

CRISIS AND CONSTANT ORDER

The Competence of Philosophy. The association of "deep philosophy", with "deep ecology" reflects the fact that ecological problems have assumed an importance great enough for them to come within the scope of philosophy, although there must be doubts as to whether philosophy is of any use for understanding historically unique or unprecedented events. Philosophy's focus on universals seems to identify it with knowledge of what is true at all times, and both Platonic and Aristotelian thought explain the world according to a conception of immutable realities which are manifested in a permanent material substratum. But there the resemblance ends, because the Aristotelian kind of thought, and its derivatives, really is concerned only with constant processes. Because of its empirical tendency, it is focused on changes of a kind which most people are capable of observing most of the time, so that the material world in Aristotle can appear to be as stable in its own way as the realm of Forms in Plato.

If it were asked why an ancient philosophy should give the best means of understanding modern crises, it must be said that Platonism is the only philosophy which engages with the whole spectrum of reality. Nearly all other philosophies, starting from Aristotle's, artificially restrict the content of reality, and so exclude things their authors dislike, or fear, or do not wish to understand. Accordingly, Plato's philosophy incorporates both creation and cosmic catastrophes within its system of Forms and matter, and that was something which Aristotle would not accept. This appears from the passage

in the *Timaeus* where time is created along with the world: "Time came into being together with the Heaven, in order that, as they were brought into being together, so they may be dissolved together, if ever their dissolution should come to pass;"(38B). This excludes any "empty time" in which a world could have evolved into being.

For Plato, the manifestation of Forms in matter was not simply automatic, but was subject to Divine power and choice, firstly in regard to the number of Forms instantiated at a given time, secondly in the different durations for which they appear, and thirdly in the order in which they do so. Fourthly, beyond the other three, creation is involved in the question as to how many highly-placed, and how many lowly-placed, members of the system of Forms are instantiated in a certain period. If these factors are taken into account, it will be clear that this conception of Forms and matter can cope with radical cosmic change, within its overriding focus on universals. On this basis, the world could possibly deteriorate simply by a progressive reduction in the numbers of Forms instantiated in it, even if the three other modes of change were not in operation. But we need to see why the world's in-forming principles should be withdrawn like this, and not kept numerically constant.

I shall therefore say something first about the order of cosmic change, and then about the corresponding changes in the human mind. Those are the changes which have led to an identity crisis; no longer understanding ourselves, we fail to understand our role in the world.

Cosmic Decline. An example of overall and pervasive cosmic change is to be seen in the myth which Plato presents in the *Statesman* dialogue, where we are told:

"At certain times God himself guides the progress of this world and presides over its revolution. At other times, when the periods assigned to it have run their course, he leaves it alone; and then, of its own accord, it begins to travel on its circular course *in the opposite direction. . .*" (*Statesman* 269c) In the same passage it is clear that this myth does refer to God, and not just to mythical divinities, since He is referred to as "the supreme divinity" or "the greatest god." (ibid. 272 e)

Once the world is released from direct Divine control, then, an increasing disorder results from the initial reversal of its processes until the world is in danger of dissolution, at which point we are told that God resumes control of it. The issues which this conception clearly raises are those of cyclic time and of cosmic pessimism. Apparently, the world as a whole appears bound to keep on getting worse, even though no one individual is bound to become part of that. Elsewhere, this view appears in myths of a Golden Age, followed by ages of Silver, Bronze, and Iron. Here again, it seems that a downward path is somehow necessary, so that this sequence must draw mankind further and further away from an original perfection or fullness of being.

At this point I want show what is involved in this idea, and will try to show that it comes from something more universal than an inclination to pessimism.

Something of a supra-human nature is at work in the pattern of change, and attention was drawn to this by René Guénon in his work on cyclic time. The determining reality in question is the Great Chain of Being, the total non-temporal structure of being, extending down from the highest divinity to the most peripheral and short-lived modifications of existence. The further down the chain one goes, the more quantity dominates quality; that is to say, the lower the level, the greater the expansion in the numbers of existences, even though they may not manifest any larger variety of Forms. At the top, there is a simplicity of fullness, while at the bottom, there is a simplicity of emptiness, and a maximum of complexity between them.

This is the order in the Chain of Being which is manifested in the succession of the ages, inasmuch as every passage from one part of time to the next corresponds to a descent from one level in the Great Chain to the next lower. The determinism involved in this is part of the cosmic order as a whole.

A pattern of cosmic descent can also be seen from the working of causality, where every cause produces first of all effects most like itself, and then effects which are progressively less and less like it. This is explained in Proclus's account of causality in the *Elements of Theology*, especially in (Propositions 28 and 29), in terms of the superiority of the cause over the effect it produces, where each part of time is the effect of the one before and the cause of the next. A loud noise sounds less and less loud the further away one is; and this can also be seen in manufactured things, which do best what they were made for when new, but gradually do less well,

until they have to be replaced. This kind of change is paralleled by the irreversibility of entropy, where natural causes operate by expending and dissipating energy which can never be recaptured.

It remains to consider the reasons as to why the course taken by time is always cyclic. This idea appears to be drawn from analogies with the cycles of the seasons and the lunar cycle, along with the life-cycles of all living things, vegetable or sentient. Besides, rotation pervades the universe, as nearly all the bodies in the universe rotate about their axes, and move in closed orbits. All such examples do not amount to theoretical proof; there must still be a cyclic property essential to time itself.

For Platonists, the cyclic pattern results from the relation between the eternal causes of things, or Forms, and the world of time and change produced by them. This world cannot be separated from the Forms, or it would cease to exist, but conversely, it cannot be fully united with them without losing its temporal nature. Consequently, the world of time can only retain its own nature and at the same time remain affiliated to its formal cause by uniting in itself a pair of opposites. This is a union of motion with fixity, and the only kind of motion which does that is circular motion. In motion which keeps traversing the same path around a fixed point, the conflict between them is overcome.

Circle and cycle are clearly not identical, but they are closely related. For change in time to form a cycle, it is only necessary that the changes should repeat the same general pattern, and not repeat identical events. That is enough for them to be cycles rather than circles.

The descending property of cycles, referred to already, results from time's manifesting the initial separation of temporal being from the eternal. In this way, time-cycles fully reflect their descent from their causes.

Where this descending process involves the Forms, the passage of time appears in the realization of possibilities, beginning with the most far-reaching of them, (i.e. manifesting the more highly-placed Forms in the Chain of Being), and then subsequently more and more limited possibilities. That kind of change is the one which is expressed poetically by the descent of a world from a golden age to an iron age, but it is always the pattern of events which is repeated, not particular events or beings.

The Roots of False Consciousness. If all changes on the cosmic level happen by physical necessity, there remains the question as to how much or how little we ourselves must be involved in them. Entities which participate in just one level of being are necessarily ruled by necessity, but this is not the case for those who participate in all levels of being. The human soul is created so as to mediate between nature and the supernatural, between the changing and the unchanging, and to relate equally naturally to both. For this reason, we are a composite of everything from the Divine down to the inertia of matter. That includes our share of Plato's universal interaction of Reason and Necessity, a combination over which neither nature nor the conditions of a world-cycle have any *necessary* power since they are produced by it. Such forces cannot comprehend our whole being, therefore, and

so they can rule only those who are willing to accept them, or those who just don't care.

All that is very far from what is taken to be the truth about our cosmic position today, because the ideas involved in it have been increasingly sidelined by those whom society regards as experts. We are nearly all aware that modern minds do not work in the same way as the minds of our ancestors, because the changes in the way in which we think of ourselves and the world have moved in a consistently materialistic direction for the past four hundred years. The ideas involved in this were not part of any science, but they became associated with the successes achieved by science in the same period, and thereby they were irrationally allowed to share in the prestige of science, so that most people were unaware of any difference, with the result that modern forms of speculation came under the umbrella of "new discoveries".

To shed light on the ecological crisis we need to find out what has driven this modern mindset, and why it was so susceptible to materialism. This involves the prospect of a steady deterioration of human consciousness, and that possibility needs to be accounted for, particularly where it means that a false philosophy could spread so far and so deep as to create a false consciousness, along with its failure to understand our place in the natural world.

The Rise of Empiricism. There has long been a major change in the accepted ideas of knowledge and truth, and this in turn has determined the way in which the mind thinks of itself; one's theory of knowledge becomes a theory of oneself. This change has been continually in

the direction of Empiricism, the idea that knowledge comes from sense-perception, with the mind passive to the input, like blank paper being printed on. It all began with the "elevation" of Aristotle in the 13th Century. Thanks to the work of Aquinas, Aristotle's philosophy was incorporated into the highest received wisdom. There was in the wake of this an adage that there was "nothing in the intellect except what was first in the senses." This went with a denial of the Forms or innate ideas, supported by a supposed argument that there could be no innate ideas, because a person born blind could have no idea of colours. That was accepted despite the fact that that could only be true if the senses were indeed the only source of knowledge.

To confirm the idea of Aristotle as the principal source of Empiricism in Western tradition, we need only bear in mind his rejection of the transcendental nature of the Forms and of the soul, and his reduction of the mind to the sensory level:

"That part of the soul, then, which we call mind. . . *has no actual existence* until it thinks." (De Anima III, iv. 429a). This statement is repeated in the same text. When the mind does not think, it cannot cause any signs detectable by sight or hearing, of course, and the absence of such phenomena is taken for a guarantee of non-existence. That is the empiricist position precisely.

Besides this, the implicit idea that the non-existent can decide to start doing something is obviously self-contradictory. Whatever can start to do something must first exist; that applies to physical activity as much as to mental. During sleep, however, sense perception ceases as well as thought. Did Aristotle never ask himself

whether he still existed while he was asleep? Be that as it may, this view of mind has been respectfully accepted by innumerable generations of instinctive materialists, who thought that the existence of objective and subsistent Forms was not believable.

In the same passage, Aristotle also says: "Hence the mind, too, can have no characteristic except its capacity to receive." (ibid.)

Even where the mind is allowed to exist, then, it could only be as a receptacle for sensory inputs, such that it must be on a level with them. Knowledge would be ready-made "out there," and would need only to find a lodging-place, and the mind would be simply a collection of images of things brought in by sense-perception. In this case, the mind could not have any independent existence in relation to the external world, let alone any innate ideas; that, incidentally, is a theory which has been made familiar in modern times by advocates of anti-dualism.

A further consequence of this is that one could have no innate personality either, but only a blank tablet to be inscribed by others. One's personality would then consist only of all the inputs received from parents, teachers and contemporaries. In this case, one could not have even second-hand personality, because those who formed us would themselves be only so many collections of inputs from yet other empirical agents. Thus personality would recede to infinity, and be reduced to nothing, while the world would consist of objects without subjects, if that were not as self-contradictory like saying there were only odd numbers, and no even.

Plotinus clearly regards this position as self-refuting: "For certainly we cannot think of the soul as a thing whose nature is just a sum of impressions from outside - as if it, *alone of all that exists*, had no native character." (Enn. II, 3, 15)

The Empiricist mind is gripped by a conviction that reality must be in principle *simple*, which ironically cannot be supported by empirical evidence. And then an anti-metaphysical position gives rise to a pseudo-metaphysics.

All such thinking contradicts what Plato argued for in two of his major works, the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*, where the idea that knowledge might be sense-perception is refuted in detail, and knowledge is shown to result from the powers of judgement and recognition of Forms. Consequently, all empiricist philosophers from the earliest times must logically have been bound to begin by refuting those arguments of Plato, but in fact they have not attempted to do so. Their kind of thought necessarily excludes God, since the attributes of the Divine can only be metaphysical, and that is why their philosophy never needs to set up explicit arguments against religious belief.

From the 17th.Century, empiricism became our national philosophical tradition, in the works of Bacon, Locke, Hume, and Mill, and they ignore Plato as though he had nothing relevant to say on the subject. Instead, we are offered a way of thinking which feels comfortably close to common sense, although it is not hard to show that it cannot meet its own criteria. Firstly, the idea that knowledge comes from sense-perception is not to be found

in any kind of sense-perception. It is in fact a typical mental construct. And then it gets worse: we cannot perceive our own perceiving, so we can't see our seeing, hear our hearing, and so on, in which case we could not even know that we had sense-perception, if knowledge is from the senses; knowledge would then be attributed to something whose very existence was not knowable. That has not prevented some of those who believe in perception alone from denying the very existence of minds, and to them the best answer is to ask that they prove the existence of sense-perception. As Plato has pointed out, a statement that "X exists" is not the same thing as a simple perception of X, because existence is always an inference following from consciousness, no matter how often we make it.

Empiricism gives rise to an optimistic popular belief that knowledge is ready-made out there, (as in the words of Aristotle just quoted), so that we need only open our windows and it will fly in. In this case, to hear would be the same thing as to understand, and one could master the most difficult books by staring at their pages. In reality, however, experience is turned into knowledge by subtle mental operations involving the judgement, which one can make for oneself, but not for others. That is why we can easily share beliefs or opinions, because that need only require imitation, but there is no direct sharing of items of knowledge as such; they must first be made one's own.

These facts are usually ignored today, because they are outside imagination, and can only be conceived and understood by reason. There is a clear one-to-one relation between things perceived and things imagined,

and this combination of thought and sense creates a false completeness, which makes most people unwilling to think beyond imagination. But if knowledge is taken to be solely on this level, the transcendental property of knowing is lost, and the knower is brought down to the level of the known, thus making ourselves part of the flow of phenomena, and therefore one more part of the natural order.

False philosophy also comes from a misunderstanding about the external world. We agree that it is full of independently-existing material objects, but these things are not literally grasped empirically, though they may appear to be so. That is because we grasp only our *experiences* of those objects, not the things as such. This can be seen from the fact that these sense-experiences have nothing either independent or material about them. They are in fact dependent on our interests, our needs, our attention span, and things which compete for our attention. Simply by being experiences, they are psychical, not material, and they do not occupy any public space, being spatial only in form.

Knowledge of the external world thus has to be representational, in which case we cannot directly identify our perceptions with the things which cause them. However, if knowledge is really from sense-perception, empiricists must have to close this gap between perceptions and material things, which needless to say, has never been done, except by denying the existence of material reality.

Empiricism could also be said to attack the difference between being asleep and being awake, because, when dreaming, the mind really is passive to uninvited

incoming phenomena, and the self-reflective principle is inactive. The dream-world is one of objects with no effective subject, (as the waking world should be for empiricists), therefore, and the mind could be said to have everything except itself. This state of mind, continued into the waking state, is one Plato attributed to the Tyrant and the Tyrannical man. (Rep. IX 571-572, 576a-b).

This naturalizing of our higher faculties has been accompanied by a down-grading of man's idea of his cosmic status, which has long been regarded as progress, so much so that Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud have been called "the disillusioners of mankind," as though centrality in the universe, and in the natural order, and in the realm of intelligence, could only be illusions. It would be different if we knew who really did have centrality in these ways, but in fact we do not, unless it is ourselves.

In contrast to this sensory idea of knowledge, the metaphysical kinds of knowledge result from recognition of Forms and their relations, both in the world and in oneself, and in this case knowledge is characterized by such properties as Exactitude, Necessity, Immutability, and Universality. These result from the transcendental natures of the soul and the Forms. But when we perceive a material object, it cannot be exact, because it is always incomplete, and it cannot be identically the same in different observers. Secondly, it cannot be necessary either, because such an object is a contingency by definition; thirdly, it is always mutable; and fourthly, it cannot be universal, because it is purely individual.

Thus empirical knowledge can really only amount to more or less probable belief, so that for it there can be no such thing as truth, but only approximation. No such thing as truth, however, means no such thing as spirituality.

Power in Exchange for Truth. Such considerations do not disturb the prime movers of modernity, because the whole force of the culture they believe in is aimed at replacing knowledge with factual information. Information occupies an intermediate zone between knowledge and opinion, and usually contains both, as though it resulted from an "entropic collapse" of the boundary between them. It is nearly always received as opinion, and then its truth content has to be judged according to its usefulness. Unlike knowledge, information can be, and is, multiplied almost without limit, making it ideal for a mindset which equates value with quantity.

Empiricism is at home in this context, because here "true" really does mean "supported by the most up-to-date findings". Information evades the grasp of theories of knowledge, because it involves only relations between already-perceived objects, not relations between minds and objective realities. Nevertheless, it is highly valued because of an all-pervasive pursuit of power. It has the strategic function of enabling one to define one's position in relation to various parts of the world upon which one can take action.

On this basis, a vast amount of practical power has

been gained over the natural world without its becoming any less incomplete, and that means that the power we have is vulnerable to all the forces which we do not control. Power is used to create changes in the natural world, regardless of whether they might be the causes of changes elsewhere of a kind we do not want, and discover only when new problems arise. (Iatrogenic illness would be the equivalent of this in the personal sphere). This situation is becoming increasingly well-known, but without making the pursuit of power any less compulsive.

No one asks why other species do not acquire power over nature likewise, if mankind is just one species among others. In reality, this means that the more we deny our relative divinity in relation to nature, the more we commit ourselves to a materialistic travesty of it. There is no agreement as to what we ought to do with our technical power, and that indicates that it is not natural to us. Do we use it for our own benefit or not? And what exactly *does* benefit us?

Answers to such questions are lacking because modern thought will not address the question as to what mankind exists for. A passion for power is closely related to religious unbelief, because unbelieving materialism makes it impossible to find the security that comes from acting according to the will of God. Instead, mankind is trying to prove it can save itself, and so make God unnecessary.

The over-exploitation of nature will most likely continue because power over nature is very popular with the general public. The religious ideal of changing

oneself so as to measure up to one's place in the world has long been replaced by the Marxist "ideal" of changing the world so that it obeys us and comes down to our measure. Consequently the exploitation of nature is politically driven, especially as nearly all governments in the developed world keep themselves in power by promising their voters that they will get rid of poverty, and go on providing more and more of everything for everyone. No one dares object publicly that poverty is inevitable, because it is mostly owing to differing uses made of free will, and that it is not necessarily an evil, as for some it is voluntary.

The rejection of mankind's cosmic centrality and the abuse of the environment are closely related because special status in the universe implies special responsibilities as well, so the morally-undemanding option is chosen instead. When the status of individuals is lowered, the effect is usually a lowered sense of personal responsibility and a belief that "If I don't matter, my sins won't matter either." This applies to the collective as much as to the individual.

This negative self-image extends itself to a disbelief in the immortality of the soul. The consequence of that, that our bodies are all we have and all we are, is precisely calculated to intensify the fears and vulnerabilities which underlie the constant pursuit of material power. At the same time, it also intensifies the hedonistic desire to get all the good one can from material sources during the uncertain span of one's

mortal life. This shows that the political and economic consequences of popular beliefs are hardly ever thought of by those who govern, since they enact equality for all beliefs, even the most unauthorized or self-destructive, or delusional.

The Golden Verses of Pythagoras have a saying that God could open everyone's eyes, but will not. I think that the meaning of this is that we are all born with the faculties necessary for the freedom of the spirit; but if we were pressured into using them, many of our previous uses of free will would thereby be annulled, and we would be forced to be free; that would imply a self-contradiction, and even omnipotence is not capable of that.

There is a purist objection that the truth of spiritual religion does not depend on or result from its ability to defuse material problems. Certainly a faith taken up for reasons of that kind would not be faith at all. But if all else fails, this can be reduced to a question of probability, namely, which is the more probable: that God and the immortal soul are realities - or that the human race is turning itself into God? The present world situation should make the choice easy, since no amount of material power makes any difference to our mortal condition. In that case, there need be nothing to exclude the conclusion that life in this world is most truly to be understood as a prelude to an eternal and more real one. The responsibility for understanding that is for every individual, and it is no more than what is contained in the precept "Know Thyself."

