NOTES ON THE POVERTY OF CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY

by Ervin Laszlo

Much of the malaise on the contemporary scene comes from the rift between the sciences and the humanities. Whatever the many factors may be which enter into the determination of this rift, the majority of contemporary English and American philosophers contribute to it even if only inadvertently. They examine the perennial questions of philosophy as though no empirical sciences existed—or at least as if their inquiry were prior to the theories of such sciences. Questions concerning knowledge, mind, obligation, value, etc., are pursued by these philosophers on the assumption that whatever evidence is available to a consistent and critical thinker in his daily life is sufficient to decide—at least to discuss cogently—the issues. There is an almost exclusive reliance on direct, everyday information and on the language in which this information is stated.

But these assumptions have come to be rejected in the sciences as insufficient and reliance on them as obsolete. Commonsense knowledge, however critically examined and logically expounded, is regarded as but the layer of prejudice which, Einstein said, impedes scientific progress. And ordinary language is found entirely inadequate to symbolize the meaning of the concepts which constitute the scientific knowledge of our time. Thus, it comes about that scientists look at philosophers with incomprehension mixed with awe and resulting in bewilderment: philosophers appear to be doing much of the time what scientists have rejected as naïve and transcended; yet they are the inheritors of the awesome wisdom of the ages and stand, presumably, on the shoulders of their gigantic predecessors. Philosophers in turn tend to consider scientific theories as based on assumptions which must first be examined, or to dismiss them as grasping but a limited sphere of reality, and giving partial or inadequate answers to the great questions to which they alone seem to have access. (Unfortunately, the philosopher's access to these undoubtedly essential questions turns out to be via a logical scrutiny of everyday information.) As a result, contact between scientists and philosophers tends to be brief and mutually irritating.

I confess that I do not see a scintilla of evidence in anything pro-

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duced by philosophers analyzing commonsense knowledge and ordinary language which would justify their efforts to come up with theories that could be read as serious recommendations to believe what the objects of knowledge, the nature of mind, beauty, religious significance, or normative values may be. To try to piece together a concept of the world, of man and of mind, and of the adventures of mindful man in the world on the basis of information obtained by observing what oneself and others are doing, is like trying to reconstruct the principles of automotive engineering from the observation of what one does when he drives a car. Such an attempt is foredoomed to failure, especially when we consider that an automobile is simplicity itself compared with the workings of nature, the human body, and the mind.

Philosophy draws upon a heritage which was the formative influence of all Western thought, scientific, legal, religious, and otherwise. Consequently, the contemporary philosopher enjoys a status as a trustee of this fund of knowledge and its representative on the present scene. In virtue of such status, philosophy has become a self-supporting enterprise; it is taught in colleges and universities as an essential component of contemporary knowledge, regardless of whether it justifies this as a systematic, or only as a historical, inquiry. Hence, these remarks take nothing away from the undisputed value of the study of the history of philosophy. They pose the question, however, concerning the wisdom of setting forth inquiries into fundamental questions, in this day and age of sophisticated empirical-scientific information, without recourse to the pertinent scientific data. Classical philosophers had to rely on critical observations of everyday events, for they had no operational means of penetrating beyond them and no information pertaining to anything else. But the same is no longer true today, and when philosophers act as though it were, one cannot help but wonder at their wisdom. Benefiting from an impressive historical heritage, philosophers are solidly established in the academic world. Nobody from other disciplines trusts himself to question their methods. The insurgence has to start from within, and it is high time that it should start if philosophy is not to become merely a historical record of ancestral accomplishment.

How We Can Include the Sciences . . .

The above remarks appear harsh and negative. They may be forgivable, for they are written by a philosopher dissatisfied with the overall state of the art in his own discipline. Moreover, the remarks apply to the mood dominating philosophy in this century and not to every philosopher or theory which has appeared on the contemporary philo-

sophical scene. There are notable exceptions, but the very fact that they are exceptions proves my point. It is not necessary to catalog here the names of those who have not acted as though all information pertinent to philosophical questions were the birthright of philosophers observing themselves, others, and their language, and exercising critical common sense, that is, of those who have drawn upon knowledge gathered in scientific fields. Let me, rather, point out that, if epistemology and ethics, for example, are to be worthy of being part (and very likely the principal part) of contemporary systematic philosophy, then they (as other fields of empirical inquiry) must be built on the most complete and reliable information available to the investigator concerning man and his relation to other men and to the world around him. To believe that the best available information on these topics is derived from a critical analysis of what people say and how they act is laughable naïveté.

An epistemology presupposes a knowledge of man and world in mutual relation, and the components of such knowledge are assembled in a large number of scientific hypotheses backed by painstaking experimental tests. Not that the theories promulgated on the scientific fields themselves constitute a full-blown epistemology—but they nevertheless furnish the basic data on perception and cognition on which an epistemology adequate to the contemporary state of human knowledge can be constructed. In constructing it lies the challenge and the vital role of contemporary philosophy. Philosophy is not rendered superfluous by science, but it is in no position to ignore it either. Much of philosophical theory formulation could be metascientific, rather than prescientific, as philosophers of the herein criticized sort would hold.

The same considerations apply to ethics. If one is to make recommendations for adherence to right principles, it is not enough to describe what principles people in fact hold. That is a task for social and cultural anthropology and linguistics, and it is by and large adequately fulfilled by these disciplines. Neither is it enough to scrutinize critically the principles people profess and to eliminate the inconsistencies. This is therapeutic and helpful, but falls far short of the potentials of ethics. What is required is a conception of the human animal as embedded in the real world that surrounds him, including other men structured in societies. How can we tell what is good and right for man —any man—until we know what man is and how he relates to other men and other things around him? To ignore the findings of the various branches of the contemporary natural sciences, of anthropology and

of psychology, in exposing a normative in ethics is to argue as though the information accumulated by these disciplines did not exist. This procedure was warranted in the case of classical philosophers, who lived at a time when the information did *not* exist, but it is simply irresponsible today when it *does* exist. It is irresponsible in this sense to decide on the basis of everyday information cleared up by logic whether a valuation is or is not the manifestation of an emotive preference and whether it is or is not verifiable publicly. Yet ethical arguments, pro and contra, typically take the form, "When I say that I ought to do *x*, I am stating (or expressing, manifesting) . . . ," as though *all* the pertinent information concerning what the case is when "I" (or anyone) states, recommends, or wills something would be available to the person doing it or to someone watching him at it.

And the same goes, *mutatis mutandis,* for the other traditional branches of philosophy. What the nature of beauty is, or of aesthetic experience in general, cannot be responsibly decided by an analysis of what one feels or experiences on such occasions, nor by the phenomenal properties of the object of experience. The question is highly complex and presupposes explicit data concerning the nature of the experient and his relation—genetically and culturally conditioned—to his aesthetic object. People do not judge and act in a vacuum, and they do not decide and behave only in consideration of the facts presented to them. They have histories, both personal and genetic, and the sum of their phylogenetic and ontogenetic experiences enters into each of their thought and action processes. But none of these tacit factors is available either to introspection or to immediate external observation. An idea of them could only be pieced together after a careful sifting of many theories of the natural, anthropological, and social sciences.

By and large, contemporary systematic philosophy has kept its commitment to the perennial issues discussed in its history but closed its eyes to the independently accumulated storehouses of information pertinent to the issues. Obviously, to have done the converse would have been to give up philosophy and become assimilated into science; hence, philosophy acted to preserve its institutional existence. But at what price? The superficiality of arguments decked out by logical rigor deserving of content of much wider scope and relevance? At that price one wonders whether it was worth preserving.

. . . And Yet Remain Philosophers

But to become assimilated into science, and to analyze logically everyday information, are not the only alternatives. There is another way,

even if philosophers trained to analyze commonsense information with all the technical apparatus of their craft are skeptical about its practicability. To acquire their own technique already takes a full-time academic curriculum; to acquire in addition a knowledge of science seems to be an oversized task. But philosophers are wrong if they assume that effective philosophizing requires the training that both they and professional scientists now customarily receive. A large part of philosophical analysis is designed to decide the truth of knowledge claims made on the basis of introspection or commonsense observation (for example, whether "ought" statements express feelings or state facts). When the introspective evidence is replaced by data furnished by the sciences (for example, given certain patterns of stimulation, "push" or "pull" type motivations are generated which emerge into behavior and consciousness), many such decision procedures are superfluous.

Hence, with the problem shift there is also a reduction in the needed analytic apparatus. On the other side, a very large part of science consists of techniques of observation, experimentation, and computation which are of direct use to working scientists but not to philosophers looking at science. Of course, the philosopher who ignores these aspects of science risks drawing false conclusions from the scientific findings. But being familiar with a discipline to the extent of knowing what goes on in it and being an expert at doing it are two different things. As Shaw said, one does not need to know how to lay an egg to be able to tell how good an omelette is.

The fact is that, if the perennial questions of philosophy are to be discussed in an informed manner, a knowledge of the problems in the history of philosophy must be combined with an awareness of the pertinent findings of the contemporary sciences. I believe to have demonstrated that this is by no means an impossible, or even an oversized, task.[1] It is a matter of proper selection from among the analytic apparatus of philosophy and the technical procedures of science, in view of their appropriateness in dealing with the chosen problems.

And if philosophers are not willing to do this, there are indications that scientists are. For example, the resolution of the board of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), endorsed by the Council on December 30, 1969, reads: "It is the sense of the Board that for the coming decade the main thrust of AAAS attention and resources shall be dedicated to a major increase in the scale and effectiveness of its work on the chief contemporary problems concerning the mutual relations of science, technology, and social change, including the uses of science and technology in the promotion

of human welfare."[2] Questions concerning the mutual relations of science, technology, and social change, and in particular on the uses of science and technology in the promotion of human welfare, are typically *philosophical* questions. That scientists deem it necessary to dedicate their attention and resources to them bespeaks the small confidence they have in the ability of the philosophic community in handling such issues. And the time may not be far off when scientists make organized efforts to evolve a theory of knowledge and an ethics adequate to the state of contemporary information pertinent to these fields. The AAAS is already running symposia on science and human values at its annual meetings, and workers in information and communications theory, cybernetics, and general systems theory have increasingly taken on themselves to discuss such hitherto purely philosophical issues as purpose, consciousness, meaning, teleology, wholeness, and many more.[3]

Contemporary science is becoming philosophical but contemporary philosophy is not becoming scientific. Since most scientists are not properly trained to handle philosophical issues, and most philosophers are simply ignorant of scientific findings, we now get either well-founded but naïve, or poorly founded but expert, philosophies. The rift between the sciences and the humanities is still with us. What we need is a kind of theory that is both well founded and expert. Exceptional men in science as well as philosophy have provided instances of it. I am suggesting that it is up to philosophers as a class to cultivate and develop it systematically.

Academic philosophy could continue to exist for a long time without changing its tactics and shifting its sources of information. But does it not behoove philosophers, the accepted representatives of rational thought on topics of humanistic interest, to take part in, and indeed be the leaders of, systematic endeavors directed toward evolving concepts and theories which, in our troubled times, fill both an intellectual and an existential need? Many of our philosophers act as though they could or would wish to do no more than discuss what other philosophers have said and to train students to become philosophers who discuss what they have said other philosophers have said, and so on. A regrettable tendency of contemporary philosophy is to analyze itself, rather than what the case is, and to look at arguments instead of evidence. And even in quarters where this tendency is not pronounced, the cases and the evidence looked at are often inadequate. Yet philosophers are uniquely qualified to consider basic problems, weigh the relevant evidence, and to come to reasoned conclusions. But to do this,

they would have to take into account what counts as a basic problem in contemporary culture and society and to assess all the evidence pertinent to such problems, rather than analyze only what other philosophers had to say on them.

Philosophy, as it now operates, takes "to philosophize" as an intransitive verb: it tends to be a closed, self-analytical enterprise. What it needs is to break out of its ivory tower and enter into constructive dialog with scientists, humanists, theologians, and others who by concern and training have information to contribute. In an age beset with crises and rapid and often uncontrolled change, it behooves philosophers not to be content to analyze each others' pronouncements, or even their own contents of consciousness, but to treat their substantive philosophic issues in a truly informed, authoritative manner.

NOTES

1. See Ervin Laszlo, *Introduction to Systems Philosophy: Toward a New Paradigm of Contemporary Thought* (New York: Gordon & Breach, in press).

2. I am grateful to Ralph W. Burhoe for drawing my attention to this.

3. Even a tentative sampling of the relevant literature would have to include such works as: Ludwig von Bertalanffy, *Robots, Men, and Minds: Psychology in the Modern World* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1967), and *General System Theory: Foundations, Development, Applications* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1968); Henry Margenau, ed., *Integrative Principles of Modern Thought*, Current Topics in Contemporary Thought Series, vol. 3 (New York: Gordon & Breach, 1970); Arturo Rosenblueth, *Mind and Brain: A Philosophy of Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1970); Walter Frederick Buckley, comp., *Modern Systems Research for the Behavioral Scientist: A Sourcebook* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1968); Lancelot Law Whyte et al., eds., *Structural Hierarchies: Proceedings* (New York: American Elsevier Publishing Co., 1969); Theodosius Dobzhansky, *The Biology of Ultimate Concern* (New York: New American Library, 1967); Harlow Shapley, *Of Stars and Men: The Human Response to an Expanding Universe* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958); William Grey Walter, *The Living Brain* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1953); and Arthur Koestler and J. R. Smythies, eds., *Beyond Reductionism: New Perspectives in the Life of Sciences* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1970).