

PHILOSOPHY IN ITS SOCIAL CONTEXT

Society, Philosophy and Religion. The idea of a philosophical society can be taken to imply that historical development could lead to a state where the prevailing culture is centred on philosophy. My own view of that possibility was very sceptical until I recalled that it was in a philosophical society that philosophy as we know it began, the one created by Pythagoras at Croton in the Sixth Century B.C. The name philosophy that began to be used at that time shows that the focus of attention was changed from wisdom as such to the love of wisdom, *philo-sophia*. That had theological implications which we will need to explore: firstly, that the ultimate reality could be known; and secondly that that same reality is wholly good by nature. Nevertheless, the conflict between society and philosophy was deep-seated, even in those days, and it ended with Kylon's revolution against Pythagoras.

So then, what went wrong? Was it the same then as for today? We may surmise that philosophy is a form of power, in which case it is liable to be feared by the devotees of political power. Philosophy first arose in times when religion was a matter of making sacrifices to the gods, either in atonement for one's own sins or for increasing the power of one's nation. Either the individual was free from guilt or not, and there was no idea of finding the root cause of his many conflicts with the gods, often with disasters. In relation to this, Socrates is known for the hopeful idea that we could, by the application of our intelligence, forestall the confusions and folly that lead to danger. At this point, philosophy and religion were still not separate, and so

to clarify their relationship we will begin with the cult of Socratic self-examination and then proceed to survey the results of society's rejection of this option in modern times.

Self-examination and self-judgement were the central issue here, so much so that it led to the Socratic dictum that "the unexamined life is not humanly liveable," "*ho bios anexetastos ou biotos anthropo.*" Not only do philosophy and religion have common roots, they both aim to cure that typical defect of mind which Plato refers to where he says "Every man is a friend to himself," or as we would say, the attitude of "Me and mine, right or wrong."

With this view of the unexamined life we are presented with the idea that the value of persons depends on their practice of self-judgement and self-understanding, so that failing in self-judgement would mean putting oneself beneath value. This examined life is more effortful and complicated than the ordinary natural life, which tends to a minimum of effort and a maximum of simplicity. This kind of examination is a function of self-reflection, which is part of the life of the spirit, an activity having no place in materialism. Self-reflection is a thing for which Matter has no equivalent.

Socrates was in no doubt about the prevalent attitude to truth in Athenian society, which is why he never held any kind of public office. Politics involves power, and the exercise of power needs to be concealed as much as possible. Plato was aware of this conflict that care for

truth gives rise to, for when he has said in *The Republic* "a high value must be placed upon truth," (Rep.III, 389) he goes on to say that while untruth is of no use to the gods, it is of use to men in authority as a "medicine" to deceive enemies or citizens for the city's welfare. At the same time, lying is strictly forbidden to private citizens, so he gives us no solution to the disrelation between philosophy and society. That was when he still believed that philosophers could be rulers, but what he says there is a clear example of the belief that the end justifies the means, to which a philosophy of the ideal ought not to lead. We are left with the problem that while nearly everyone is interested in the truth, very few value truth for its own sake.

The problem is increased because the act of imparting truths to others is undermined by the fact that *opinions* are very easily shared, while truths as such are not directly shareable. To share opinions, people need only to like the sound of what they hear, whereas to share a truth requires that the hearers can make it their own. To do that, they must be able to apply the test of reason to what they hear. This is why truths which are made public are inevitably turned into opinions, if only because nothing more than that was expected by their hearers. Besides that, to make a truth public is therefore to give it a place in a multitude of private agendas whether received as truth or opinion. A truth cannot be the same thing for those who have sought it rationally for its own sake, as for those to whom it comes *gratis*.

Philosophy and Religion. Any convergence between the life of society and philosophy would have to affect the relation between society and religion: could it make religion unnecessary, or could it make religion stronger? The answer to such questions requires a comparison between religious practices and the problem confronted by philosophy.

Two things which philosophy and religion have in common are the fact that they both work at the difference between Appearance and Reality, *and* that they are both obstinately resisted by society. The reason for that is that the happiness of most people, and possibly of oneself to some extent, depends on being able to take Appearance and Reality as one and the same thing. This issue has always been there, but it finally came out into the open in the Twentieth Century, when this tendency of the natural person led society to assert its native bent in a number of pseudo-philosophies, which aimed to be able to eliminate metaphysics and reduce it to natural science, sociology, and matters of verbal usage.

This granted everything to Appearance; by this means both religion and philosophy are equally negated at the same time. This fact alone gives a strong indication that philosophy and religion are fated to stand or fall together. Only by its inclusion of the metaphysical dimension, then, can philosophy justify its separate existence. The choice in favour of Appearance alone by modern intellectuals cannot rightly be called philosophical, because the naturalistic values they adhere to are always subject to evils which no effort can remove. It does offer a kind of simplification, however.

Opposition to Philosophy. For Platonists, reality is sought by means of an *a priori* knowledge of the Forms, rather than of their material instantiations, and in what can be known logically of the soul and the intellect. This is part of the tendency which modern society has reacted against, setting up cultural leaders for itself who teach alternatives such as a linguistic philosophy, where the true meanings of words are defined according to popular usage, even though popular usage does not pretend to be anything more than pragmatic. This position has been backed up by the assertion that there was no such thing as private language, even though public language is free to change without the consent of mentors or referees to vouch for its authenticity. That is one variety of the non-philosophy which society can use to justify its natural preference, and, by the way, one which endorses the views of the liberal elite in this country.

The popular belief that knowledge must come only from sense-perception is closely involved in this, even though the knowledge in question is really of poor quality, since sense perception never gives us anything but a finely-mingled mixture of knowledge and illusion. Imagination alone should be enough to warn us that we are taking for reality something which could easily become very different, or indeed a lot worse. As if to exclude that, the prevailing culture represses imagination, except where it can be used for fictional images of lust and violence.

Creativity and critical self-knowledge are in any case closely connected, even when the self is not the primary

object of observation. Such activities depend on the Platonic idea of the essential nature of the soul, that of self-motion, as distinct from motion caused by external pressures, the latter being the natural cause for the motion of inanimate objects. On the other hand, the soul is always liable to be moved by external psychical pressures in addition to its self-motion, but every increase in its spontaneous action makes it more true to its essential nature, and that is naturally a source of pleasure. At the same time, the soul is moved in an inward manner by the Divine nature, (the Unmoved Mover) but that does not conflict with the soul's self-motion because it comes from above the physical level, not from within it.

This implies that activities must be divided between those of action and those of *reaction*. The greater the proportion of action, the greater the degree of free will and a greater rational autonomy. Although this is an attractive option, its desirability is only manifest to those who already possess it. Consequently it cannot be seen to compete with the natural goods to be found in the realm of being; transcendental goods are above being. Here are grounds for disagreement about the nature of the good, therefore, and along with it, the possible option of going beyond the realm of Appearance.

One reason for this situation is connected with the effort one must make in order to understand one's place in the world, and the usual desire that this effort should be the least possible. This issue is one of energy, therefore, and that is one which appears not to

be a problem for the modern world. In fact modern mankind is usually taken to be very energetic and innovative, so that a demand that we be even more energetic may seem to be unreasonable. An answer to this question was given by Ortega Y Gasset, (*The Revolt of the Masses*, Ch.7) according to whom all the busyness going on around us is not really action at all, but only *reaction* to external pressures. One can therefore be active in a conventional sense and still be internally subject to inertia. This shows that we need to look more closely at our idea of energy. True energy is something springing from the inmost self, and outside the realm of unfreedom where options are imposed on us. This is a distinction which modern thought ignores or has no idea of, being fixed on Appearance. Social theories which ignore this are the ones which go on to negate philosophy in principle, and these can be classified either as Gnosticism or as ideologies. This tendency began in the ancient world, and has risen to great prominence in modern times.

Gnosticism Ancient and Modern. The possibility of Gnosticism arises from the fact that philosophy logically requires God, a benevolent creator of the world, and this was why Plotinus wrote a long tractate entitled *Against the Gnostics*, those who thought there was an evil God. (Manichaeism was the most extreme form of this tendency). This is because belief in God accounts for the fact that the world can be understandable by human minds, that the same light is given to all, that what is understood is worthy of love and reverence, and deserves to be known for its own sake. On this basis, the world is such as to foster the realisation of this

purpose. Accordingly, philosophy begins with the Divine, and any truths it arrives at have an eternal and objective place in God who is the archetype of all truth. Such thought is in any case a conversation with God. One consequence of this is that if one's relation to society in a world of Divine origin is bad, the fault must be one's own, and that is another reason why modern minds usually reject the idea of creation.

If non-philosophy is possible as a part of the popularly recognised culture, so likewise is anti-philosophy, this being Gnosticism, so that philosophy has an opposite which it is commonly confused with. According to Eric Voegelin, "Gnosticism is the essence of modernity." (*Science, Politics & Gnosticism*, p.x)

The modern collective mentality identifies itself strictly with the world of the natural sciences, and that does not include the function of self-reflection. In cases where the need for self-change is understood in today's society, therefore, it becomes politically travestied as an urge to induce other people to change something in the outside world; the possibility of changing something in oneself is avoided with a consistency which shows that the option of self-aware inwardness is both recognised and rejected.

All behaviour based on gnostic ideology rather than philosophy comes from a presumption that every person or self is truly good, and so in no need of self-judgement, while all that is bad belongs to the outside world. One must be willing to ignore the absurd implication of a bad

world full good people, and in practice it is not objected to, such is the attraction of systems which require no change in the individual, and which support the attitude of "Me and mine." Here, then, is the crux of the issue.

This kind of thought inverts an essential property of philosophy: if philosophy were a fair trial, ideology would be a frame-up, starting with the verdict and manipulating the facts so as to agree with the verdict. This kind of thinking also destroys the function of philosophy as a form of spirituality. For Platonism every soul contains the whole system of Forms or universals, and so is a monad which is a microcosm in relation to the whole Macrocosm. For this reason its position in the Macrocosm will rise or fall depending on its relation to the higher Forms which it knows from within. If the Higher Forms are replaced by supposed truths which are selected for practical purposes, the connection with the Whole is lost and with it the interior process of the effort toward self-salvation. In this way, the higher archetypal world of Platonism is replaced by *a future state of the material world*. Such is the way of materialism.

Where the ideology is that of Marxism, for example, it acts true to type in ignoring the question of the origin of everything. The subject is out of bounds, because a benign Creator, a malevolent one, or an origin consisting in nothing more than chance are all equally adverse to this kind of doctrine. The first would lead it back to Christianity, the second and third would both mean there

was no hope, and no answer to the question as to what the world is for, and this reveals an essential incoherence. Concerning the work that is required of us, the ideologies can make no sense of the distinction between effort made under external compulsion and effort which originates in the individual soul, which is purely voluntary. Without the latter, there can be no kind of self-realisation, and so the will to live is attacked at its root. Thus the work that people can be forced to do is only of a low quality.

Where, then, "the unexamined life" is the rule, the place of self-examination is taken by a constant examination of our natural environment instead, as if in accordance with the adage that nature abhors a vacuum. The function of conscience in regard to oneself becomes conscience in relation to nature. From a personal point of view, the unexamined life is besides dangerous, because we are left unable to distinguish between truthful judgements and mere abuse, whether aimed at us or by us. That increases one's vulnerability, and then disagreement descends into antagonism.

Philosophy and the Eternal Return. But despite the weight of opposition to it, the future of philosophy need not be in doubt, because it is a way of knowledge which exists over thousands of years. Its extinction would require that the realm of instantiation could break free from that of the Forms, which is an impossibility as extreme as that of mirror images taking on a life independent of the objects reflected. The biggest barrier against a victory of materialism is simply the mind's function of

knowing itself, which materially would be like keeping still and going elsewhere at the same time, besides which we are capable of knowing many things without any intervention from sense perception; the knowing mind becomes the thing it knows while remaining itself.

The ignoring of these facts creates a tension between mankind and its world which only a restoration of truth can resolve, and this has happened periodically over long periods of time. If we look at the dates of birth of Plato and of those who have been leaders in major revivals of Platonic thought, it can be seen that such revivals occur at intervals of approximately six hundred years. Plato was born in 429 B.C., Plotinus in 205 A.D., John Scotus Erigena in 810 A.D. and Marsilio Ficino in 1433 A.D. On this basis, we should expect the next restoration to be later in this century, and the way for that has been prepared by a huge amount of Plato scholarship. But if that is not to be, what other alternative could there be? Could it be the Apocalypse?

NOTES

"Godless philosophy" - an example:

Conversely, for materialistic thought the truths reached by philosophers are events in their own brains and in the brains of those who like what they say, and no more. The materialists then have to find reasons why other people should prefer their brain-events to their own. Even if their thoughts were very rational, reason itself is for them only a human peculiarity and not something eternally preceding the natural world. Needless to say, they do not abide by the rules. They quietly slip back into Creation mode when they need to argue for their position, and then slip back out of it when presenting their conclusions. Most people don't notice. A brain which is by definition the result of a series of accidents is somehow supposed to be able to dictate conclusions to other brains produced by quite different accidents. But such is the way of Godless philosophy.