

PHILOSOPHY: WHAT FOR?

Federico Ferro Gay

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When Leibniz died, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, he thought he had lived in "the best of all possible worlds". He naive optimism was due to the full confidence drawn from the philosophical achievements of the preceding century and shared by all his contemporaries. Such confidence increased after Leibniz's death and reached an incredible level in the nineteenth century becoming a superb self-confidence with immutable beliefs and rocklike stability even in a century of tension, change, and upheavals so great that even today we are struggling to adjust to them. Being rationalist, these philosophers attributed most of men's mistakes to ignorance, which is remediable, rather than original sin.

This way of thinking remained dominant for many years. Even Marx maintained that science could guide the continued progress of man by supplying the correct answers to all social questions. As a result, in the past century a double tradition has come into being in philosophy. One tradition tries to maintain and demonstrate the inevitability of progress and combines with it the belief that human nature and the physical universe conform to simple laws that can be discovered by science. The other tradition takes into account a new human predicament produced by the new conditions of life that man faces in the scheme of progress, urbanization, anonymity, and the general rootlessness of modern life. Added to this is the absence of God and the anxiety produced by loneliness. All these factors contributed to man's feeling of alienation.

While both these central trends in nineteenth century philosophy had the common denominator of confidence that science would create new possibilities of redeeming the world, a counter-movement was growing out of Dostoevsky's attack on science and technology. The followers of this opposite viewpoint held hostile attitudes toward science as a cognitive enterprise. This was due to their lack of confidence in the effectiveness of scientific methods for the solution of economic, political, and social problems. The new emphasis this movement proposed was to turn away from "objectivity" and toward "subjectivity" and to address man as an individual rather than as a member of an organized society. It should be noted that their interest in the self was not to consider man as a knower, but as a chooser, as a decider. In other words, these philosophers held that one becomes truly a self not in the neutral contemplation of a truth, but in the passionate commitment to deeds.

The representatives of this counter-movement (Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, for instance) were hardly taken into account in their own times and have generally been scornfully considered until our times. There was a favorable occasion when these thinkers seemed to represent something. Nazi efforts to exterminate the Jews, the American nuclear attacks on Japanese cities, the repeated failure to resolve conflicts by peaceful means, and other facts of World War II drew men's attention

forcefully to facts about human nature that earlier generations had ignored. Under these circumstances, the dominant philosophy of reasonableness and progress began to appear naive in the face of the fact that scientific progress enabled the destruction of man and his world. The "spiteful man", as Dostoevsky described him, seemed more accurate than any other model.

The philosophy of this counter-movement condemned the culture that produced such alienation and estrangement. By emphasizing inwardness, it taught that becoming a complete self is much more important than trying to improve one's environment. Such an attitude has been present in any human crisis since the death of Alexander the Great. In such conditions, man has always turned to the individual self because of the feeling of distrust toward any organized means of survival.

The conditions described above have not disappeared. On the contrary, they have become worse. When mankind apparently recovered from the greatest disaster of this century, the Second World War, other insanities appeared to weaken even more his general condition. In philosophy, two movements reflect this condition: a new sophistic movement, and a return to scientific optimism.

In the first case, as in the Fourth Century, B.C., some brilliant skeptic philosophers have penetrated the context of our crisis in order to perform the ancient task: "To make the weakest argument the strongest one". Their practice was and is absolutely pernicious. By making the small appear great and vice versa there is never an attempt to give a basis for the truth, only an attempt to manipulate appearances. It is the struggle to seem right at any cost. For the ancient and new sophists all value is dissolved in the word and its adequate use, not in ideals, not in praxis, not in action. By consequence, there is no authentic progress (because all criteria have disappeared in the crisis) but only the perfection of skills in convincing others of opinions concerning persons and immediate interests.

The new wave of sophists which have invaded our civilization has produced a collapse which appears irremediable. The new sophists are probably less brilliant than their classical predecessors but are much more efficient. Today they have the weapons of ideological institutions and prudently employed science. This science is not to humanize but to serve interests and to eliminate people.

These pseudo-thinkers are fascinated with change. Unfortunately, these new Sophists would convince us of the value of false and apparent changes which are not constructive. Change ought to be accepted only when it presents itself in right dimensions; when it takes place not only in the ambiguous brilliance of words, but in deep essential action such as the transformation of societal structures or people.

This is certainly another kind of alienation: alienation from responsibility. Those individuals who sit at the feet of the Sophists in rapt attention are frustrated and alienated. This situation entails a double aspect, the sophist and his victim. The sophist knows perfectly well the illusions of change which certain interests need to propitiate. He understands, in detail, the confusion and the sequence of falsities this change has produced and instead of facing the crisis with serious-

ness moves through an inner skepticism and creates any amount of sophisms with the unique intent of surviving in a crashing society and allowing him to keep his leadership and a relatively quiet existence. Among his victims, the most tragic is a symbol of our time: the man who suddenly gets involved in sophistry to the extent of doubting about the rightness of all his existence.

On the other side, there is a return to scientific optimism. A new kind of scientism, however, which refuses to take into account the classical problems of philosophy under the pretext that only science has problems. As Moritz Schlick puts it:

There are no specific "philosophical" truths which would contain the solution of specific "philosophical" problems, but philosophy has the task of finding the meaning of all problems and their solutions. It must be defined as the activity of finding meaning.<sup>1</sup>

This, of course, is a reformulation of the significance of all the philosophical activity now defined as a logical analysis of the language we use to record and transmit our knowledge.

This new position implies an attack on metaphysics in the sense that science has no interest in explaining things: it is sufficient to describe them. The proper job of the philosopher is, therefore, reduced to an analysis of the methods and the language of the scientist so as to give scientific knowledge a rigorous logical presentation free from the illusions of hidden purposes and unknown realities. This view then, is opposite of a classical task of philosophy, pursuing synoptic accounts of experience and presenting general views of the progress of our civilization.

What remains of the traditional philosophical problems can be explained in another quotation from Schlick:

The fate of all "philosophical problems" is this: some of them will disappear by being shown to be mistakes and misunderstandings about our language, and others will be found to be ordinary scientific questions in disguise. These remarks, I think, determine the whole future of philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

The last part of this quotation contains a prophecy which, unfortunately, is going to be realized if philosophers do not react to this kind of estrangement. I say "unfortunately" because if the only task of philosophy is that which I tried to describe above, its performance is no longer justifiable.

The analytical tradition has performed an invaluable function with respect to science, for there are difficulties produced in philosophy by the improper uses of the language. However, this should not be the disciplines unique scope, not even its most important function. The reason is that any philosophical system always involves action. Man is

not only a knower, he is also a decider. Theories are only the framework for decisions and any decision, of course, implies action. We cannot remain neutral in a world where the slightest action is much more important than the best theory. If we fail to take into account such kind of philosophical behavior, we should certainly fall into the logical contradiction of "choosing not to choose".

Philosophy is not only an analysis of the language used by science in order to describe facts, it is also a critical enterprise. This critical conscience is based on Socrates' famous sentence according to which "The unexamined life is not worth living".<sup>3</sup> The examination of life, to which the great Greek philosopher devoted most of his life and for which he was willing to die, includes all the axiological and social aspects of philosophy and such aspects should appear at different levels in the philosophical activity.

In a general sense, it should result in another more fruitful relationship between science and philosophy. In the analytic tradition, philosophers only distinguish pseudo-problems from real problems. Science should be made to face our most tormentous and immediate problems, and help in solutions, or at least, in diminishing their huge proportions.

Russell once said that if science has not been able to abolish poverty, exploitation, and war, it is because it is not desired strongly enough. What "Keeps evil in being" is the fact that "We have less desire for the welfare of our friends than for the punishment of our enemies".<sup>4</sup> I think that the second part of Russell's affirmation should be applied to the false philosophers of change we have called "New Sophists". Their constant verbal struggle in demonstrating the superiority of their ideas about change and refuting opposite positions have impeded coordinating efforts necessary to make a real human progress possible.

This new relationship between science and philosophy should also reduce the distance one can observe between scientific and technological progress and human advances. Previously, the possibility of taking advantage of the discoveries of science and its technological applications was diminished for a lack of education, or for having missed a proper evaluation of the good uses of science. Thus, society suffered a progressive despair.

What has thus been said neither implies a regress to obscurantism or a misunderstanding of the important role science has played in the progress of mankind. It is not a return to subjectivism, only an appeal to human consciences in order to consider science as more than oversimplified as applied to human problems.

This particular kind of action should reflect its efficiency in any kind of organization devoted to philosophy. Any department or school of philosophy should reveal its presence in the university and community to which it belongs by becoming their critical conscience. If not, all the blame we receive in the sense that our activity is useless, merely speculative, or worse a state of parasitism, would be right. In many cities (and ours is not an exception) the presence of the philosophical organization is hardly noticed. There is no moral or physical link with the community. (Philosophy of liberation may be an only exception, yet it occurs only at an individual level.)

Philosophical societies, especially international ones, should perform a wider service. How? According to our friend and colleague, Professor Archie Bahm, in a letter to Professor André Mercier:

Since many international political conflicts are caused by conflicting underlying philosophical presuppositions, and probably can be resolved only by resolving conflicts in underlying philosophical presuppositions, responsibility for exposing, examining, clarifying and evaluating in terms of inconsistencies and other theoretical deficiencies rests with philosophers as those most competent to deal with such presuppositions.<sup>5</sup>

And he adds later:

If world crises can be resolved by resolving or reducing conflicts in underlying presuppositions, not only will mankind be helped, but also philosophy, still insisting on remaining an ivory-tower profession, could then demonstrate genuine practical usefulness to mankind.<sup>6</sup>

André Mercier's answer, through the Report to the Committee Director to the General Assembly of FISP ("the most complete philosophical organization in the world" according to the Secretary General) was the following:

FISP will not launch projects which can be called applied philosophy, i.e., philosophy which seeks to spread certain views or doctrines with political purposes. FISP can intervene with its moral authority in case of injustices to individual philosophers, groups and associations.<sup>7</sup>

(And Professor Bahm points out: "But not to mankind".)

I quoted our colleague's argument "demonstrating that philosophers are responsible for helping to solve world crises" and the answer he received (that his charge was completely ignored and misunderstood), only because it reflects the real attitude of what we could call "official philosophy". This attitude shows an impressive estrangement from real problems and from efficient accomplishments of the philosophical tasks. Describing such tasks as "a political intervention" demonstrates the assembly of philosophers in a world congress do not want to face the only responsibility which could justify their activity.

The situations described throughout this paper show that alienation is still the most important and difficult problem philosophy has to fight to solve. The problem surfaced in the long centuries of the collapse of classical culture when the idea of there being a "human predicament" gradually emerged. It reflects the sense of insecurity and pessimism with which man had come to look at this world. It grew in Marx's time in a depersonalized, deanimated and demythologized universe. Alienation was seen in socioeconomic and psychological terms as the estrange-

ment of the worker, life in an industrial and capitalistic society, alienation from self, from fellow man, and from man's work. Alongside this, subjectivist philosophers uncovered and denounced man's sense of loneliness in an indifferent or even hostile universe. Dostoevsky's underground man is a powerful example of this sense of alienation.

Two others kinds of situations have magnified the problem. These being the new sophists with their apparent solutions and the return to optimism in science. Alienation is still efficiently at work. The new sophists may successfully estrange men from their sense of responsibility and morality by pushing them to a miserable condition of why-should-I-worry or reducing everything to a verbal game. Also, the restricted role of philosophy in relation to science may impede a full cooperation in the use of the latter and cloud the meaning of progress in its strictly human sense.

Because of all these considerations, I think that philosophers should reflect once more on the words Marx wrote when he tried to establish a task for philosophy:

It is the task of history...to establish the truth of this world. The immediate task of philosophy, which is in the service of history, is to unmask human self-alienation in its secular form, now that it has been unmasked in its sacred form.<sup>8</sup>

If we do not take into account this responsibility as men and as professionals of philosophy, it will not be long before we can see an accelerated march toward nothingness.

#### NOTES

1. Schlick, Moritz, The Future of Philosophy, The University of Pacific Philosophy Institute Publications in Philosophy, 1932, p. 58.
2. Ibid., p. 60.
3. Plato, Apology, 38a.
4. Russell, Bertrand, The Impact of Science on Society, Columbia University Press, 1951, pp. 51-59.
5. Bahm, Archie, J., Letter to André Mercier, Sept. 11, 1978.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Marx, Karl, Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right (London: C. A. Watts, 1963), p. 44.