

RELIGION, SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE

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There are abroad in the world today two tacit answers to the perennial question, "What is the meaning of life?" Characteristic of one answer is the claim that life's meaning is only understood through revelation. Without revelation, we are warned, life is meaningless, it leads only to nihilism. Current revelations are both sacred and secular, sometimes divine and sometimes demonic. This answer is called the "religious" answer. The second answer is that only a life of reason can be meaningful or hold any promise—and by reason, one usually means a life directed by the judgments of science. Now let me not mislead the reader into thinking that the way of religion is irrational or that the way of science does not have its revelations, its flashes of insight, its moments of ecstasy. I only wish to make clear what seems to me to be the *sine qua non* of each.

Philosophy is not, however, satisfied with either answer. Each, accepted separately, seems to rob man of those elements of his nature which characterize his humanness, i.e., both answers taken in isolation remove from him the responsibility of being an individual. It is necessary of course to defend this claim. But at the risk of sounding platitudinous, I must say that we all now live in an age which ill affords any collective dehumanization of man. The continuous stockpiling of attitudes (in the form of "systems of belief" which fall into one "camp" or another) fares well to man's tragic extinction. Thus it seems to me that philosophy's primary task today is to struggle to re-establish communication between the "religious" and the "scientific" answers in order to foster our survival. The burden of this paper is to trace the path which

philosophy seeks to sail if it is not to founder and lose its significance on the Scylla of religion or in the Charybdis of science.

I

Karl Jaspers once wrote that philosophy—even as Christianity—has its “saints.” Socrates, Boethius, Bruno—all were martyred for steering a philosophical course. They are never considered great philosophers, nor are their philosophical conclusions particularly important, but they have always been the “holy,” the “set-apart” ones because they perished for their philosophical commitment. When the scientist Galileo recanted of his heliocentric universe theory, he needed merely to bide his time until science revealed the foolishness of his tormentors. His was, it seems to me, an easy truth. It lay within the context of “objectivity.” Objective truth demands objective answers. “The book is on the table.” Is it, or is it not? To affirm the claim or to deny it ends the case for objectivity. But, when Giordano Bruno refused to recant, he died on the martyr’s pyre. His was a difficult truth—philosophical truth, not scientific truth. Both men acted in keeping with the truth to which they were committed and for which they had to stand; but one truth would suffer by retraction, the other would not.

Galileo’s objective truth is a truth which stands without Galileo. It has the Platonic character of universality about it; its validity is unhistorical and timeless. However, we should not allow such a truth to beguile us as it did Plato. It is not absolute; rather, it depends on finite premises and a method of attaining knowledge which involves stipulative procedures and pragmatic ends. On the other hand, Bruno could not recant; for when he reached that point where he believed that he had plumbed the depths of reality, to deny this fact would have been to deny his inward sense of integrity; and what is more fundamental, it would have been completely alien to his sense of what was true to his experience—in a

phrase, it would have robbed him of his freedom to seek truth. Galileo acted as a scientist—Bruno acted as a philosopher.

Let us observe what is peculiar to Bruno's philosophical truth. (1) Philosophical truth is belief accruing from knowledge. To think—and to think free from contradiction—is basic. "Cognition" is the primary instrument of philosophy. The philosophical procedure is never intended to be irrational; philosophy stands unreconciled to the attempt of any who would establish the truth upon the irrational. The irrational is, at its core, merely negation. Therefore there must be nothing which is not questioned, no secret which is withheld from inquiry, nothing which is permitted to veil itself. It is through the process of critique that meaning, and hence knowledge, is to be acquired. (2) The result of such a procedure frequently acts as a descriptive iconoclasm. Philosophers consciously seek to pull down man's irrational idols. In a certain measure they are asking man to analyze his "reason for his reasons." We might say, man as a philosopher carries on a dialogue with the "gods," but as a philosopher, one is frighteningly aware of the fact that the dialogue is onesided—the conversation proceeds only as he speaks. The gods remain silent. Therefore, in a subordinate sense, philosophy is a therapy one conducts with himself as long as he lives (Wittgenstein)—and this therapy has for its basic principle the conviction that health (salvation) is only acquired when man rigorously struggles to apply that uniqueness of his nature which sets him off from the brutes—his capacity to think. (3) Finally, philosophy acts as a liaison between the "ideologists" and the "scientists," in the manner of a translator of alien languages. He seeks to keep open the lines of communication between idealism and realism, between the eternal and the temporal.

II

Let us consider the philosopher's conversation with both the religious and the scientific man, beginning with his confrontation with religion.

There are at least four significant relationships between religion and philosophy. Initially, there is the common quest of both after what is called the "monotheistic abstraction" (Schrödinger), i.e., the pursuit of unity, the rejection of desultory idols and of superficial asides, a dogged tracking of the final answer, the right answer, the "truth," and the commitment to this "truth," one's ultimate allegiance to the highest value. Religion traditionally labels its answer with the honorific title, "God." Philosophers have had many names for their answer—the good, the true, the beautiful, the absolute, reality, being.

On the one hand, to the religious, the philosopher's God is pale, vapid, threadbare—as Blaise Pascal says, the philosopher's God is never the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But on the other hand, philosophy distrusts religious images of God because they are frequently seductive idols, magnified into proportions which fit the picture world of its pious followers. Sometimes, in the eyes of the philosopher, religion can have a cultic aspect—an intense devotion to its conception of the holy, to its community of believers and to its priesthood, all combining to make many of the religiously indoctrinated terrifyingly certain of their beliefs. Frequently the apologists of such cultic manifestations find any disagreement with their conviction merely the aberrational mutterings of untransformed pagans. Philosophers must guard themselves against such cultic commitment—rather, they must accede to the individual's complete freedom in his search of knowledge.

A second relationship important to both religion and philosophy is the principle of faith; but philosophy has a rather restricted use for the term "faith." Faith, philosophically,

means the willingness to hold a belief which reaches beyond the structures of phenomenal verification. Sometimes philosophers refer to this as the "risk of faith" (Kierkegaard). Philosophical faith involves such a risk—an intellectual gamble, or a learned surmise. And the philosopher is very much aware that his claims might be demonstrated at some future time, by the process of objectivity, to be sheer nonsense. However, the philosopher does not intend that such a faith be understood as a rearguard retreating action, i.e., an attempt to hold to certain types of unsubstantiated nonsense until empirical research finds us out. Rather, philosophical faith is the awareness in man as an autonomous creature that overbelief (James) is the indispensable basket in which all descriptions of reality must be carried. Man's overbeliefs sustain him psychologically and provide for him goals which protect him from stagnation. Faith acts as a catalyst for creativity and is the conceptual foundation of values; ostensibly faith is the ground of man's idealism.

Also it seems to me that the conception of prayer exhibits a third possible relationship between religion and philosophy. Prayer is, philosophically, the personification of one's quest after the absolute answer. Prayer is the legitimate mode of "hypostatizing" what one considers ultimate—that which demands our worship, that which we are prepared to kneel before. Einstein once called this act "my reverence for the mystery of the Universe." Thus the act of prayer, philosophically, has the effect of making man a devoted and responsive adventurer in his quest for understanding, rather than indolent and passive.

Finally, the principle of revelation, which is commonly described by the religious as the immediate and objective utterance of God—"the light for the path" (Tillich)—need not be utterly rejected by the philosopher. He too seeks the final confirmation of reality—of God, if you wish. That is to say, he also responds to the ecstasy of the "truth," the confirmation of his thought concerning what must be—what is—

that which is not alien to his conception of what is indeed the "light on his path."

III

Obviously much more should be said about philosophy's dialogue with religion, but now I must turn briefly to the philosopher's dialogue with science. Philosophy and science are permanently wedded in one respect—each establishes reason and the empirical process as basic to its methodology. And yet, philosophy is, on frequent occasions, the critic of science. Space will not permit me to engage in a lengthy analysis of all the points of contact which these two disciplines maintain (even if I could), so I shall limit myself to a single issue: Man's nature.

What is man? How should he be understood? Science shows us remarkable and highly important things about man; but as science offers more and more clarity and precision concerning man, it becomes more and more evident that this insight compounds the mystery of man's final definition. Science's need of precision forces it to abandon scope. All of the variables necessary for an explanation of man (even if they were all known, which they certainly are not) cannot be subsumed in a single calculus. Some of these variables must be sacrificed if any results are to be secured. Man is always more than he knows about himself. In a biological sense, man is perhaps best described as a central nervous system with electrical impulses charging up and down certain vascular conduits. And yet, this definition only partially describes man—never is it adequate for understanding man as a mower of lawns, or a woman under the hair dryer. In so far as we make our conception of man scientific, we confine ourselves to the world of masses in motion. We deliberately sacrifice our conception of man as an individual. But if we seek to preserve a "something more" about man's nature by reaching beyond the categories of science, have we actually added anything more to our understanding of man? It is my convic-

tion that we have. We should not be reluctant to define man in extra-scientific categories; in fact, to confine our definition of man to the precise claims of science is to subtract much of the experience which we all apprehend to be part of man. To the question, "What is man?" the answer, "Only a sophisticated ape," is inappropriate. But why? Because, this explanation necessarily fragmentizes man, i.e., biology only answers some of the questions which torment us concerning our own nature. All explanations—mathematical, physical, biological, psychological, theological—only encompass segments of our experience.

It is necessary to understand man in a broader, a multi-descriptive sense. The task has fallen to philosophy, first to listen to science's explanations of man, recognize the significance of its objective "truth," then to listen to religion's—or any other discipline's—reply, and thus to translate each system's conclusions in the terms of the other, taking great care not to destroy the actual description of man through too severe a bifurcation, or too extreme a reduction.

But while doing this, philosophy must not forget its iconoclastic role. Frequently, for example, philosophy finds it necessary to question some of the assumptions of religion or science. Consider the problem which arises concerning science's inability to give final explanations. Because science cannot demonstrate phenomenally the origin of the Universe, it does not in itself provide for religion a logical basis for its metaphysical explanation. An argument *ad ignorantiam* proves nothing. On the other hand, the scientist's constant obsession with reductionism must also be resisted by the philosopher. To suggest that man is adequately understood as a series of electrical impulses is to reduce man to the status of a mechanism, wholly abstracted from his existence as a spiritual being. In truth, man must include the religious nature, the man of the spirit, as well as the biological man.

Essentially, then, the philosopher can neither determine how the theologian or the scientist must answer his questions,

nor what these answers will be. Rather, the philosopher is the interpreter and the critic (as Socrates has urged) who constantly calls each discipline to account for its assertions. Perhaps Herman Melville's most lyrical lines depict the philosopher's place in our contemporary age:

Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye.

And so it is that philosophical truth has a strange way of melting away. For philosophical truth in a sense goes beyond philosophizing—it is found in experience which is not philosophical but scientific or religious. And when the philosopher speaks to this experience he is in reality no more, it seems to me, the philosopher but the scientist or the theologian—and that is another story.