

METAPHYSICS IN TRADITION – A FOREWORD

The Background. “The Science of Sciences” was the title given to metaphysics in pre-modern times, and the least knowledge of it was thought to be of more value than any amount of knowledge about the natural world. Since then, its status has fallen so far that it is hardly counted as a science at all, and yet it remains an essential content of tradition, and it is the indispensable foundation of theology, apart from the Bible. Its importance, and the reason for its existence, can be seen most readily from the fact that the majority of things that most matter to human life are *not physical*, i.e. truth and falsehood, right and wrong, justice and injustice, reality and unreality. Among these things is the existence of God Who, although supremely real, is non-material and is eternal, omnipresent, all-powerful, and all-good.

Thus the first of all realities is wholly metaphysical, in which case, metaphysical reality would be the source of all the realities most familiar to us, besides being the source of standards and absolutes. If this were not a science, all religions and theologies could be no more than expressions of popular subjectivity, like pop music or folk dancing; they could have no relevance to destiny or the last ends of human life. The primacy of metaphysical reality is hinted at by the fact that immaterial goods are desired for their own sake, while material goods are usually desired for the sake of something else. Without the objective Divine reality, then, all values would be subjective, that is, arising only from the desires and aversions of human nature, which are endlessly variable. If metaphysical truth were the delusion it appears to be for some modern philosophies it would either mean that we were incapable of thinking rationally or in any way

usefully about the things that most closely concern us, or else that our real concerns were limited to food, sex, money and personal power.

This kind of philosophy would leave only the alternatives of helplessness or criminality if consistently followed. Needless to say, materialists are not consistent, or honest about the source of their values, while they are sensitive about their image. Their problem is that their point of view is readily shared by people of low intelligence and little or no culture, and they can only escape from this by affecting something nebulously spiritualistic for social reasons. The anti-metaphysical trend has for a long time been supported by a popular hostility to Plato, who is to this day the best source of metaphysics, because people with no first-hand knowledge of Plato take offense at the common supposition that he expresses a hostility or negativity to the body, which to them is a standard of good. (His strictures against the body are much less severe than some of those of the New Testament, a fact they do not even try to make sense of, or try to raise as an objection to Christianity).

Consequently, we are expected to agree that the Platonic idea that the body is the prison or the oppressor of the soul must be self-evidently wrong, although no argument is given for this, despite the fact that the argument for the opposite position is so simple that almost anyone can understand it: If you have a body, you must feed it, and therefore work in order to buy food. That can easily become an end in itself and leave little or no time for anything else. In this way, the body oppresses the soul, in opposition to the metaphysical order, which states that the life of the body is the soul, while the life of the soul is truth. Plato is in any case the

metaphysician par excellence, despite confusions with the philosophy of Aristotle. Aristotle did not write a book entitled "Metaphysics." Those who edited his papers collected part of them under the heading of "Physics" (*ta phusika*), and the untitled part left over was simply called "After the Physics" (*meta ta phusika*), not specifying the content.

Empiricist Denials. The opposition to the idea of metaphysical science is rationalized on the premise that sense-perception is the only source of knowledge, despite the fact that a non-sensory knowledge is needed to interpret the shapes, colours and noises of the senses. That knowledge depends on the innate constitution of the soul, regardless of the ruling dogma that there is nothing in any person except what was put in by parents, minders, teachers and contemporaries. This is (consciously or not) a continuation of the old Scholastic assertion that "there is nothing in the intellect except what was first in the senses," albeit in a slightly more subtle form. This has been held in all seriousness, despite the absurdity that, in this case, the number of persons with outstanding intelligence would have to be the same as the number of persons with five senses, and that anything could be understood just by looking at the words that expressed it. There is the further absurdity that there is no sense experience or perception to show us that everything comes from sense perception; this is because the idea involved in that dictum results from an act of *rational reflection*, not perception. The senses have in any case no equivalent for the act of self-reflection. If used correctly, rational reflection is an essential source of knowledge, and its existence in our minds precedes all forms of sensory input. It has priority over everything phenomenal, being essential to the rational soul.

There is a resistance to metaphysics which arises from what it has in common with religious teachings, where it opens up the difference between appearance and reality. This is always a sensitive issue, firstly because the happiness of most people depends on living as though appearance and reality were the same thing, and secondly because affirmations of the differences between them threaten one's grasp of what is taken to be reality, and therefore one's power of self-preservation. The individual is offered a freedom from the conventional concerns of life, but with less competitive advantage. The difference between appearance and reality taught by nearly all religions is not good news for most people, because they teach that actions always have unseen consequences, and metaphysics reinforces this. One does not remember that the security of social life can be replaced by security of another kind.

However, metaphysics is obviously acceptable where it has a commitment to values upheld by national religions. The idea that the intellect has the possibility of mingling with a more than human reality outside cultural norms may often encounter unbelief, but it is simply a consequence of the more easily accepted fact that the different levels of reality in the real world are all present in the personal microcosm, as mankind is an epitome of creation from matter to spirit.

Metaphysical thought as humanly practised can often be at fault, because its method of reasoning from very limited premises can be traduced to a matter of deliberately reasoning without regard to all the truths that are available, and so descending into mere prejudice. Its very freedom in relation to particulars is therefore its greatest danger when misapplied, and the norms set by the masterminds of tradition are ignored. The retreat from Christianity with its moral values in modern times has opened doors to forms of pseudo-

metaphysics which are simply ideological weapons. Ideology is the shadow cast by metaphysics: in place of the love of truth and faith in the mind's ability to reach it, ideology inverts the relation by starting from what it asserts to be the truth, and reasoning backwards from it to positions which can be made to appear to support it. Ideologists thus make a claim to know everything, or everything of any importance, and offer their systems as the key to the power that universal knowledge would give.

Metaphysics and ideology are in reality opposites, but there are all too many people who do not understand how to distinguish them. Here is another reason for the degraded position of metaphysics, compared with the one it once had. At the same time, the huge expansion of the natural sciences strikes the imagination so much as to create doubt as to whether any other kind of knowledge could be necessary. In this case, one ignores the fact that the value of the material sciences as self-knowledge is practically nil, and would remain so no matter how many times the amount of scientific knowledge was multiplied. To know something is to know that *you* know it, and without that condition, you might as well not know it at all; and conversely, a meagre and superficial amount of self-knowledge allows only a meagre and superficial value to whatever other things are known.

Another menace to Metaphysics began in the 1920's and 1930's with the great expansion of books on psychology. According to R.G.Collingwood, many people at that time failed to understand the difference between metaphysics and psychology, whether

from ignorance or mental laziness, and thus there arose another source of doubt as to whether metaphysics needed to exist. In any case, psychological explanations are much more popular than metaphysical ones because they directly connect ideas with human behaviour.

In the realm of modern philosophy, metaphysical certainty is bypassed by Analytical Philosophy, with its use of symbolic logic to give a literally mathematical certainty to its reasoning, something to which metaphysics seems to have no answer. It really does not need to have one, because the validity of an argument proves only that its conclusion follows from its premises, while doing nothing to prove the validity of those premises. This is why metaphysics was called "the science of absolute presuppositions" by R.G.Collingwood. (*An Essay on Metaphysics*, 1940). For modern philosophy, the chosen premises are the instinctive assumptions of the man on the Clapham omnibus, or should we say, the typical non-intellectual. On that basis, it can claim a wide range of corroboration, and so have relevance to the real world. But this puts philosophy into reverse: instead of starting from inadequate current ideas and reaching something deeper and more logically coherent, it does all its reasoning to get back to the starting point. Having no doors to transcendence, all it can do is to endorse average common sense, or else deny it, even on its own level, without giving any different idea of reality.

Nevertheless, there is a truth in this form of thought, namely, the contention that *some* philosophical problems result only from misunderstandings of the ways in which words should

be used, and that there is a technique to rectify this; that, however, would be a very humdrum claim – just another tool for the philosophic workshop. In this case, the desire for glamour and charisma would be in no way satisfied, unless it was reworded as: "All philosophical problems are caused . . .etc" (as if anyone could live long enough to verify something supposedly true of "all philosophical problems"). But now someone could be raised up as a new saviour figure and lead a cult for people without religion, albeit on the back of an absurd claim.

[There is a substantial interval between the ideas of "philosophical problems" and "misunderstanding verbal usage" which needs to be bridged by an appropriate use of language. But how are we to know that the meanings of those words were understood correctly when this was done? It would presumably have to be in terms of "ordinary language," but what could the words "philosophical problems" mean to the unthinking public and its ordinary language? There seems to be no answer, unless the answer is that this philosophy fails to meet its own criteria].

There is also the possibility that some problems may be insoluble because they do not have solutions. Kurt Goedel proved this for mathematics, where problem and solution are more closely linked than in any other subject. Colin McGinn took this point of view in philosophy, and declared himself a "mysterian" in relation to the connection between consciousness and its objects. But then metaphysics does not require that the capacity of the human mind should be

infinite. That belief is a modernism, with its consequent assumption that every problem must indeed have a solution, as though mankind took itself to be God.

The Metaphysical Need. If it is asked whether all things are equally real, or are some things eminently real, and others less so, physical criteria are of no use because "being real" can be an attribute of either material or non-material things. Objects of sense are popularly taken to be examples of the real, but for all that, they are impermanent and unstable, and can seldom be repeated exactly. The metaphysical idea of reality requires the real to be permanent and changeless and independent of all the conditions under which it can be manifest to perception, hence things are judged in relation to the Forms or universals, as they are found in Platonic philosophy. They are independent of both space and time. Here common sense and metaphysics part ways, because for some, that is an extreme position. Nevertheless the concreteness manifest in material objects is lacking in both permanence and exactitude, and that allows the conclusion that true concreteness is not material. The rational soul in which the Forms reside is of like nature with them, in which case the difference in concreteness between body and soul must be owing to the greater concreteness of the soul, not of the body. This in turn is again an inversion of the common sense order which arouses widespread resistance.

The equal dependence of religion and theology on a science of metaphysics has consequences for them, some of which have been explained by Roger Scruton, author of *The Face of God*, when pointing out elsewhere (*The Uses of Pessimism*, Ch.9) the

fact that a degree in theology makes one an expert on the history, doctrines, and practices of one's religion, but by no means an expert on God, as the word "Theology" would imply. To get from expertise on a religion to expertise on God would require a "quantum jump" beyond the capacities of finite beings. God can be studied in sources of Revelation, but this remains limited by all the Divine attributes which have never been expressed, and beyond that, the attributes which are not expressible at all. No advances in theology can encroach on the necessity for metaphysics, therefore, just as the things studied in biology do not grasp the mystery of life.

References to Plato and Platonism usually serve only to confuse the issue when discussing Christian theology, because it can be made to appear that theology is being influenced by persons who are followers of Plato, as though they believed him to be the founder of a rival religion, which is an absurdity and an irrelevance. For example, Hans Urs von Balthasar speaks of an integration of gnosis into Christianity, partly owing to "Plato and all his imitators." (*A Solovyof Anthology*, Introduction). In reality, Plato is the most important of metaphysicians whose works are readily available, and so it happens that people speak of "Platonism" when what they really mean is "metaphysics." Because of this habit, it is possible for theologians to conceal the role of metaphysics in relation to theology and religion by representing it as an influence by followers of a cult of a Greek philosopher, most probably pulling spiritual issues down to a merely human or cultural level. In reality what we call Plato's metaphysics is part of a universal wisdom tradition which pre-dates Plato.

For theological purposes, metaphysics can also be sidelined by wrapping it in the word "philosophy," something we were warned about by St. Paul. Here again the spiritual nature of the intellect can be ignored, so as to give greater freedom to religious thought when it needs only to take its bearings from the state of society. However, religious leaders whose business is a specially intimate conversation with the Holy Spirit, will sooner or later have to show what comes of that conversation. If the outcome is an almost routine agreement with the leader writers of progressive liberal papers, they can be seen to be out of touch with the permanent realities, and presumably therefore, with the Holy Spirit.

Metaphysical Re-assertion. Against this, the issue of religion with a revived metaphysical content gave rise to the work of René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon, who attacked the idea that the purpose of religion is to make oneself useful to society when society abandons its own usefulness by ceasing to uphold belief in God. Unfortunately, much of the good they could have done was lost because of their belief that reality itself was a monistic system, therefore allowing no ultimate meaning to persons. For all their good intentions, that led them to a position like that of aggressive scientific materialists. Without persons, there could be no centres of consciousness or intellectual energy capable of conceiving or manifesting metaphysical science. It also meant, rather paradoxically, that writings meant for spiritual enlightenment could not contain the words "soul" or "immortal soul." The nihilism of modernity is not so easily escaped.

Truth known metaphysically is profoundly liberating, simply

because its certainties are not derived from the outside world and the people in it, but Guénon and Schuon thought in terms of an absolute liberation which was only possible for the intellect alone, which is why Guénon treated the person as a mere aggregate of separable phenomena connected somehow with a transcendental intellect, without explaining how or why. But given that the self is a microcosm, uniting all levels of being in its constitution, there is no basis for the absolute independence which monists believe in.

Metaphysical knowledge has never been welcome from the point of view of power, like priestly and political elites. Even today, they resent the idea that what they want to tell society must be bounded by the acceptance of an ultimate nature of things, even where religion is concerned. The fact that such knowledge is not too difficult for the majority to whom it can be a matter of concern makes it even more problematical, and more liable to attract suspicion from the elites. This shows the extent of the revolution begun by Pythagoras and inherited by Socrates and Plato, making metaphysics open to mankind in general, beyond the reach of power-gatherers. The only reason why Plato was able to undertake this role was the protection he had from belonging to a class which was at the highest level of power in Athens. Thus a dissenting member of a power elite was the first necessity.

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(place in front to "Metaphysical and Anti-metaphysical").