could not but result in its never gaining any approximation of an interpretation of the whole range of human experience. Third, it would mean that anything which philosophy might offer in the way of a solution could, at very best, be nothing more than an ideological prescription, rather than a metaphysical interpretation of what is basic and real.

Because contemporary civilization's demand for meaning is, in so many ways, similar to philosophy's own demand for meaning, these two strands have tended to merge in the minds of a great many people. This situation helps to account for much of the present interest in philosophy. At the same time, seldom has the ambivalence between philosophy and civilization been more evident than it is today. Indeed, one of the more popular ways of dividing philosophers is into those who see it as a means of solving our contemporary problems, and those who see it as primarily concerned with solving its own problems, and only incidentally interested in those besetting civilization. It is this very tension within philosophical thought which helps to account for the tremendous productivity of philosophy today, both in terms of criticism and of construction. Such a situation can be made all the more clear if we approach contemporary philosophy historically, starting with its various reactions to the absolute idealism of Hegel.

Most of the philosophy of the nineteenth century, as well as much of its religious thought, started with an attack on some aspect of the great Hegelian synthesis. This system, which claimed to harmonize science and ethics, which purported to synthesize the actual and the ideal by means of its dialectic, which offered its own version of "whatever is is right," which interpreted freedom as the appreciation of necessity, and which saw in the modern

national state the Absolute in action, was attacked from both theoretical and practical points of view. The earliest of the telling attacks came at the hands of three Continental rebels: Kierkegaard, Marx, and Nietzsche. Despite very great differences of approach, their attacks on Hegelian thought were alike in three important respects, and this is true without there having been any communication between the three men. They went beyond those who argued that Hegel's attempt to be objective had failed, to insist that any such attempt at synthesis was by its very nature impossible. Philosophy was, for them, merely the justification or expression of some other aspect of human experience than the intellectual. An objective or rational philosophy like Hegel's was, in their minds, out of the question. They were also united in a metaphysical attack on Hegel's idealism. While Kierkegaard argued for a God who was transcendent, Marx for a materialistic metaphysics, and Nietzsche for the will to power as basic, they were at one in insisting that any idealistic metaphysics was impossible.

These two points led to a third area of agreement: for each of these three thinkers philosophy was primarily a means of changing the situation in which men found themselves. This we have already noted in Marx' statement that up to his time philosophy had tried to understand the world, but that the time had come to change it. While Marx' change was to be achieved by collective means, those of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were individual, the former's by religious means, the latter's by aesthetic and ethical. It is from these three men, as well as from English liberalism, that we get the strand of contemporary thought which looks upon philosophy as primarily a means of change and reform.

The twentieth century attacks on Hegel's thought, however, have been more theoretical than practical, and have focused largely on his epistemology. This has led to such a concentration on the problems of meaning and knowing that there is a strong tendency to say, not only that Hegel's metaphysics was wrong, as the nineteenth century did, but also to deny the very possibility of any valid metaphysics at all. It is just impossible, these contemporaries argue, for anyone to say what reality really is, or what it must be. This current attack is aimed at the metaphysics of Aristotle as well as of Hegel.

Hegelian thought crossed the English Channel during the post-Enlightenment at the same time that it was being attacked on the Continent, and bade fair to become the leading English philosophy from its new home in Oxford University. But the epistemological interests derived from the early British empiricists (Locke, Berkeley, and Hume), as well as the continuing emphasis on the free moral person, served to produce a reaction to such absolute idealism. About 1900 a counter attack was launched from Cambridge University. Here G. E. Moore (1873-1958) began the common-sense empirical attack on the rationalism of Hegelian epistemology. A person's ordinary experiences were sufficient, he argued, for him

to know that he had a pair of hands, and there was no need for him to go beyond such experiences into the realms of rationalistic speculation to prove that fact. The same argument was applied to the independent existence of the whole realm of nature. This approach led Moore to study the language in which people's thoughts were expressed, in the interest of excising from it such unnecessary speculative abstractions as reality, being, idea, and other Hegelian categories. In the attempt to do this the question which he continually asked was: What do you mean? What does this statement mean? Answers to these questions led one back to ordinary experience, he argued, and not into the realms of abstract speculation.

The work of Moore was of great importance for two reasons. Through his criticism a number of people were freed of their allegiance to Hegelian rationalism and absolutism. Further, his interest in language started a new approach to philosophy. While earlier thinkers, such as Hobbes and Bentham, had evidenced a real interest in language, it was Moore who saw philosophy's main task as the clarification of language. And it is out of this concern for language that one major aspect of contemporary British and American philosophy, the analytical, has appeared. Analytical philosophy has helped to produce what we call semantics, the practical study of the ways in which words are used, including the effects which certain words, such as democratic, communist, or politician, produce. While the study of semantics has been helpful in certain social problems, as well as in advertising, the analytical school of philosophy has very carefully avoided any suggestion that theirs is a technique for solving practical problems.

While Moore and his followers continued their investigation of ordinary language, Bertrand Russell (1872) turned the analytical method in another direction by applying it to different problems. He agreed with Moore that philosophy's work was primarily analytical, but wished to apply it to the questions of logic and mathematics which had always interested him. One of his earliest questions was why certain mathematical and geometrical statements (a straight line is the shortest distance between two points, for example) should be accepted. Philosophy, as he saw it, was primarily concerned with propositions, statements in logical form. But his study of the Aristotelian type of proposition convinced him that the older subject-predicate form of statement (A is the cause of B, for example) was inadequate for contemporary needs, especially those of modern mathematics and science. Aristotle had viewed the world as made up of substances with certain attributes, and relations as one form of attribute. According to him, the statement, "The boy runs," to be logical must be changed to read, "The boy is the one who is running." If such relations were to make a difference they had to be internal and, as an inescapable result, each thing, person, or event became nothing more than the accumulation of its qualities and relations, thus losing its own individuality and integrity.

In this work Russell was joined by his Cambridge mathematics teacher, Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947), of whom more later. Together they wrote the Principia Mathematica (1910-1913), in three volumes, which marked a watershed in the history of mathematical and logical thought. They made a sustained attempt to reduce numbers and their relations to logical ideas and propositions. The result was so successful that, while it has remained a stumbling-block for the uninitiated, the work stands as a major development in symbolic logic and a constant reference work for the philosophy of science.

The linguistic analysis of Moore and the logical analysis of Russell were reenforced and given further impetus by the appearance of a group of thinkers centering at Vienna during and after World War I. Led by such men as Moritz Schlick (1882-1936) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), they developed a school of thought which was first called logical positivism, and later logical empiricism. The names are significant because the first one helps connect their thought to Comte, a connection which they soon rejected, while the second one helps indicate their attempt to hold together both reason and experience, but in a radically different way. Most of the Vienna circle had originally been scientists, and they approached the problems of knowing from the point of view of their applicability to the new physical sciences. While there were differences of interest and emphasis, and the group disappeared as a school, there was fairly general agreement among them on a number of important points.

The logical empiricists began their analysis by dividing the sentences which people utter into two kinds: the meaningful and the meaningless. A sentence is meaningful only if it expresses a meaningful statement, whereas a sentence is meaningless if no such statement is expressed. A meaningful statement is, for them, one of which the truth or falsity can be ascertained. There are only two types of such statements. The first includes those which are true or false because they contain intelligible definitions of the way in which words or symbols are to be used. Appealing to the work of Russell in mathematical logic, the logical empiricists can now show that all statements in arithmetic, including algebra, and logic are true by virtue of their definitions of the way in which words or symbols are to be used. For example, two plus two equals four is merely a definition of the way in which the symbols are to be used. These definitions are purely linguistic, and have no reference beyond the range of language at all. The second type of meaningful statements includes those which are true or false because they assert matters of fact whose truth is dependent on the possibility of their being verified. The statement that it is raining today can be empirically verified. Such a distinction within meaningful statements is closely analogous to the one Hume made about the relations of ideas and matters of fact.

The essential point with regard to statements which assert matters of fact is that they are either themselves directly verifiable in sensible experience, or they imply statements which are

verifiable. A statement is regarded as verifiable when it is provable in principle, even though not in fact. Thus the geographical features of the side of the moon which is always facing away from the earth are legitimate objects of meaningful statements. What is in fact now unverifiable is verifiable in principle since trips to the moon are quite conceivable.

The statements most abhorred by the logical empiricists are those which are not, even in principle, verifiable in sensible experience, and which nevertheless claim to be more than definitions. Such meaningless statements include especially those of theology and metaphysics. Also, the statements which express value judgments, such as those of ethics and aesthetics, are usually classified as meaningless by the critical school. This somewhat startling fact results from the argument that value judgments are not verifiable. We ordinarily refuse to recognize that something is good or beautiful just because someone else approves of it, but we are not able to offer any verifiable criteria for agreement on the matter. The truth or falsity of statements containing good or beautiful cannot therefore be verified. And, if unverifiable, the statements which contain such judgments are meaningless in the strict logical-empiricist sense of that word. They are described as emotive "expressions" of our likes and dislikes and, for this reason, the theory is often referred to as the "ouch" theory of ethics. It may be a fact that some people believe that genocide is wrong, but it is impossible to verify the statement that genocide is wrong. While the logical empiricist is more than willing to help us try to define what we mean by such terms as "wrong," he refuses to allow us to interpret statements containing these words as being verifiable.