

Philosophy Today

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In a few words, the situation of philosophy today is as follows.

Philosophy has ceased to exist as an intellectual enterprise without limits that examines special professions, changes them, tames them, puts them in their place, and it has become a special profession itself. This profession may deal with some of the problems of its ancestor, it may analyze them in detail, and with considerable skill. What is missing is an overall purpose that connects the problems with the rest of knowledge and of human life, that defines their “location” in the kingdom of thought, their importance (or the lack of it), and that might lead to a reform of traditional procedures.

The absence of such a purpose is not surprising for the professors who are now running the business are not, and cannot be philosophers. They are illiterate, provincial, without a sense of perspective, too concerned with their reputation (and their salaries—a topic very dear to *my* heart) to be capable of arriving an independent judgment.

Their pupils are not likely to reverse the trend, they have been trained to regard the shortcomings of their masters as virtues, and so they now confound narrowness with depth, illiteracy with professional excellence (just remember how proud a logician is when he can say “I do not understand this”), lack of perspective with either profound commitment or, if they belong to a different school, with an honest regard for (particulars and for) the truth.

Nor is there any hope that pseudosubjects such as “black philosophy,” or “philosophy from the point of view of the liberated woman” are going to improve the situation. First of all, these subjects still have all the drawbacks of their orthodox rivals (illiteracy does not cease to be illiteracy when practiced by blacks, or by women, nor does a change of perspective compensate for the lack of it). Secondly, because they are so nicely “integrated” into the status quo that they are not likely to lead to decisive changes (the situation is here not different from the effects or, rather, the non-effects of “integration” on a larger scale).

A citizen interested in the revival of philosophy thus cannot rely on the existing institutions (which at any rate become more and more similar to business enterprises). Nor will he be so conceited to believe that he can change the world

all by himself, that he has the imagination to invent the necessary ideas and the strength, and perseverance to make them real. To get his ideas, he will turn to the past. He will study the work of individuals such as Pherekydes, Hesiod, Plato down to Brecht and Ayn Rand and the anonymous myths of literate and illiterate societies. And to increase his strength, he will assemble, or will join a circle of friends of similar inclination whose minds are not paralyzed by professional standards and whose jobs leave them time to do anything they want. Such a circle should not be held together by intellectual interests alone, intellectual interests should play a minor part, just as they do in a complete life. They should appear and disappear as naturally as any topic appears and disappears in an animated conversation that ranges from the personal to the abstract, from the profound to the trivial to the ridiculous to the abstract, and back to the personal again. Not principles, but the free interplay of affection and interests (in food, movies, ideas) should be the binding force of such a group—or else we are back where we started from, we have another religion, another “school of thought,” not the beginning of a new form of life. (It is better to be united by a liking for the Marx Brothers than by a “profound concern for justice.”) I do not know of any such group today though I know some people who by casually drifting together might form one. Nor am I sure that these people will like what I am going to say. Still, I am talking to them, and not to the professionalist.

Philosophy was once concerned with *comprehensive views* of the world, the position of man in it, his physical makeup, his hopes, his possibilities, his obligations. Such views might be inherited and traditional, as were the views of the Greek Epic, or the views of the Dogon, or they might be invented and revolutionary like the views of the Presocratics, of Plato, of Brecht. Most of the time the distinction is just a matter of degree. The important point is that each particular enterprise, each profession, however powerful and advanced, each personal opinion, however attractive and self-evident, each individual *is compared with, and has to measure up to, something outside itself*.

This comparison is not a one way process. The rise of new classes, new forms of life, the physical, moral, intellectual results of wars, migrations, discoveries do not leave the general standards unchanged but lead to their most penetrating criticism. It is interesting to see how the heroic morality of the Greek Epic gradually gives way to a more humanitarian point of view and how this development influences, and is in turn influenced by, a conscious examination of the values of the heroic age. The examination ranges from the mockery of the “Milesian tales” to the broad surveys of the tragedians to the aggressive *intellectual* criticism of Xenophanes, and it creates a series of new and fascinating subjects. Tragedy, lyric poetry, the rationalism of Xenophanes, and of the Ionian philosophers of Nature, mathematics, astronomy are all the by-products of this interaction between *general standards* that *set examples* for the life of society and *concrete developments* that *constitute it*.

The interaction is recognized as a driving force by Plato, but Plato like all rationalists after him tries to *tame* the force by subjecting it to the jurisdiction of a debate between reasonable men. The debate is open, it admits any view, makes use of any method that seems appropriate through the discovery of the peculiar character of mathematical concepts (*Phaedo* 74aff) and the hypothesis that the concepts of justice and of the good might be structures in a similar way temporarily (*Statesman* 294b/c) restricts its scope. The debate is supposed to *direct* the fate of man in an orderly way rather than exposing him to the accidents of history, of talent, of the inventions of individuals. but it still contains the general side by side with the specific and permits either of the two components to influence the other.

A most interesting example of this interaction between general philosophical principles and methods of research in restricted fields is astronomy. Plato makes fun of the empirical astronomers of his time who “examine the proportions of day and night and their relation to the month, and that of the month to the year and of the other stars to these and to one another.” He wants an abstract theory dealing with “the real speed and the real slowness, in their true measurements, and in all their true forms.” “In fact,” he says “we shall pursue astronomy just as we do geometry by making use of problems, *and we shall leave the phenomena of the heavens alone.*” The change is not suggested to adapt astronomy to the “professional standards” of geometry and thus to make it more “scientific.” It is suggested “to make the right use of the inherent intelligence of the soul” that is, to make the right use of *man* and thus to *improve* him (*Rep.* 53aff; cf. *Lgg* 818c). This “humanitarian” suggestion played an essential role in the rise of a theoretical astronomy, it is responsible for the tremendous difference that exists between the highly developed “empirical” astronomy of the Babylonians and the astronomy of the Greeks, and it determined the path of astronomy for centuries to come (cf. Simplicius *de coelo* 451c).

“Humanitarian” influences in special fields are not restricted to antiquity. They occur wherever curious, critical, and imaginative individuals strike out on a new path and make new discoveries. *Ernst Mach* believed that Newtonian mechanics had ceased to be fruitful, he was convinced that it had started to become a hindrance of progress and he thought that it should be viewed as a temporary scheme for the ordering of data of a particular type rather than as a *conditio sine qua non* of rational understanding. The accepted forms of thought such as absolute space, absolute time, the boundary between “objective” matter and “subjective” sensations were not necessary for explaining its success and they were highly questionable in themselves. So he envisaged a science that would either yield them as a *result* of research rather than *presupposing* them in every single piece of research, or that would show them to be entirely *illusory*. Mach’s science was very different from the science of the realists who rejected it (even Lenin did not realize its dialectical nature), from the science of the positivists who bowdlerized it and turned it into a series of slogans as well as from the day-to-day bread-and-butter science of the Newtonians. Mach

was not unduly worried by this conflict between his ideal and the science of the day. "It appears" he writes in reply to a particularly violent attack "that physicists are on the way of founding a church; they are already using a church's traditional weapons. To this I answer simply: . . . I decline with thanks the communion of the faithful. *I prefer freedom of thought.*" In the twentieth century Mach's Utopianism led to important developments and changed some sciences beyond recognition. And yet our philosophers of science fulminate against all Utopianism and insist on an analysis, or a "logical reconstruction" of the *status quo*. None of them would ever dream of changing science to preserve freedom of thought. Specialism overrules humanitarian considerations and prevents fundamental changes in the special professions themselves. For this is the paradox of professionalism: *fundamental* improvements are possible only if one is prepared to proceed in a thoroughly unprofessional way.

A most interesting feature of Plato's philosophy is his attention to *style*. It is fair to say that contemporary philosophers at their best have no style at all. At any rate—they never consider the matter, they unconsciously drift into some jargon which then pervades everything—their writings, their lectures, their conversations, their jokes. Plato for whom philosophy was an ever-changing enterprise, a continuous debate, was aware of the difficulties that arise when one "freezes" the process by putting it on paper. He experiments, he tries different methods to capture the *intellectual motion* that is essential to every interesting discussion. He is lighthearted, frivolous, loquacious in one dialogue, tightlipped, serious, controlled in another. He recognizes that some things cannot be said, not even in a debate, but must be insinuated with the help of images, and he uses fairytales, myths, to do the job. He changes his style from libretto to treatise back to libretto, and he does this consciously, for he comments on the changes, and he tries to explain them (*Phileb.* 23b; *Theait.* 143b). He abhors jargon and useless precision ("To use words and phrases in an easygoing way without scrutinizing them too curiously is not in general, a mark of ill breeding; on the contrary, there is something lowbred in being too precise"—*Theait.* 184c) and then he explains the shortcomings of a written account: "You know Phaedrus, that is the strange thing about writing, which makes it truly analogous to painting. The painter's products stand before us as though they were alive, but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words; they seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever" (*Phaedrus* 275d—compare this with the attitude of our professors who read even when they are supposed to talk, for example, when explaining their "ideas" at a *conference*: burying their heads in voluminous manuscripts they mumble sentences and phrases no one in his right mind would ever think of using in a conversation.) He contrasts the "living speech" of a debate with the "dead discourse" of a book (276a) which offers not wisdom, "but only its semblance" (275a). For the writer there arises then the task to find a style

that captures this “living speech” and makes the “semblance” approach reality. Here is the reason for the asides, the concrete details, the loose ends which are excellent and superbly used stage props for showing the transitory character of a vigorous exchange of opinions. (The only modern scientist who was aware of the problem, and who tried to solve it by a special, quasi-historical way of presenting the results of his research, was Niels Bohr.) Every subject can enter the debate and, entering it, it loses its definiteness, it becomes problematic, it dissolves before our very eyes.

If we want to find modern writers who come close to this manner of presenting things we must turn not to the philosophers but to the *poets*—we must turn to Goethe, Hoelderling and Kleist, to Kierkegaard and Tolstoy, to Ibsen and Brecht. Like Plato these writers move from reality to the page and back to reality. Like Plato they breath life into their written accounts by exploring the possibilities of language and by bending language to their purpose (Kleist spent about the same amount of time on the first sentence of his *Michael Kohlacs* as Plato is reported to have spent on the first sentence of the *Republic* which sets the scene and has nothing to do with the argument.) But there is one decisive difference which anticipates the later degeneration of philosophy. Plato puts all his efforts into the attempt to understand the world “rationally” which in his case means: through the medium of a *debate* while the poets are much less convinced of the power of reason and want to get some insight into its scope and its limitations. Plato saw the problem as is shown by his use of myths, fairytales, stories right in the center of a rigorous argument. He seems to have realized that the rationalist account and, for that matter, all ideologies have limitations and that they must be examined by examining the effect of concepts on material that is not yet obviously ordered with their help. He is not content with knowing how ideas look when contemplated in isolation, or when compared with other ideas, nor is he satisfied with knowing their function in abstract games (arguments, derivations, proofs) only. He wants to know the effect which an idea has when it is embedded into the real world with its loose ends, strange connections, whimsical inhabitants. And as he cannot impose, or withdraw ideas at will, he must construct *models* (plays, stories, myths) where the interaction between idea and “life” can be studied at leisure: the “aesthetic” elements in Plato, far from being mere embroideries, or unintended (and, perhaps, unwanted) side effects of his “poetic” temperament (Wilamowitz) have a most important *theoretical* function: they set the stage for an examination of the doctrine of rationalism and of other, and even more narrow doctrine.

The method of examining a set of abstract ideas, an ideology, by *embedding* it into a model of “real life” and studying the tensions that arise in the model is employed by the Ionian philosophers of nature, by early historians such as Hekataeus, it is developed into a marvelous art by the founders of tragedy who expand the models, make them complex and almost as rich as “life itself” (cf. von Fritz, *Antike und Moderne Tragoedie* [Berlin: De Gruyter, 1962]) and by later playwrights such

as Ibsen and Ayn Rand, and it is refined by comedy writers from Aristophanes to Brecht (theory) and Kauffman and Hart (practice) until a *single line*, a well placed joke suffices to explode an entire world view. To my mind this is the highest achievement of the whole tradition. It criticizes, it enlightens, it prepares improvement not by laborious arguments and droning sermons but by entertaining one-liners and it never relies on a profundity that turns nice guys into raving maniacs and makes intelligent people look like bedwetting imbeciles (remember how much a person who has just gained some “deep insight” resembles a child who has just wet his bed). Yet this glorious achievement can no longer be claimed for philosophy. The reason is that philosophy after Plato moves in an entirely different direction. Let me enumerate some of the steps that lead from the vivid debates of the Platonic circle to the dreary papers of the school “philosophers” of today.

The first step is the elimination of mythology. A philosopher *thinks*; he does not tell stories. He pursues the Truth; he does not entertain. Rationalism ceases to be a special doctrine that is embedded in a wider context and it becomes a universal medium of discourse. Secondly, this medium is transformed from an open debate into an exchange of standardized arguments: myth and open debate were signs of the “impotence of thought” (*Hegel Geschichte der Philosophie* Vol. II [Glockner Vol. 18], 188) and *not* of a wider perspective. Thought is developed and takes over everything. There arise then the magnificent cathedrals of the scholastics which succeed in accommodating even the principles of faith. This is the third stage. Fourthly, these cathedrals break up into special subjects which follow rules of their own and resent any outside interference. Philosophy keeps its name, even its function, but it changes its scope. Next comes the transition to analysis (the stages overlap, there are other developments as well, and there are always irregular and original thinkers who do not fit into any historical scheme). Instead of *changing* and *improving* a subject, philosophy now just *comments* on it, “analyzes” it. This is due to a rise of science and the defeat of earlier constructive proposals; many subjects went their own way, and the philosophers wanted to be on the safe side: analysis is a philosophy of defeat dressed up as a revolutionary movement. The specialist ideology which is by now in full bloom demands that philosophy, in order to qualify as a subject, must have special methods and a special lingo. So special methods of analysis and special languages make their appearance. Removed from the control of history (history of philosophy is just another special subject that is only loosely connected with the rest of philosophy) and invented out of the blue (many “analytic” philosophers believe that philosophy proper started with Wittgenstein, or Quine, or Strawson, or with some other midget of twentieth century “thought”) these methods are often quite infantile when compared with their predecessors, and so are the debates about them (Austin against Ayer on sense data)—but nobody realizes this, and so it becomes possible to use illiteracy as a weapon for threatening those who want to make things a little more interesting: analysis is also an illiterate philosophy dressed

up as a universal measure-stick of sense and rigor. (The answer to the logician who says “I do not understand this, I do not comprehend that” is: “Well, get a better education!”) Attention gradually moves from an analysis of special subjects (such as science) to an analysis of the instruments for the analysis of special subjects. The break between philosophy and the rest has become complete. Even those who oppose concept-pushing and who are convinced that something has been left out silently identify rationalism with articulate speech and thus see themselves forced to promote stammering and absurdity—many forms of “mysticism” (but *not* the mysticism of Meister Eckhard) and “existentialist” irrationalism (but *not* the irrationalism of Kierkegaard) are impossible without a firm but unrealized commitment to some principles of the despised ideology. Add to this the transformation of all subjects into professions which are run according to strict business standards, the increasing emphasis on “teaching” where teaching means: giving a jazzed-up account of third-hand versions of the results of someone else’s effort without having an inkling of that effort itself as well as the resulting ignorance of us professors (most so-called “teachers” now “explain” and, of course, “criticize” the “Thought of Plato” without knowing a word of Greek and without having the faintest idea of the historical and social conditions of the time)—and you have the picture with which I started: Philosophy has ceased to exist as an intellectual enterprise without limits that examines special professions, changes them, tames them, puts them in their place, and it has become a special profession itself, even a business that is run by illiterate and provincial practitioners. Can it be revived? And how can it be revived?

I do not think it can be revived from the *inside*. Being well paid and respected by his profession, being encouraged by the institutions of which he is a part, being admired and/or feared by his students, being advanced when he plays the game, kept in the same place, or fired, when he does not—why should the contemporary dealer in philosophical goods mend his ways and learn new things? (I, for one, am much too lazy to do anything that drastic.) So, the revival must come from other quarters. For the children of white upper middle class parents it must come from small circles of friends who have the time, the energy, the motivation to either reject or, what is even better, to simply *bypass* the *status quo* (live and let die:) and who have also sufficient reserves of joy and good humor to escape the dangers of self-righteousness. Is there any advice that we can give to those heralds of the future? I think there is.

To my mind the first and most important step is to reverse the trend and to revive alternative traditions such as the tradition of Plato, of Aristophanes, of the wise men of illiterate societies, and so on. Ideas do not come out of the blue and those which do are hardly worth mentioning. Ideas are the results of long developments, they occur and have meaning only to those who belong to some *tradition*. The first step therefore demands that we familiarize ourselves with some alternatives of the scientifico-democratic rationalism of today. And “familiarizing oneself with a

tradition” does not mean reading fifth-hand accounts written by busy and ignorant compilers of fourth-hand accounts, it means studying the *original sources* (documents, institutions, societies) and trying to restore in one’s imagination the form of life that produced the sources and gave them content. For example, there is no way of making up one’s mind about Plato outside the domain of classical scholarship and, indeed, the best, the most imaginative, the most “relevant” analyses of Greek Thought have been written by classical scholars such as Rhode, Wilamowitz, Murray, Cornford, Snell, von Fritz, and, of course, Nietzsche. Replacing Plato with a translation, or with a paraphrase is not very different from replacing human contact with television. One continues to breathe, one continues to speak, but one cannot be sure that one does so because one is still alive.

In other cases the situation is exactly the same. One must learn the language, one must study the institutions, one must, if possible, *participate* in the forms of life one wants to consider in order to be able to judge those effects on thought, will, emotion which do not occur in written accounts and which cannot occur in them, for “methodological” as well as for personal reasons. What we want, after all, are not alternative *descriptions*, or alternative *arguments*, what we want are alternative *experiments of living*—and here everyone must decide for himself. *Learning* must be given the widest possible scope, it must become part of one’s existence rather than preparing a professional competence that is part of an otherwise empty life. It is no use proclaiming a “radical” or a “black” philosophy when all one has to offer is another course at a university. Ethnic groups have the tremendous advantage of being united by a common interest that is a much stronger binding force than the interests of even the most dedicated intellectuals. *But a common interest is not a culture.* Being without a culture, a common interest can neither conquer despair nor escape the “new opportunities” of an “integration” that takes it for granted that what everybody wants most is being white and upper middle class. Ethnic groups thus have to revive their traditions just as we must revive ours. If there is to be a “Black philosophy” then it must be developed from a knowledge of African languages, African institutions, one must be ready and willing to base one’s life, *one’s whole life* and not just a little part of it on myth and magic rather than on reason and science and not a single element of contemporary Western culture must be permitted to pass without the most painstaking examination. Science must lose its ideological preeminence and the separation of state and church must be supplemented with the separation of state and science which means that children should be able to choose between instruction in science and instruction in magic just as they can now choose between instruction in methodism, catholicism, or no religious instruction at all. “Integration” which prevents a full and genuine recovery of ethnic traditions must be circumvented, or changed. Such an activity that restores old forms of life, old languages, old ways of thinking, that restores their original shape rather than their modern reflections, uses all resources of mankind, thought,

imagination, argument, dreams, hallucinatory events, playacting, science, magic will not only revive philosophy, it will also return to us a humanity which we lost when we permitted ourselves to be run by the professionals and when we started taking it for granted that aggressive concept-pushing is the peak of human achievement. We, the products of Western culture who did not have to look on when foreign invaders killed our traditions but who did this job ourselves have a rather simple task before us. All that is needed is a little curiosity, a little affection for one's fellow man and a sense of perspective. But the very simplicity of the task makes it also most difficult, for what intellectual is prepared to trade a three-volume systematic treatise for a one-liner "on the same subject"? Indeed, the task would be absolutely hopeless were it not for a few people who just *might* be interested in the exchange and whose good sense and laughter might one day put an end to that nightmare called "contemporary thought."

Note

This paper has not been published previously. [Note added 2012.]