

THE HUMAN SIGNIFICANCE OF PHILOSOPHY

Although he was not the first Western philosopher, Plato was the first to define clearly the aim that has characterized Western philosophy since its beginnings.¹ The principal capacities in which the human being acts are scientific, moral, mathematical, artistic, political, and religious, and the aim of philosophical activity was to achieve a standpoint providing complete explanation and justification by finding and eliminating the elements of dogmatism, unrealized ignorance, and mere hypothesis by which, in the capacities mentioned, the human being is influenced.² The ideal envisaged was the self-inclusive understanding, achieved by the understanding's successive advancement and containment of all conceivable criticism of itself. The criticisms by Parmenides and Zeno of Ionian and Pythagorean physics and Socrates' criticism of various aspects of Athenian life were excellent examples.³

Plato believed that, to achieve the aim mentioned, both the

¹ On the beginnings of Western philosophy, see J. LaLumia, "From Science to Metaphysics and Philosophy," *Diogenes*, Winter 1974, No. 88.

² *The Republic of Plato*, tr. F.M. Cornford, New York, Oxford University Press, 1951, pp. 221-226.

³ J. LaLumia, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-27, 33-35.

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ego's understanding the world (or everything which is not the ego itself) and the ego's understanding itself were necessary. It was his conviction that human consciousness is characterized by transcendental aspiration and that the reach of human consciousness is equal to its aspiration.

On the other hand, Kant, although agreeing that human thinking is transcendental in tendency, believed that, in this regard, it was the human mind's most stubborn illusion to think that it had ever been, would ever be, or could be, successful. Accordingly, for him, not objects in the world, but dogmatic sets (including the tendency mentioned) and structures characterizing in advance all the objects that human knowledge could ever have, are the things we stand to be enlightened about when we are philosophical; self-referential and self-enlightening results are the results we get, and, as the history of philosophy amply shows, dilemmas, paradoxes, and puzzles are the experiences we are likely to have. In this way, Kant's historical significance consisted in showing that, while philosophical activity functioned to disclose the extent to which the human being is self-forgetful in science, morals, art, religion, and politics, the history of metaphysical philosophy was a history of mistakes due to residual self-forgetfulness or self-unconsciousness influencing philosophical activity itself. Not that this made metaphysical activity an utter mistake in Kant's eyes, as it has in the eyes of some logical-positivists, since it was an essential part of Kant's meaning that metaphysical philosophy is philosophical activity that misunderstands its role as criticism by imagining that it has capacity to discover, not what objects must be for consciousness and for judgment, but what objects the world as such has in it.⁴ Kant did not hold that metaphysicians were wrong as such, much less that they had meaningless things to say, but that it is not in the competence of human knowledge to say whether they are right or wrong. At the same time, however, it is worth observing that, by putting the possibility of ultimate success for metaphysical philosophy *beyond* history, Plato prophetically anticipated

⁴ This is evident in the design for the reconstruction of metaphysics Kant says he set himself in writing *The Critique of Pure Reason*, particularly in the Preface to the Second Edition (1787), and it is evident in the sense of his criticisms of metaphysics, particularly in the section of the same work devoted to Transcendental Dialectic, especially theology.

that the failures of metaphysics *in* history might be used in this manner to argue the futility of metaphysics.⁵

But, though Kant's insight into the nature of philosophical activity and the successes of which it is capable was an advance in self-understanding for philosophical activity, the dualism he still left room for by his division between phenomenal and noumenal objects shows that his insight was incomplete, since the same transcendental tendency that he was concerned to admonish philosophers against inherently provides for the division's being made only by a philosopher still influenced by some remainder of dogmatism. A self-inclusive understanding that distinguishes two kinds of objects, one of which it is supposed to be unable to know, is a contradiction in terms.⁶ The ideal to which philosophical activity tends requires a stratification of egos or selves without end, whence it follows that the successful self-inclusive understanding must be an understanding which realizes that, no matter how much advancement it has made, some of the problems of philosophy must always reappear. By contrast, metaphysics is philosophical activity just self-forgetful enough to dream that it might behold God and, like God beholding himself in the works of many theologians, derive complete cognitive, moral, and aesthetic satisfaction from what it sees. Socrates is overshadowed so much by the figure of Plato that it takes a great effort to remember that the contrast between them is the same as the contrast Kant meant to draw between philosophy as criticism and philosophy as metaphysics: Socrates' conception of philosophical

⁵ "If this is so, will a true lover of wisdom who has firmly grasped this same conviction—that he will never attain to wisdom worthy of the name elsewhere than in the next world—will he be grieved at dying? Will he not be glad to make that journey? We must suppose so, my dear boy, that is, if he is a real philosopher, because then he will be of the firm belief that he will never find wisdom in all its purity in any other place." - *Phaedo*, tr. Hugh Tredennick (in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Hamilton and Cairds, Pantheon, 1966), p. 50.

⁶ It is true that Kant explicitly denies his conception of the noumenon is self-contradictory and that he calls the conception problematical and limitative, that is, a conception intended merely to indicate that phenomenal knowledge "does not extend to all that the understanding thinks" (*The Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Meiklejohn, London, Dent, p. 188). Nevertheless, he has no doubt there are things-in-themselves and that these have a causal relationship to phenomena, and this seems contradictory as well as dogmatic to me.

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activity made it something that must always be annoying, whereas Plato's conception made it something that must ultimately tranquillize. Thus, Kant was a beginning with respect to making philosophers see how metaphysics is a kind of recidivism and miscarriage for philosophical activity, but it took Wittgenstein to find just the right words for the relationship: philosophical activity is both an ailment and a cure, depending on how one looks at it.⁷

These remarks have been made to provide the context of the topic to which this article is addressed. Evidently, a satisfactory view of the history of philosophy should be enlightening as to the tendency of philosophical activity to seem puzzling, anomalous, disconcerting, and even pathological to most men. Moreover, it seems significant that, beginning with Kant, but especially since Wittgenstein, some philosophers have seen themselves as therapists for the bewitchments of other philosophers, while more and more philosophers have tended to see themselves as therapists for bewitchments to which all human beings, including themselves, are prey as language-users and thinkers.⁸ Now, what is the significance of this as a human phenomenon? The answer I wish to advance is that it is inherent in the nature of normative self-consciousness, so characteristic of philosophical activity, to result in works or products that have the aspects of trouble and pathology that have been mentioned. Philosophical activity is activity that consistently finds trouble because it looks for trouble, the important question for the purposes of the article being why trouble is looked for and whether it is inherent in normative self-consciousness not just to look for trouble but also to make it.

Extreme examples have often been useful for making a type clear. For instance, it seems difficult to deny that, if there were a question of naming a result of philosophical activity that is

⁷ "The philosopher is the man who has to cure himself of many sicknesses of the understanding before he can arrive at the notion of the sound human understanding. If in the midst of life we are in death, so in sanity we are surrounded by madness." - *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, ed. G.H. von Wright, R. Rhees, G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford, Blackwell, 1956, p. 157.

⁸ I say "beginning with Kant" because of the great influence of Kant's having emphasized a therapeutic function for philosophical activity (or "criticism," as he called it), but this is not to deny that Socrates, as represented in Plato's dialogues, had a similar conception of philosophy.

typical because what is typical of results of philosophical activity is extremely evident in it, few would fail to mention solipsism. But what is extreme about solipsism? The answer seems to be: self-consciousness in it is extreme. Like Midas whose touch turned everything into gold, solipsism finds the self in everything and subverts the normal human attitude of externality completely. Moreover, we are not surprised that it is philosophical activity, and not science or religion or art or politics that produces such a result, because the history of philosophy makes the reason easy to understand. The reason is that, even when they disagree with solipsism, all human beings, but especially philosophers, in some degree or another share the ideal of the self-inclusive understanding that generates solipsism and, in that respect, are not different from the solipsist. It is easy to see that the Ariadne thread that runs through all philosophical works, idealist or otherwise, is that, in them, self-consciousness usurps a place and a value that in the lives of most men is reserved for heteroconsciousness.

A similar but more instructive example is Anselm's famous argument for the existence of God.⁹ As with Parmenides who imagined that he had made a discovery about the world when he had really discovered elements of logical self-forgetfulness influencing physical theories that he knew,¹⁰ what matters for our purpose is what Anselm actually accomplishes with the argument and not what he believed himself to have accomplished. In this respect, it is interesting to note how great is the seductiveness of the transcendental tendency Kant cautioned against since, not only does Anselm apparently believe that he proves the existence of God, but Anselm's critics have in general attacked his argument as failing to prove God's existence while missing the argument's success as a kind of psychoanalysis. Anselm's argument does show something, but what it shows is not that God exists but that self-unconscious consciousness makes the atheist feel able to say that God does not exist. The method is Parmenidean and Socratic, and the purpose of the method is to make the atheist realize something about his logical,

⁹ St. Anselm, *Basic Writings*, tr. S.N. Deane, LaSalle, Ill., Open Court, 1964, pp. 7-9 (Ch. II, *Proslogium*).

¹⁰ J. LaLumia, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-19.

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linguistic, and cultural situation which the good conscience with which he denies God's existence shows the atheist does not realize. The effect is not to provide enlightenment about whether God exists or not, but enlightenment about the enabling or disabling properties of one's underpinnings for saying that God exists or does not exist. The argument forces encounter with what there is about oneself that is unrealized when taking up the question of whether God exists, and it forces realization about what is peculiar about this sort of question and about language connected with asking it and dealing with it. This suggests the important point that the controversial character of Anselm's argument after so many centuries of effort to refute it, its unsatisfactoriness as a proof of God's existence and the unsatisfactoriness at the same time of all attempts to refute it as such, have the same explanation that has been mentioned before: our mind when we consider the argument is on God as something in the world or not in it, our mode of thinking is transcendental as when we wonder whether the world really has atoms in it or not, whereas our mind is required to be self-searching and to ask itself what it is doing when it thinks of God.

But the argument is instructive in a further way about how metaphysics is a kind of recidivism for philosophical activity. The believer emerges in Anselm's argument as someone who on the subject of God understands a thought better than the atheist understands it. This is disconcerting for what the atheist wishes to say; his underpinnings have been made naked and he has been forced to become aware of them, with the result that the good conscience with which he could previously say that God does not exist is gone. Only, and this is Anselm's self-forgetfulness, the good conscience of the believer is also gone for he can no longer say that God exists with the realism with which he used to say it: he has to confess that, after all, he only understands, not a necessity to believe in God, but a necessity to think of God, if God is thought of at all, in a certain manner.¹¹

¹¹ Kant has several criticisms of the Ontological Argument, but the only criticism he makes which seems to me to be applicable to Anselm's formulation in contrast with Cartesian formulations is the following: "If, in an identical judgment, I annihilate the predicate in thought and retain the subject, a

It is not accidental that psychoanalysis has been mentioned because the temptation to find analogies to psychoanalysis is hard to resist. Philosophy is criticism, but criticism is motivated by some unrequited desire, some desideratum we cannot give up but cannot deny we do not yet have. The desideratum in philosophy is acting (that is, judging, believing, making, doing, choosing, etc.) with a conscience that is unassailable because it knows it is not deceived. An alternative desideratum is entertainable: the psychology of sub-human animal consciousness. Cyril Connolly strikes a responsive chord when he writes that he considers "the natural condition of created things...to be one of undiluted ecstasy," and, opting, for ecstasy, holds that self-consciousness is bad, like Adam cast out of Eden.¹² There are good reasons for such a feeling, not the least of which is the correlation between instinct, faith or dogmatism, and decisive action. Nevertheless, while this model fits the psychology of the sub-human animal, it plainly does not fit the psychology of the human being. Connolly is not just talking about innocence but about the *attractiveness* of innocence, and that implies a natural condition for the human being that a psychoanalytic model is more suited to explain. The sub-human animal may know innocence but he does not congratulate himself that he has it or regret that he does not: whatever his needs and capacities, self-encounter and self-appraisal are not among them, so far as we can see. Moreover, just because of this psychological difference, good conscience in the human being, unlike good conscience in the sub-human animal, is consciousness that helps itself be untroubled by agreeing to keep something about itself a secret for the sake of action of any kind. To act, to live, to create, the

contradiction is the result... But if I suppress both subject and predicate in thought, no contradiction arises, for there *is nothing* at all, and therefore no means of forming a contradiction" (Kant, *op. cit.*, p. 348). The hypothetical atheist's predicament in Anselm's argument is that, on the one hand, he cannot "suppress" the conception of God and also use it to state his position, whereas, on the other hand, he cannot use the conception of God and also avoid contradiction. But Anselm fails to see that "the unconditioned necessity of a judgment does not form the absolute necessity of a thing" (Kant, *op. cit.*, p. 345), that is, he confuses a finding of logical self-consciousness for a finding of heteroconsciousness or a finding that critical philosophy might be expected to make for a finding of science.

¹² Cyril Connolly, *Previous Convictions*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1963, p. 406 and p. 414.

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good conscience in the human being must pretend it does not know that it has an intimation of failing and dying; if possible, it cannot let itself become the uneasy conscience because its ability to act effectively is influenced accordingly. For example, Democritus, bent on explaining physical phenomena, must pay attention to Parmenides because Parmenides has forced certain elements of logical innocence in previous physics to be admitted; but Democritus must not pay attention too much, else science would stop, so he makes the provisionally tolerable compromise, atomism. On the other hand, it is possible that Democritus contrives the justification that enables him to resume scientific action, and this is a new secret he must try to keep that resembles the one he was forced to admit.¹³ It is easy to give comparable examples, for instance the route from Galileo and Newton to Berkeley and from Berkeley to Mach and Einstein.¹⁴

The significance of philosophy, then, seems to be that for any human heteroconscious activity to have satisfying significance the human being has to justify it to himself by finding in himself, or else inventing, conditions or presuppositions that justify it without needing justification themselves. Descartes in his *Meditations* and Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* are classic examples. In man, as distinguished from the sub-human animal, the consciousness that acts is on a journey that impels it to become a consciousness which judges the consciousness that acts, like the self in Hegel predetermined by its own motion to find itself in bondage, or the ego in Freud that must make its peace with the Superego or enjoy no peace.¹⁵ This is why human beings might feel tempted to envy the sub-human animal and this is why philosophy has, from the viewpoint of heteroconsciousness which is necessary for action, the aspects of a gadfly, an annoyance, and even a malady. The question is whether, as Socrates and Pascal both realized, the psychology of sub-human animal consciousness is humanly preferable.

¹³ J. LaLumia, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.

¹⁴ See Karl R. Popper's essay "A Note on Berkeley as Precursor of Mach and Einstein" in *Berkeley: Principles of Human Knowledge, Text and Critical Essays*, ed. by C.M. Turbayne, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1970.

¹⁵ See Jean Hyppolite's remarkable essay "Hegel's Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis" in *New Studies in Hegel's Philosophy*, ed. by Warren Steinkraus; New York, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1971, pp. 57-70.

From these observations we can understand what logical positivism, on account of its narrow preoccupation with science, failed to understand, namely the affinity of philosophy to literature and the resemblance of the value of philosophy to that of literature, especially poetry.¹⁶ But philosophy does not resemble all of literature unless literature is conveniently defined, as Bronowski defined it, as art that makes us vicariously realize and experience the dilemmas inherent in being human.¹⁷ This definition is not helpful because it obliges one to say that philosophy resembles one kind of literature whereas the truth is the other way around: the kind of literature Bronowski is talking about resembles philosophy. This is easy to see from a consideration of the works of such philosophers as Plato, Nietzsche, Santayana, or Pascal. It is accidental that these works are justifiably considered to be literature since the authors were evidently artists as well as philosophers. But it is not accidental that their works bear classification with works like Zeno's paradoxes, Carnap's *Meaning and Necessity*, and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, which are works that most people would not be disposed to classify as literary art. What is common to all philosophical literature is just what Bronowski claims to be the quintessence of literature, namely a self-referential quality and the tendency to bring paradoxes and puzzles to our attention. To speak accurately, therefore, a great deal of what is properly called literature does not have the quintessence Bronowski claims and Ahab, for instance, speaks words that make us realize a human dilemma, not because Melville commanded the literary art, but because in Melville the literary art belonged to a mind not unlike that of a philosopher. As Bronowski realizes, it *is* a question of quintessence, or what different sorts of human activity *essentially* or *typically* accomplish. But a work of art, literary or otherwise, may or may not be a work that brings home to us various ways in which man is involved in dilemmas and different ways in which the totality of affairs might have

¹⁶ For example, see C.A. Mace, "Representation and Expression," *Analysis*, Vol. 1, No. 3, and "Metaphysics and Emotive Language," *Analysis*, Vol. II, Nos. 1 and 2. Also, A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, New York, Dover, 1946, pp. 44-45.

¹⁷ See J. Bronowski, "The Logic of the Mind," in *The American Scholar*, Spring 1966, pp. 233-242.

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meaningfulness, whereas all philosophical works, whether instances of literary art or not, do this in some degree or another. And, finally, when literature is philosophical, as in Thomas Hardy's novels or Wordsworth's poems, it often resembles, not criticism, but metaphysics, that is, an expression of some basic beliefs about the world advanced as discoveries. In other words, it is dogmatic and a kind of pseudo-science on a par with metaphysical beliefs that scientists frequently fail to distinguish from their scientific conclusions, indeed a kind of religion. Like metaphysical doctrines by philosophers, it is philosophical activity that misunderstands itself in that it takes itself to have made a finding of heteroconsciousness when it has really made a finding of self-consciousness. This misunderstanding does not make the contributions of literature and metaphysics to human self-knowledge less important. As Feuerbach realized, the essence of religion also consists in the contribution it makes to human self-knowledge, but the importance of religion is not diminished by the fact that this essence which it has is "hidden from the religious."¹⁸

¹⁸ "...Every advance in religion is therefore a deeper self-knowledge..But the essence of religion, thus hidden from the religious, is evident to the thinker, by whom religion is viewed objectively, which it cannot be by its votaries." Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, New York, Harper & Row, 1957, p. 13.