

Traditional Philosophy

THIS article is in large part based upon a reading of an essay on philosophy, religion and art, by Horace M. Kallen, entitled "Value and Existence." Those who care to read the essay will find it in a collection in book form of eight essays on the "Pragmatic Attitude" in modern philosophy, published by Henry Holt and Co., New York, under the title "Creative Intelligence."

Each essay is written by a specialist from the point of view of his particular department of thought, the leading essay being by Professor John Dewey, chief spokesman in America for the so-called new Pragmatism. This school, whatever its worth, at least appears to have rejected the idealist illusions of Bergson in favor of a materialist basis as a starting point in their philosophy. So far so good.

Traditional philosophy is a difficult, and, to many workers, an unfamiliar subject, and one which, in addition, they may consider as having no bearing on the revolutionary struggle. In truth, the study of philosophy has never been popular with so-called practical minds because, on the surface it appeared to drag a long and lengthening chain after the practical affairs of a work-a-day life. And other readers, regretful of what they regard as mis-spent time, may with old Omar mourn:

"Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and Saint, and heard great argument
About it and about: but evermore
Came out by the same door wherein I went."

Nevertheless, my plea must be that the winds of old doctrines still circulate among us, to the prejudice of a sane and scientific approach to the solution of social problems. To the Tentmaker's disciples of today, and to others who may decry the discussion of philosophy and like abstract subjects, I will quote Joseph Dietzgen from the opening paragraph of his essay on "Scientific Socialism."

Says he, " . . . yet I beg (you) to consider whether it is not as valuable to engage the more advanced minds and to gain qualified thorough-going comrades as to strive for great numbers by publishing popular articles. Both these aims, I think, should be kept in view. If the party is really of opinion that the emancipation from misery cannot be accomplished by mending particular evils but by a fundamental revolution of society, it necessarily follows that an agitation on the surface is inadequate and that it is moreover our duty to undertake an enquiry into the very basis of social life."

In his essay Professor Kallen only discusses the initial and fundamental impulses of philosophy, religion and art in relation to the general social situation out of which they arise. The subsequent history of the adventures of philosophic and religious thought, the forms which they take on, the various systems into which they have been erected under the influence of the industrial and institutional character of society, do not enter into that phase for discussion. We are thus taken to the heart of the problem and provided with a criteria; a point of approach for reviewing traditional philosophy in general, or any of its particular systems.

Philosophy, as is religion, is a social fact, and like the latter receives its impulse from complete social situations. It is this fact that gives to the philosophers of various periods their social significance, and also, that they in turn, reacting back, influence the course of events. They have thus served as among the causes which determined the subsequent history of philosophy.

In this world man finds himself in an environment, social and organic, of which change, the arch-enemy of a life which struggles for self-preservation, is the one unchanging law. A part of this environment constantly menaces him and frustrates and obstructs the realization and expression of his propensities, while another part is utterly

indifferent, though potentially hostile, to him. Bound to earth by the chains of necessity, positive as well as negative evils encompass him; repression, hunger, pain, disease and death wait on him to the end of his day. In repugnance to this material environment, winged imagination takes flight; repressed instincts, propensities, emotions, feelings and desires find expression in compensatory ideals (which Professor Kallen terms value forms). These ideals are expressed concretely in religion, philosophy and art.

In religion we find man's compensatory ideal in the promise of another world after death where all the things of his heart's desire, of which he has been cheated in this world, are to be realized.

Religion's handmaiden, traditional philosophy, evolved the conception that the things of the world were only "appearances" behind which was the real "reality," spirit, God, vital spark, or the absolute, of which, experienced phenomena were only the material manifestations. Thus the mind, confronted by the perplexing menace of the variation of experience which complicates existence, reconstructed the environment and came to rest in the conception of unity of the world; or, in other words, behind the changing, alien materiality, was conceived a spiritual unchanging world where the soul of man would feel at home through all eternity. Such a world is a better world when it is conceived as of the same stuff as the spirit of man, for the mind is more at home with mind than with things. Religion, which has fought against the elimination of the devil and his works from the cosmic scheme, was giving expression to this trait of the mind, for no horror can be greater than utter alienity of nature. The humanization of Evil into Devil mitigates Evil and improves the world. Unity, spirituality and eternity are the "value-forms" which the philosophic tradition gave to man.

But philosophy also promised more. Out of these forms evolved other compensatory ideal values. In order to gratify deep instinctive desires, philosophy enunciated the preservation of individuality by the means of "immortality" and "freedom." Fear, which made the gods, made also the immortality of man. Professor Kallen considers it most probable that the fear of death, at least among civilized peoples, springs from unsatisfied hunger of the living rather than a condition of the dead, who, alive would have satisfied this hunger. The will for self-expression, obstructed in the world, conceives the soul's potentialities as actualized in immortality.

A few words on the "freedom of the will" by Professor Kallen, who thinks this last value-form may be the inspirational basis of all the other forms.

"The primal significance of the ideal 'freedom of the will,' he says, 'has been obscured by the Christian controversy of its problem of 'free-will' and the entanglement of this ideal with the notion of 'responsibility.' For the Ancients the free man and the 'wise man' were identical, and the wise man was one who all in all had so mastered the secrets of the universe that there was no desire of his that was not actually realized, no wish the satisfaction of which was obstructed. Now freedom and wisdom in this sense is never a fact, and ever a value. . . . Freedom, then, is an ideal that could have arisen only in the face of obstruction to action directed toward the fulfilling and satisfying of interests. It is the assurance of the smooth and uninterrupted flow of behavior; the flow of desire and fulfillment, of thought into deed, of act into fact. It is perhaps the most pervasive and fundamental of all desiderates (compensatory ideals), and in a definite way the others may be said to derive from it and to realize it. For the soul's immortality, the world's unity and spirituality and eternity, are but conditions which facili-

tate and assure the flow of life without obstruction. . . ."

"Is any proof necessary that these value-forms are not the contents of daily life? In fact, experience as it comes from moment to moment is not one, harmonious and orderly, but multifold, discordant, and chaotic. Its stuff is not spirit, but stones and railway wrecks and volcanoes and Mexico and submarines, and trenches, and frightfulness, and disease, and waters, and trees, and stars, and mud. It is not eternal, but changes from instant to instant and from season to season. Actually, men do not live forever; death is a fact, and immortality is literally as well as philosophic discourse not so much an aspiration for the continuity of life as an aspiration for the elimination of death, purely immortality (not death). Actually the will is not free, each interest encounters obstruction, no interest is completely satisfied, all are ultimately cut off by death.

"Such are the general features of all human experience, by age unwithered, and with infinite variety forever installed. The traditional philosophic treatment of them is to deny their reality, and to call them 'appearance,' and to satisfy the generic human interest which they oppose and repress, reconstruct an imaginative world of generalized value-forms and then to eulogise the reconstruction with the epithet 'reality.'"

We live in an age of transition and "idealist" philosophy; traditional or modern is in full career towards disintegration because the social situation out of which it arose is passing away. Only among those to whom the fruits of labor come bounteously without labor or knowledge of productive processes: only among them and their parasitic or servile following does it still linger on as fit apologetics for the great game of "something out of nothing." Modern science, its method and the result of its labors in all fields of knowledge, perhaps most notably in biology, together with the application of scientific knowledge for useful ends known as technology, in the mechanistic processes of modern production since the industrial revolution, are influences which are moving prosperously forward to complete control of the mind of the coming age. The circle of those coming under these influences grows ever wider and wider, and those affected by them possess a range of principles and preconceptions utterly alien to the metaphysical fundamentals of both religion and "idealist" philosophy.

In a future issue, I may deal with the nature of the principles and preconceptions induced by the new social situation, and with the outlook on and social phenomena held by those whose minds are possessed by them.

C. S.

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