

PHILOSOPHICAL NOTES

The subject of rationalism has been the chief topic considered in previous installments of these notes. Under this system it is held that the source of truth is in the reason, and in the extreme form of rationalism the source of truth is in reason alone. Thus rationalism in modern philosophy leads to the acknowledgment that the only source of science, the only things that can be known, are ideas. This is idealism.

But rationalism need not end in idealism. The appeal to what is called "common sense" is also a possible consequence of reason alone. The Epicurean philosophy is an example of this. Although Epicurus was an Athenian of the 3rd century B.C., much of his philosophy has come to us through his Roman disciple, Titus Lucretius Carus (circa 55 B.C.). We are not concerned in these notes, however, with the common notions about Epicurean philosophy as popularized under the Roman Empire where, according to Latham,* "there were many avowed Epicureans, but they were interested in the Master's tolerant and easy-going morality rather than its scientific and philosophic foundations."

It is a natural consequence of our times to think of the poem of Lucretius, "The Nature of the Universe," merely as a source of ancient ideas about the atom. However, it would pay moderns, in their haste to criticize philosophy generally, to concern themselves somewhat with the place of Lucretius in the history of that subject, in so far as he deals with the source of knowledge. For if they be tempted to set off what they call "common sense" against the philosophers, they will soon learn that an example of its serious development and application to science has preceded them in Lucretius.

In certain respects common sense led Lucretius to some good results, as, for example: to the acknowledgment of "the everlasting sequence of cause and effect" (p. 67); to the recognition of free-will (p. 68); to the assertion that "nothing can come out of nothing" (p. 68); and to the conclusion that "through undisturbed vacuum all bodies must travel at equal speed though impelled by unequal weights" (p. 67). And although he attributes the creation of the world to chance (p. 91), he nevertheless says: "It is

* References to Lucretius are to the prose translations of R. E. Latham in the Penguin series.

in the highest degree unlikely that this earth and sky is the only one to have been created. . . . You have the same natural force to congregate them in any place precisely as they have been congregated here. You are bound, therefore, to acknowledge that in other regions there are other earths and various tribes of men and breeds of beasts" (p. 92). For Lucretius, all these conclusions follow from common sense.

But what else seems to follow from this same common sense for this philosopher? Here are some examples: that the same sort of atoms make thin air and blazing sunlight (p. 63); that "the universe was not created for us by divine power" (p. 65); that some atoms travel faster than sunlight (p. 64); that the universe has a bottom and there is thus a motion of atoms in an upwards and downwards sense in the universe (p. 66); and that the mind, spirit, and body of man all compose a single corporeal substance (p. 100), which is mortal (p. 108).

The student of philosophy must acknowledge that all serious philosophers of modern times are very well aware of this appeal of Lucretius to common sense and of its failure. The fact remains that while the serious study of philosophy demands that each individual search for a criterion of true knowledge, it is not an easy study and often leads to what might very well be called uncommon sense.

Swedenborg's philosophy has been called too difficult by some. It is true that it is difficult. In discussing methods, Swedenborg defines what he calls the analytic and synthetic methods. In so doing, he speaks of the synthetic method as the "angelic way" (*Rational Psychology*, 1949 ed., p. 2); that is, to reason from genuine principles, or from things prior to things posterior. But before this method can be used, the philosopher "must proceed by the analytic way" (*ibid.* pp. 2, 3); and to accomplish this he makes use of "all the sciences, both philosophical and physical" (*ibid.* p. 3). "Hence it is clear," Swedenborg concludes, "how important it is that we strive after true principles; and this never can be done save by the posterior way, being the way of the senses, of experience, of the sciences, and of the arts. These are human and they must be learned" (*ibid.* p. 4).

If it is true that philosophy is difficult and that difficult philosophies have erred, it is just as true that the example of Lucretius warns the philosopher that common sense is not free from error

either. The philosopher—and this is every man in his serious moments of thought—painfully and with difficulty searches for the knowledge he can trust.

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PREFACE TO THE INFINITE

You here see philosophy reasoning upon the infinite and the soul, yet using the most familiar words and a humble style, and endeavoring to divest herself of the aid of metaphysical terminology; and this, lest any obscurities or sublimities of expression should cause the mind to dwell upon words, and turn it aside from things and the subject. When any high theme is treated of, a vigilant care should be exercised to avoid the minutest expression that can make the reader pause. We have, therefore, been anxious to present our philosophy under the simplest aspect, and in a guise in no way different from the familiar speech of the world.

Philosophy, if it be truly rational, can never be contrary to revelation: that is to say, if the rational principle partake of the soul more than of the body: or the reason arise from no gross corporeal instinct, whose end it tends to realize, forming the soul by use and exercise for perpetual obedience and consent thereto. Reason or understanding is a faculty partaking both of the soul and the body, whose end is, to enable the soul to be instructed through the body and its organs, that afterwards it may dispose all things in such an order and connection, and call them forth with such distinctness, that a rational principle may be the result. The end of reason can be no other, than that man may perceive what things are revealed, and what are created: thus the rational cannot be contrary to the Divine; since the end for which reason is given us, is, that we may be empowered to perceive that there is a God, and to know that He is to be worshiped. If reason be the mean, endowed with the faculty and power of perceiving, and if the actual perception be the end, then the mean, in so far as it is correctly rational, cannot be repugnant to the end. The very mysteries that are above reason, cannot be contrary to reason, although reason is unable to explain their grounds. But of these subjects we speak in the following Work.