



## The Characteristics of Modern Philosophy

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**I**s the history of philosophy nothing more than a branch of natural history? Does the only reality in the object of the history of philosophy consist of the cerebral phenomena which form the basis of all intellectual activity?

The word reality has several meanings. Evidently for the physiologist, even for the psychologist, that which is real in a work of art consists of the cerebral and mental effort that realizes it; but for the universal man within each one of us, the work of art is itself a reality; it detaches itself from the brain that produced it and lives a life of its own; it elicits terror or pity, enthusiasm or disgust; it grows and dwindles away; it has its own distinctive history and destiny.

This kind of existence has to do with philosophy as it grows from age to age; it also is a poem unfolding before our eyes and interesting us in itself, quite apart from the physical and psychic conditions of which it consists.

Let us, then, consider modern philosophy by comparing it with that of the ancients. How marked the difference! It is impossible to remain insensible to the change that has taken place. To the ancients, in the golden days of the classic age, philosophy was preeminently the noblest exercise of the human intellect. Once the demands of nature satisfied and leisure won by effort, man felt awakening within himself a loftier faculty than practical activity, the faculty of knowing and contemplating the order of nature and cooperating in thought with universal reason. Such an occupation was less necessary than any other; but then, no other was so beautiful. It was the spirit taking delight in itself after falling into line with the necessities of life; it was freedom, i. e., thought liberated from physical constraint and turning of itself toward its own object. With what artless joy and abandon the ancient Greeks used those wonderful instruments of thought: dialectic and syllogism, which they had just discovered! They are in no hurry to reach the goal; the path leading to it is so attractive! They are not so foolish as to fix a conclusion beforehand to their reasonings, but gladly content themselves with noble anticipations and glorious risks if logic is incapable of proving more. Moreover, are they not assured that reason, that divine power within the human soul, is itself the sovereign and pattern of the universe, and consequently that science and happiness are the natural reward of a methodically planned reason? Why should philosophy impose restraint upon itself? Its sovereign sway within its own domain is beyond dispute. Religion, which appeals to the exterior man only, does not suspect it, nor is science, born beneath its wing, hostile to it. Freely it continues its task which is none other than the full blossoming of reason, the embellishing both of universal nature — in which we find it living — and of our own nature, in which we bring it to birth.

Such was ancient philosophy; modern philosophy is altogether different. This latter does not find the ground free nor can it provide itself with its own law. While the ancient wisdom was crumbling away, religion was gaining a hold on the souls of men, either satisfying or awakening moral needs almost unknown to the ancient Greeks. Henceforth man no longer contents himself with forming one in spirit with nature and contemplating that supreme thought on which the world is founded. He regards nature as corrupt, and would like to

break the bonds that bind him thereto. His will is to know a supernatural world whose regenerating influence he receives during this lifetime. In it he deserves to live forever after death. The consciousness of his sin and wretchedness besets him; while in this state he is tortured by the desire for endless perfection and happiness. Life must of necessity be the means of proceeding from hell to heaven; the Supreme Being must be a Father who has pity on his creatures. Religion alone means to answer these needs which itself has called forth or nurtured. Concerning things above, religion has received illumination that transcends reason; it is in possession both of purifying pardon and of transforming grace. It gives this world over to reason — which forms part thereof — in order to reign alone in the next, man's true home, compared with which the present world is as nothing.

Here, then, we have philosophy removed from the invisible world, dispossessed of the supreme control of the human soul. Will it, at least, remain in possession of the visible world? This was the case during the whole of the Middle Ages, when, as religion itself acknowledged, the explanation of natural phenomena was sought for in Aristotle's *Physics*. The sixteenth century, however, witnessed the birth of a rival power with principles of its own and claiming that it alone could interpret nature, and this power was science. It is not the qualitative element in things, the object of metaphysics, said the scientist, that is able to explain phenomena : they are explained as being dependent on numbers, magnitudes and mathematical properties which are clear in themselves and have no need of verification by philosophers. What we have to do is to observe phenomena, try to discover inductively their more or less constant relations to one another, and finally to reduce these relations or laws, which are still obscure and contingent, to mathematical formulas, disentangled of all sensible or metaphysical matter and thereby exclusive of all indetermination; by this means, man really acquires that mental representation of the universe and empire over things that is the supreme goal of his ambition on earth. Still uncertain of its independence in the days of Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Descartes and Newton, science, finding its material in observation and experimentation, as it found its form in mathematics, speedily became emancipated; nowadays it stands on its own feet. And whereas at first it limited its ambition to explaining astronomical or purely physical phenomena, and only in a spirit of audacity which it knew not how to justify, challenged the manifestations of life, it has gradually, by a process of continual advance, entered realms which it was forbidden to approach, and now we find no single element of reality that has any right to close the door upon it.

With these two powers, science and religion, modern philosophy came into contrast. At a time when the moral world is wholly occupied, when the power which is to seize upon the material world becomes conscious of its might, reason recovers possession of itself and claims its kingdom. In what position does it find itself when advancing this claim? During its beautiful and fertile youth, reason produces an amazing diversity of systems. This very profusion is now working against it, for truth must always be one and the same. Moreover, when examining itself, ever since the days of antiquity, reason has frequently wondered if the absolute it seeks is really accessible and if its ambition does not transcend its powers. And so it is, when feeble and distrustful of itself, that it undertakes to begin its work all over again. How much more difficult the task is now than it was in the past! No longer is freedom of thought an attribute of the human soul. Even in such as consider themselves independent of religion, there exists the need of religion, imperiously demanding satisfaction. And none the less do those to whom science affords no satisfaction regard its findings as truths that brook no contradiction ; these findings possess a type of certainty of which the ancient philosophers knew nothing. If philosophy would live, it must take account of these requirements. No longer can it quietly follow the lead of reason.

Problems are set which it is compelled to meet. What is the destiny of man? What is duty and on what is it based? What is freedom? What is merit? Is the Architect of the universe likewise a Providence, assisting man and dealing with him according to his moral worth? Such questions as these, which men like Plato and Aristotle encountered only when they had to come to the end of their investigations, frequently leaving them unsolved, are now enjoined on the philosopher as essential questions which must be answered at all cost and with the utmost precision. The philosopher, too, cannot avoid inquiring what this mechanism consists of which science brings into evidence, and how far it extends. What is that experience? What are the mathematics to which we are indebted for certain truths and which, we are assured, form our only means of knowledge? When antiquity encountered such problems, it was in order to become aware of the power of reason which then had within itself the germs of science. Now, however, nature is self-sufficient. The scientist does not know whether there is reason in nature or not, and, for the philosopher, the data of science are a barrier-line sternly drawn by a foreign ruler who scorns to make known his right to do so. That free philosophy, then, in which the sages of old took delight, is dead. To the moderns, philosophy has ceased to be a noble diversion, a kind of divine pastime; it is a task, a serious matter, the struggle of reason for its very existence. Disputing the claims of religion and science, philosophy must give proof that it too has rights and a kingdom of its own, that it is vain for us to pretend to do without it, that it is as redoubtable to him who denies it as it is propitious to him who renders it justice, that it fears nothing from truth but rather feeds thereon and increases its power: in a word, that it lives and has power to continue alive.

Such, indeed, is the spectacle offered to us by modern philosophy. It struggles for a place between religion which commands and science which ascertains facts. At one time, examining the principles on which its opponents take their stand, it proves them ruinous unless supported by reason; at another time, it appropriates whatever is best in the doctrines and methods brought against it and turns into an instrument what seemed an obstacle; at another time it refutes and denies, and that to some purpose. Then, in self-defense, modern philosophy traces the frontiers of its kingdom : criticizing the powers of reason and fearing not to sacrifice largely in order to enjoy in safety what it retains. And now, by reason of this very criticism, thinking it has won autonomy once for all, it launches forth, and, from the depths of the infinite into which it plunges, assists at the creation of being. Here, in humbler mode, it describes and analyzes, adapting the method of physical science to the study of mental problems. In other things, it limits its ambition to classifying and organizing science. In the latter, it imagines human consciousness to be an original, special principle, as certain as any scientific or religious principle, and adequate for the foundation of the main truths which the intellectual and moral life takes for granted. In the former, it reveals and makes universal the most general principles of the sciences, in order to obtain such a view of the totality of things as is strictly in conformity with the data of experience. Thus philosophy becomes scientific with Bacon, Descartes and Leibniz, religious with Malebranche and Spinoza, descriptive with Locke, critical with Hume and Kant, moral with Kant and Fichte, transcendental with Schelling and Hegel, positive with Auguste Comte, psychological with Royer-Collard, Cousin and Maine de Biran, idealistic with Berkeley and Mill, both synthetical and experimental with Herbert Spencer. These various systems are not, as with the Greeks, the spontaneous fruits of a productive organism which is growing in every direction: each of them has for its object a more satisfactory solution of the difficulties that beset the mind of man, and arise either from religion or from science or from the relations between the two. Each of them is an attitude of reason brought face to face with its rivals: in the one case it rebels and struggles, in the other it

brings the hostile powers into agreement or reconciliation with each other.

And so the history of modern philosophy is a drama of which reason is the center. The problem is to find out whether the ambition to understand, which man formerly regarded as his greatest quality, is condemned once for all, or whether human destiny henceforth consists in passive obedience to a master or in registering facts the meaning of which it is impossible to know. How can we remain aloof and indifferent when we see reason thus struggling for its very existence? How can we help gazing, eagerly on the stage of life? If it is a noble spectacle to see a nation struggling for its independence, a conscience for the faith it holds, the disinherited for their means of livelihood, enthusiasts for their dreams, and passions for their satisfaction, how can it be uninteresting to see the human reason of antiquity spring into renewed life before the powers that imagined they had crushed it, collect its forces, organize attack and defense, retreat and advance in turn, drive against the enemy his own troops, and finally recreate for itself an empire wherein to reign once more in power and glory? No, this is no idle sport; it is a real war with the souls of my fellow-beings as its battlefield, and with greater intensity than ever, in presence of this drama of moral history, there comes to my mind the poet's line : "I am a man, and nothing human is alien to me."

But is this sufficient, is modern philosophy nothing more to us than a spectacle to gaze upon ? Shall we show only sympathy to the reason that insists on existing, whereas the conditions of its existence seem to have disappeared? It may suit some individuals to stand aloof from this warfare and take a curious interest in the fortunes of the fight. The human mind, however, even in these days, has not attained to this degree of detachment, and if we each one question ourselves, we find that, in this drama which we are interested in watching, the hero is another ourself; we see that we are actors as well as spectators.

Indeed, can we regard as now solved the problems which have stirred the minds of modern philosophers, and that in a sense condemnatory of philosophy? Does the human mind consider that religion or science, in so far as they claim to be adequate for man, have carried the day? Science has kept its promises. Armed with the twin weapons of observation and calculation, it brings beneath its sway every element of given reality, even such elements as appear least susceptible of being reduced to strict laws. The mind places full trust in it and abjures the right to dispute the principles on which it rests. But the more definite are the methods and results of science, the more evident it becomes that true being is beyond its scope. It decomposes and reduces, trying to find being in a simple immutable element. It thus reduces the thinking to the feeling being, the feeling to the living being, the latter to chemical substance which is supposed to consist of invisible and hypothetical atoms, themselves regarded as derivative beings awaiting further reduction. The being after which science seeks eludes it continually; we cannot conceive of what that simple material element, to which alone objective existence must belong, is composed. Nor is this all. Speaking generally, scientific method consists in explaining the qualitative side of things by their quantitative side, the phenomena given in consciousness by the corresponding determinations of space. Space, however, considered as existing *per se*, is a thing incomprehensible; something, moreover, that science in no way claims to impose upon us. Space is inseparable from our perception of it, quantity is a quantification performed by the mind: thus, to reduce soul to matter is to reduce soul to soul itself, and science proves to be a vicious circle.

But that is of no consequence, we shall be told: science is the sum total of the knowledge it is given to us to acquire, and we must simply abandon the attempt to know that to which science cannot attain. This is all the scientist seeks, he discovers that the very thought of such problems as science is unable to solve gradually fades away from the mind.

Perhaps such a mental state, natural to one exclusively devoted to scientific investigation, might extend to all men, did the desire to know, of itself alone, fill the entire mind. But we possess in addition the power to act, to act from motives. Now, the whole of science, even if we supposed it to be complete, is incapable of supplying us with the faintest motive to action. It can tell us how, and in obedience to what motives, certain men have acted, it can ascertain that we have certain instincts or tendencies to act in some particular way; but nothing it can find will contain a reason for acting, a valid answer to the question: what advantage will it be? When I am told that the struggle for life is the fundamental law of nature, and that all our institutions, all our inventions — including those of the intellect — and all our feelings, even those that appear most disinterested, are but effects of this law, I cannot find in such a theory any principle of action, since life for its own sake is worthless in my eyes; rather than force myself to efforts and tasks that have so vain an end in view, I would withdraw from the stage and feel inclined to cheat plans and expectations of so baffling a nature. The reason I reject pessimism and persist in my will to live is not because I am told that renunciation of life comes under the category of love of life, which love, consequently, remains the essential tendency, it is because I make an end or object for myself of that which I ascertain as fact, because I convert into morals that which is but science. Mankind has never lived by virtue of knowledge alone; were we seriously to resolve to obtain from nothing but science our reasons for acting, the effect would be gradually to slacken the springs of action and make man, after he had been reduced to a state of natural inertia, the mere sport of external influences.

Consequently, it is morally impossible for mankind not to look beyond the world as shown by science: man must have something else that will satisfy his need to know, and more especially his power to act. True, religion offers itself to meet the demand of human nature, without recourse to philosophy being necessary. And indeed, the feelings propagated by Christianity: love for the poor and lowly, respect for the human soul, the worth of moral intentions, the beauty of self-denial and confidence in the triumph of justice, are living and held in honor among men as much as ever they were. But if the Middle Ages, after appreciating Greek philosophy, were even then only willing to believe in order to understand, how much stronger is the refusal of modern generations, reared in the school of science, to adopt any dogma without sternly discussing its origin and value! And even were religion to demonstrate what it asserts, viz., that its dogmas are supernatural revelations and that it holds promises of bliss, man would still not consider himself satisfied. For that which is only supernatural is alien to him and may crush, not convince him; while as for the happiness he is promised, he will not find it if his reason is coerced, and even if he did, he would be likely to repeat with the sages of old: better suffering in freedom than ease in slavery.

Thus, neither science alone, nor religion alone is capable of satisfying man. He wants to deal not only with astronomical and physical, physiological and psychic phenomena, but with himself as distinct from all these. He wants not only to know but also to act, to act in accordance with motives, and nothing external to himself, nothing given to him as a simple fact, can he regard as a true motive. He acts according to his idea of action only when he finds within himself the principle of his determination. And so, whether clearly conscious of it or not, he dwells in a world other than that of facts, whether natural or supernatural. Facts are but the externals of being: man would plunge into the heart of being itself. In the least of his conscious sensations, there are the confused idea of existence for itself and that of the power to act which characterize true being. That reflection on these inner depths of human nature is not found in all men, nor is indispensable to existence, is both evident and natural. Light sheds its beams, just the same, on the man who shows no curiosity



as to its source. But the human mind, which reflects on everything that comes before it, cannot possibly refrain from inquiring what it is itself, when everything it studies depends on the being in which it participates. The ancients clearly saw that this exercise of reason was a noble and beautiful function, well deserving to occupy man's leisure hours: for the moderns, it is something inevitable, since both religion and science, which claimed to make philosophy useless, are unable to satisfy the very needs they themselves call forth and keep alive.

Again, if the heaven of philosophy were to disappear from the human soul, one might well inquire whether scientific and religious activity would not itself be condemned. Why do we cultivate science, i. e., the disinterested knowledge of the nature of things, except for the reason that we find in it food for the spirit, something that adorns our very existence? Science, which prescribes no action of any kind, does not even invite me to cultivate science. To give myself up to it, I must find in it some pleasure worthy of being enjoyed; I must love and esteem the reason which it develops within myself, I must believe it worthwhile to become aware of the economy of the universe. What, too, will be the object of religion, if we are really nothing but passive instruments in the hands of an almighty force? Vainly does this force impose on us the most sublime actions. Unless we make our own the reasons of these actions by proving them to ourselves, unless we convert into free volition what at first was but an outer command, we gather no fruit from our obedience, we do not become religious at all. Religion has no grounds for existence unless it finds a man to whom to appeal, a man, i. e., a reason capable of understanding, appreciating and willing.

This struggle for existence, then, on the part of the reason, which constitutes modern philosophy, concerns us also, if we want the human ideal to be realized. Before us as before philosophers like Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz and Kant, two paths open out: that of sense and that of spirit. It is materially permissible to take the former. In that case, there will be nothing for us but facts. History as the introduction and science as the conclusion represent the whole of the knowledge to which we can lay claim. But if we are not satisfied, in practical life, with the principles of action that instinct, custom and science can give us, religion is there to impose commands on us in the name of an infallible and omnipotent will. We can make such a decision: if we do, the history of modern philosophy becomes relegated to the past, so far as we are concerned; it certainly retains the interest attaching to an account of anything human, but is not at all our own affair, we are watching the combat without having any voice as regards the issue.

We may also inquire what would become of mankind, if intellectual and moral life were limited to the culture of science or religion stripped of everything philosophical. Doubtless, we should have long to wait for any result. Man lives on a substratum of habits that may long survive their causes. Still, if science affords man no motive for action, and religion, of itself alone, imperfectly supplies this lack, how can we help dreading lest the exclusive sway of either the one or the other, or of both combined, gradually enfeeble the human will, and, in the end, deliver man up to pure instinct and blind force? It is action that creates human institutions, discoveries and civilizations, sciences and religions; and if one would act, one must believe oneself something. How can a man persist in willing, if he is convinced that will is an illusion, and that it is nature alone, with her mechanical forces, that produces our apparent power of initiative? Freedom is no physical phenomenon which outlives its scientific explanation. Explained by science, freedom receives its death-blow: it must disappear in time. It exists only in those who regard it as scientifically inexplicable. The idea we form of the history of philosophy thus depends on our will itself. If we cease to regard as realities both human action and the reason which is its essence, then the history of philosophy, like natural history, offers us nothing but facts to register and classify; but if

we wish reason to be, to develop and extend its empire, if we wish motives of action, thought and life to be retained by reflecting men, if we wish science itself and the moral feelings not to lose the credit we find them enjoying, then the history of philosophy, especially of modern philosophy, will be to us both a living problem and a glorious panorama; systems will no longer be abstractions, but rather clear, distinct voices whispering to the human soul; the clash of ideas will no longer be a simple relation between phenomena, but a division between ourselves and ourselves, and the historian will lend an ear both to the philosopher and to the man.

Is not this the path along which we should choose to travel?

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