

PHILOSOPHICAL NOTES

"*Modern Art.*" It has become part of some people's thinking—if indeed you can call it thinking—that Picasso introduced a revolution into art. Of course it is true that Picasso has done many things and is a good technician with the brush. Yet whether we consider his cubism or his malformed women, he was not original. His distinctiveness lies in his ability to combine so many facets into one lifetime. But the history of philosophy and of art have produced many who have possessed this trait. So many indeed, that the application of the term "distinctiveness" is endangered unless we understand it in a special way.

Aristotle, Descartes, Leibnitz—in philosophy; Michelangelo in art; Leonardo daVinci in a larger area including mechanics and many other things; Henri Poincaré in science and philosophy; were all universalists of a high order of importance in the history of thought. On a still wider basis we can include the name of Swedenborg.

But let us return to the apparent newness of Picasso's malformed women, for example. Certainly it cannot be denied that a large amount of Picasso's popularity is based upon these monstrous creations. Yet they are hardly original. Hundreds of figures drawn by the Egyptians and preserved for us to see even now testify to the error that Picasso is the creator in drawing of the strange orientation of the anatomical parts. The profile of the head was a thing more beautiful to the Egyptian than the front of the face. So the Egyptian more often than not drew the profile. But the eye looking directly at the observer meant more to the Egyptian than the eye looking off into space. And so the Egyptian drew the eye looking into the eye of the observer even on the drawn profile. And the chest, what of it? Its broad view appealed to the Egyptian more than its side view. And so the Egyptian's profile head is attached to a chest facing in the same direction as its eye. To complete a figure in profile it must have a leg. But in profile this leg would be seen from the side which was less beautiful to the Egyptian than the other side. And the leg would cover that side of the other leg which was pointing in the right direction. Thus that ancient artist, whenever he could, would cause the leg on the far side to be stepping forward in such a pronounced manner that it could be clearly seen.

In the Egyptian figure one is never confused by the expressed imagination of the Egyptian artist. How can one avoid confusion when looking at a Picasso monstrosity? Yet, we might add, Picasso as an artist no doubt has a right to his peculiar delineations. But have those who consider them to be such wonderfully new creations judged them in the light of history? Or have they done so only by holding to the tenet of "what is new" isolated in their ignorance from knowledge of what is old.

"*Dubito Ergo Sum.*" If ever there was a man who would have done away with the past (even including his own early training) as a philosophical exercise in order to begin his thinking anew, it was Descartes. In his *Method*, he explains how from his studies in languages, eloquence, mathematics, theology, philosophy, and "other sciences" he had found all those subjects wanting when it came to providing him with the certainty of opinions he had about God, about himself, and about many other things. Only in the method of Euclid which enabled one to arrive at certainties could he find some restful basis. If only, he thought, this method could be applied in philosophy in general!

But opinions that he already held were in the way. And, as he says

. . . but as for the opinions which up to that time I had embraced, I thought that I could not do better than resolve at once to sweep them wholly away, that I might afterward be in a position to admit either others more correct, or even perhaps the same when they had undergone the scrutiny of Reason. (Tudor Pub. Co. Edition p. 157.)

Even so Descartes did not charge forth doubting all without some very careful preparation. Least of all did he advocate the method for others! As for himself, he says

And, finally as it is not enough, before commencing to rebuild the house in which we live, that it be pulled down, and materials and builders provided, or that we engage in the work ourselves, according to a plan which we have beforehand carefully drawn out, but as it is likewise necessary that we be furnished with some other house in which we may live commodiously during the operations, so that I might not remain irresolute in my actions, while my Reason compelled me to suspend my judgment, and that I might not be prevented from living thenceforward in the greatest possible felicity, I formed a provisory code of Morals, composed of three or four maxims, with which I am desirous to make you acquainted.

In what follows he lays down this code. One who reads this code will feel its continuity with the past. One realizes if he reads Descartes carefully that Descartes is applying a method to philosophy, not to life. Life must continue according to some standard—some standard that has proved its worth in the past. Similar circumstances may be given as an illustration of another doubter, Hume, better known as a skeptic. Doubting and skepticism were not a way of life for these philosophers; they were methods used in philosophy. People who followed, but without the same analytic ability, confused the method with a way of life. And doubting and skepticism became a way of life, and this attitude perhaps contributes in no small way to the present importance of the doctrine of newness.

"But What Is Truth?" Many have asked this question. In fact, the best known of the interrogators, Pilate, is known to many simply because he asked this question even though many today may be hard put to explain the occasion.

This question is an example—if the existence of truth be but admitted—of a timeless one. And if one seeks the truth he will sling in the faces of those who seek what is new the timelessness of this question.

"What is truth?" is asked in all ages of history and in all ages of man, of the state, of society, of the Church.

Swedenborg says in 1 Econ. 652, "But what is truth? Will it be the work of ages to discover it, or of ages to recognize it when discovered?"

Metaphysics. An art critic, writing recently in a newspaper, said "Metaphysicians if they are painters, deny the laws of physics, especially gravity." (*New York Times*, Friday, April 13, 1962.)

Now this sentence appears to be just plain silly and ought to be allowed to perish along with a lot of other trash that finds its way into newspapers. Silly though it may be, it led us to reconsider the meaning of metaphysics. Without resort to reference material three usages of the term come to mind immediately. The first was the use of the word as a title of one of Aristotle's books. Second was its use by Kant in his oft repeated question "Is metaphysics possible?" Third was its use in something I read on the very day the item quoted above appeared in the newspaper.

Absolute values are ideals never reached. Yet I think that the common effort of mankind has approached some ideals in quite a respectable way. I do not hesitate to call a man foolish if he rejects the teaching of experience because no logical proof is forthcoming, or because he does not know or does not accept the rules of the scientific craft. You find such super-logical people sporadically among pure mathematicians, theologians, and philosophers, while there are besides vast communities of people ignorant of or rejecting the rules of science, among them the members of anti-vaccination societies and believers in astrology. It is useless to argue with them; I cannot compel them to accept the same criteria of valid induction in which I believe: the code of scientific rules. For there is no logical argument for doing so; it is a question of faith. In this sense I am willing to call induction a metaphysical principle, namely something beyond physics. Born. *Natural Philosophy of Cause and Effect*. p. 7.

As suggested elsewhere in these notes, careful use of language might very well indeed be guided by a good dictionary—say Webster's unabridged. Reference to it brought the following:

The term was first used, it is believed, by Andronicus of Rhodes, the editor of Aristotle's works, as a name for that part of his writings which came after the *Physics*. That division of philosophy which includes ontology, or the science of being, and cosmology, or the science of fundamental causes and processes in things; in a looser sense, all of the more abstruse philosophical disciplines; in a narrower sense, ontology alone. The primary meaning of *metaphysics* is derived from those discussions of Aristotle which he himself called the First Philosophy or Theology, and which deal with the nature of being, with cause or genesis, and with the existence of God.

See also Richard McKeon in the introduction he prepared for his edition of *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Apparently two hundred years separate Aristotle's writing of the book and the assignment of its title by Andronicus.

Our own memory had jumped from Aristotle to Kant. But Webster gives a considerable fill-in for that interim.

By Albertus Magnus [metaphysics] was called the transphysical science; and Aquinas considered it to be concerned with the cognition of God. Scholastic philosophy in general understood it as the science of being itself, that is as *ontology*, a meaning which with some difference of interpretation is still retained.

Webster then goes on to recite some matters that remind us of the background that existed when Swedenborg first studied philosophy:

The Renaissance resulted in two developments. In Germany, Christian Wolf divided metaphysics into ontology, cosmology, psychology, and natural

or rational theology. In England, Bacon defined it as the quest or study of formal and final causes, contrasting with it natural philosophy as treating efficient and natural causes, etc. . . .

And then after all this and some more the dictionary arrives at Kant:

. . . in Germany, Kant's *Critique* asserted its transcendental province as the science of pure, or *a priori*, reason. The notion that metaphysics is concerned with that which transcends experience led to the positivistic denial of the possibility of metaphysical knowledge, while the critical spirit and logical point of view of Kant caused metaphysics to be identified with logic by Hegel.

So it seems that with the denial of the possibility of metaphysics in the Hegelian sense (we might ask if this is the same as in the Kantian sense) the word was set free to be used in a manner quite different from that of Aristotle or Andronicus. We can be certain that Aristotle would not have identified it with logic since he treats of logic in its own books which are quite distinct from *Metaphysics*.

It appears that Max Born's placing the "art" of induction under metaphysics might be consistent with Hegel's meaning of that word. At any rate if metaphysics should be interpreted as in the newspaper reference, it has merely suffered further disintegration in history.

If this is a meaning of "metaphysics" for serious scientific purposes, it may be that the kind of meaning in the newspaper article cited above is not so remote after all for "respectable" thinkers.

Communication. What impresses one about the history of the meaning of "metaphysics" outlined in the dictionary is not just the learning that can be attached to words as illustrated in this case but rather the history of ideas. This seems to be forgotten today as one hears so much about "communication." So little thought is evident on the nature of the ideas that ought to be communicated. There seems to be a certain virtue attached to the art of communication for its own sake and the merit or worth that might be in ideas to be communicated is pushed aside. It might be that language reflects this in another way—how often do we hear about "great" ideas or "momentous" ideas or "timely" ideas, how seldom about "good" ideas or "bad" ones?

If "communication" is to serve a "good" purpose, then it is not just its effectiveness to persuade or to educate the other fellow that

is the important thing. The other fellow ought to be aware of his part in this communication, and that part is to understand. You and I are the "other fellow." It is well that we study the tricks of communication that we may apprehend them when they are used on us—especially when it is for the purpose of taking away from us what is good or what is true.

The fact that the communicator uses terms from logic does not mean that he is logical. His demand "to define terms" may turn out to be a mere tactical device. His "logic" may be wrong logic and his demand to define may be only to lead away from the real question. It may be that logic properly applied would give exactly the opposite conclusion derived by him and his vaunted use of its terms. And as for the hue and the cry over "defining your terms" this may be the tactics which will bury you in your words and close your ideas to the real teacher, which is experience.

Today as the communicator of "modern ideas" tries to reach our mind, he should find that mind active and not passive to his communication.

One neat trick of solving problems today is to so restate things that the problem disappears. This well known method has been applied many times. For example Munn says,

... There must be understanding and agreement on the meanings of words used. This is not easy to do. So much so that some authors have suggested that the controversial words are essentially meaningless, and should be eliminated from respectable discourse. In particular, they would reject the expression "free will," and, though perhaps not so readily, "determinism," "causality," "predestination." *Free-Will and Determinism*, p. 9.

Munn does not himself accept this idea. He only repeats to us one of the devices used today to restrict language so as to part company with the past in which that language originated.

Metaphysics and Science. In the previous note reference was made to the demand to "define your terms." There are certain terms that show a continuing resistance to being defined. This is particularly true of fundamental concepts. Some disciplines, mathematics and logic for example, contain within their framework the explicit recognition of these "undefinables" as "point," "line," and "set," for example.

Another set of terms that stubbornly resist definition are the names of the disciplines themselves. Two of these occur in the

title of this note. What is "metaphysics"? What is "science"? An agile "communicator" of the kind referred to in the previous note can keep us from saying anything at all about "metaphysics," about "science," yes even about "mathematics" or "logic" by the simple device of insisting at the outset that we define these names. An effort to define them could carry us through the whole history of thought. And in this process we may never get to the thing which we wished to say whether it be in the field of "metaphysics" or in the field of "science"—or in any other field.

A concentrated and dedicated effort to define "metaphysics" and "science" may prevent us from thinking metaphysics and science. And yet it is not through definition of them that we learn them, but by thinking and experiencing them.

After some experience in gaining knowledge in science and in metaphysics—and in some other fields too—we are in a fair position to ask some interesting and useful questions:

Is science, regarded as a body of knowledge, identical with knowledge? Or:

Is there such a thing as knowledge that is respectable and yet not a part of science? Another question is:

Is science, regarded as a source, that is as a means of producing new truths, the sole source of new truths? And from this we progress to still another question:

Is metaphysics, or that which is beyond the science of nature, useful? respectable?

"That which is beyond physics" was the definition of metaphysics given by Andronicus. Can we do better? Or must we depend upon experience in metaphysics itself? Frank Sewall writing in 1887 in his book *The New Metaphysics* says

What lies beyond this physical, visible, and tangible world of nature? If anything, then its realm is the subject of metaphysics; the laws that govern it; the relations it sustains to the world of tangible things—these we shall hold to be proper subjects of metaphysical investigation.

Understood in this sense metaphysics is a thing quite distinct from those vague creations of the mind which have for so long a time borne this name, and brought it into discredit with practical thinkers.

It is clear from these quotations that Sewall considered metaphysical investigation in general as proper; his problem was to decide what are proper particulars for such investigation.

A difficulty in the definition of these terms can be pointed up here. If we take the implication of the meaning of "metaphysics" from Aristotle—made explicit by Andronicus—then we can go one step more and ask what does it mean "beyond science"?

"Beyond science" turns out to be ambiguous for there are two directions in which one can go beyond science. In one of these one can go in the direction *away* from immediate sense perceptions—this is toward metaphysics. In the other direction one can go beyond science *toward* immediate sense perceptions. This is toward the common-sense world of every day living. This too, as is the case with metaphysics, is non-scientific. This meaning of "beyond science" is illustrated in a quotation by Phillip Frank from Herbert Dingle as follows: "The truth is that chemistry indeed has no place in the strict scientific scheme. . . . The part played by chemistry in the growth of science has been a pragmatism, heuristic one."

Frank continues: "To speak briefly, chemistry is today a common-sense term, but not a scientific term."

We called "silly" the statement from a newspaper referred to in a previous note which said that metaphysics . . . denies the laws of physics. Yet now we read that "chemistry indeed has no place in the strict scientific scheme. . . ." Is this not silly too?

We excused the former statement somewhat because its physical ground was only newsprint. But the quotation about chemistry was taken from the *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh* (1949), 62, Part IV, p. 409, which is not a newspaper—nor is Herbert Dingle an art critic but a serious scientific philosopher.

In our definitions of "science" and of "metaphysics" we will have to be content with less than a full representation in words of these disciplines. And we will have to depend for our understanding of them more upon our experience with them.

It is well that we recall some of this experience with these definitions when we hear someone discarding "free will," "cause and effect," "force," "soul," "metaphysics," "chemistry," and some other fundamental concepts because they cannot be defined, or understood—or simply as the "modern" communicator of ideas would have it, because "they are outmoded"!

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