

THE CONTINUITY OF PHILOSOPHY

THE history of philosophy is certainly not the uniform and regular development of a primal seed; there are breaks, irregularities, off-shoots. Yet it is true that we cannot legitimately reduce it to a mere welter of mutually exclusive ideas, to a mere swarm of watertight systems. We shall look in vain for complete breaks. The past cannot but reach over into the present and in some sense perpetuate itself. Period shades off into period gradually and the pressure of what has gone before leaves an indelible mark on the present. Thus all would agree now that we cannot admit a decisive and unbridgeable gulf between the scholasticism of the close of the Middle Ages and the philosophy that succeeded. It is true that the age of Descartes is an age of revolt throughout a great part of Europe, but this very fact precludes the possibility of a complete new beginning, since that age of which the philosopher may be said to be a spokesman by its very contrast and opposition to the preaching age is largely determined and coloured by the past.

For a philosopher, by the time he had reached the age and point of reflection at which he could undertake such a task, would inevitably be imbued with a certain stain or colour according to the epoch in which he was born, with its mental tone and outlook on life and the world, so that his very reaction to the prevailing tendencies in thought, if reaction he chose, would itself be influenced and partly characterized by the prevailing colour of its opposite. We all acknowledge the influence of certain prevalent political aspirations on the thought of Hegel, even though there is a reciprocal influence the other way. To take another example: anyone who reads the dialogues of Plato may be conscious not only of the influence of the past, through the Pythagoreans, but also of the influence exerted by the ideal of the Greek city-state and of the prevailing code of morality.

To this it may be answered that the colouring of a man's speculation which results from the influence of his epoch and intellectual and moral environment is alien to the funda-

mental in his thought. His main ideas, the root characteristics of his thought soar above the local colouring in lofty detachment, as the Idea of the Good stands in the grandeur of remote isolation above the undergrowth of city-state and slavery.

We reply that though the production of pure thought may rightly be said to stand in proud and solitary isolation *in itself*, yet as viewed by the thinker and by those to whom his thought is made known, those pure ideas will appear in a rather different light from that in which they appear to other recipients. It is indeed true that simple ideas which are representative of simple facts need not vary from age to age, though they will have different "fringes." But when ideas are complex and presuppose much abstract thought it is clear that the same term or word which is employed to denote such an idea may cover several different ideas. The same word, then, may be employed by different men, while on the other hand the corresponding idea may not be the same in the mind of each. Or it may remain essentially the same idea, though, as existing in the minds of men of different epochs or of different men of the same epoch, it has various degrees of richness and wealth of content. Add to this that different ages, different social groups, etc., have different synthetic ideas, and the influence of these colours to some extent (and may indeed tend to discolour and distort) the ideas subsumed beneath the framework of the general scheme or leading synthetic idea.

To take a simple example of what we have been saying. Owing to the vast accumulation of experimental data within modern times the term "evolution" would signify much more to a scientist of the twentieth century than to one of the time of the Renaissance. Again, owing to the influence of other leading ideas, presuppositions and general outlook, the idea corresponding to the term "evolution" will vary, according as the word is employed by a materialist Marxian, by a disciple of M. Bergson, or a convinced Catholic.

The affirmation therefore of the same propositions at different periods does not mean that at both periods precisely the same content is ascribed to those propositions by all

concerned. Verbally the propositions are the same, but subjectively considered, i.e. considered as thought by various concrete men, they are certainly different, since the people who affirm these propositions and who attach to them peculiar meanings, change themselves, and thoughts do not exist apart from a thinker. We cannot allow a realm of ideas detached and separate and self-existent, out of all contact with any subject, with any thinker.

We conclude then that the result of philosophic speculation can never in the course of its history really and truly reproduce itself—at least as regards its abstract and complex ideas. From the purely formal and academic point of view of course it might so reproduce itself in regard to the propositions verbally considered, but concretely considered it cannot.

At this point in our treatment of the subject it might be as well to forestall the objection that we are impugning the character of truth, and admitting an erroneous doctrine of relativity. That this is not so may become apparent by considering a concrete instance, which may serve to clarify what we have been saying and to emphasize the way in which we would have it understood. The proposition "God exists" is true now, has always been true and will always be true, since truth changes not. It is not true for A and untrue for B, true in the Middle Ages and untrue in the twentieth century. But that is not to say that the meaning attached by different men is the same. Hence our distinction between the idea objectively considered and subjectively considered. That God exists is affirmed as true by St. John of the Cross and by the theistic man-in-the-street, but when St. John of the Cross used the word "God" he understands much more than the other man does from one point of view, for his knowledge of God is greater. Doubtless the other man affirms all that by implication, but we are not speaking of that point now. Similarly St. Pius V and Calvin both affirm that God exists, but Calvin's idea of God is not the same as that of the Pontiff. Certainly of course it is possible to particularize the statement, e.g. that God to Whose existence as Creator and Self-existent Being we conclude by reason,

and Who is revealed to us through Jesus Christ, true God and Man, and the teaching delivered to the Catholic Church and preserved intact by the Church in communion with the See of Peter, exists—so that many other senses in which the simple proposition “God exists” might be understood are excluded (and rightly of course from the point of view of truth), but such particularization, from our present point of view (though not, we hasten to add, from every point of view), involves the affirmation of a different proposition. Again, the very term “exists” means more to the trained metaphysician than it does to the uncultured person, and is differently understood by the Catholic and by the modernist.

Truth therefore is unchanging, but a proposition, such as our example of “God exists” which is true when understood in a certain sense, may also have more or less different meanings (very likely containing untruth) attached to it by different people, for not all men apprehend it in precisely the same degree of richness, nor even in the same way (though for the ordinary Christian the meaning does not vary from age to age, save perhaps in the “fringe” of associated ideas).

Apply then what we have said to the history of philosophy in general and it is seen to amount very much to this, that history does not repeat itself in the concrete. It is clearly not possible for the same thoughts to be thought again by precisely the same men in a different stage of historical development, and that is really what is meant when we say that the precise meaning attached to the same philosophic propositions at different epochs and by different thinkers will itself differ.

The history of philosophy is not a mere record of isolated units, of utterly detached systems, but it can really justify a claim to the title “history,” though we must guard against any tendency to postulate a mechanical, uniform development. The spontaneous creation of personal genius and talent must be allowed for, though, as we have shown, even this personal element is not absolutely isolated and uncoloured by anything outside itself—how could it be? In other words, the history of philosophy is the history of the philosophic

speculation of men, but of men who were historical men and not mere "windowless monads." Concretely it is the very movement and development of that speculation, with all that it has of personal contribution and of mutual influence and interdependence.

We have shown then that the term "history of philosophy" implying a certain continuity is not a misnomer. But what is this movement of speculation in itself? Is it a mere froth on the surface of the stream of life, an epiphenomenon indicative of the total culture of the epoch, but destitute of further significance? Or is it the conscious expression of the Hegelian Spirit which unfolds and manifests itself in history, and comes to self-consciousness in the speculation of philosophy? It is certainly not the first, since the intellect is capable of attaining truth. We cannot deny the *per se* validity of intellectual processes and turn to a sensationalism and emotionalism that is the product of intellectual despair, nor salute movement, *élan vital*, as the ultimate value in contradistinction to intellect, when the assertion of this ultimate value is itself an act of intellect.

Nor is philosophical speculation the process whereby the Absolute gradually attains to consciousness of itself, the expression of the Subject. Yet there is a sense in which it is the expression of the subject, for it is the expression of man's search, his immemorial search after God, and of God's attraction of man's intellect to Himself. Just as the will tends to the good, so the intellect to the true; and just as the will tends ultimately, through all the partial goods and make-belief of life, to the Sovereign Good, the Substantial Personal Good that is God, so is the intellect directed ultimately to the *Veritas Suprema*, that is the same God. The faculty tends to its proper and corresponding object, and as the intellect is made for the contemplation of the substantial truth, so is it ever seeking that same Truth, though sometimes under strange guise. Spinoza's doctrine of the "*amor intellectualis Dei*," Plotinus' flight "of the alone to the alone" point to the truth of the intellect's orientation towards *Veritas Suprema et Substantialis*. Behind the pre-Buddhistic anchorite's contemplation of Brahma, behind the Platonic ascent to the Idea of

the Good, we can discern the same thought. Ultimately and fundamentally philosophical speculation is the search of the human intellect after God, if haply it may find Him. And even though the philosopher may begin with the presupposition that there is no God, and may build up some system of, e.g., Historical Materialism, it remains true that in seeking for the nature and explanation of the universe (and of course we presume his sincerity) he is seeking, albeit unconsciously, for God, the Substantial Truth.

The history of philosophy then is ultimately the history of the human intellect's search for God as the Truth. The result has often been and is strange and monstrous—we are not pure intelligences, and the processes of our minds are influenced by so much from without, which is not always of profitable service—but the dynamic stimulus at the root of all this intellectual speculation is the movement of the intellect towards its Centre. The movement of philosophy, the history of its course and development (and when we use the word "development" we do not by any means wish to be understood as connoting perpetual progress) is not the expression of God, in the sense in which an Absolutist might understand the words, yet it is the expression of man's intellectual search for God. The true philosophers, as we read in Plato's *Symposium* (substituting "truth" for "beauty"), are those who "from the meditation of many doctrines arrive at that which is nothing else than the doctrine of the supreme truth itself, in the knowledge and contemplation of which at length they repose."

Yet there is a sense in which the very history of philosophy is an expression of God. We mean this, that the very presence of this movement or course is itself, however much superficial observers might suppose the contrary, an argument for the existence of God. For what is the *ratio sufficiens* of all this speculation, of all this restless searching? It might be answered that it is man's desire to plumb the why and wherefore of the universe, to attain to the ultimate explanation, an explanation which will be for ever unforthcoming, as is evidenced by the hopeless confusion of systems and ideas. But such an answer is inadequate, since the very searching

for an explanation, the very existence of the "metaphysical itch," needs a *ratio sufficiens*, and that *ratio sufficiens* can be grasped by considering the nature of the intellect itself. The intellect is the faculty apprehensive of truth, but it will not work entirely in the void, without object. We should not find all this philosophic speculation, all these successive metaphysical systems, unless man's intellect "discerned" a latent Form, dimly apprehended behind the fleeting things of time, that is Itself the ultimate Explanation of all things. We can adapt the words of the great African Doctor: "*Tu nos ad Te creasti Domine, et irrequietus est intellectus noster, donec requiescat in Te.*"

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