

CERTAINTY AND THE SECULAR WHICH DO WE WANT - PHILOSOPHY GROUNDED IN THE SUBJECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS OR ON OBJECTIVE SOCIAL ANALYSIS?

Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios

If you ask a western philosopher : “what is the task of philosophy?”, one can expect today two types of answers:

(a) Philosophy is “the analysis and criticism of received social, scientific and religious statements, and the reconstruction of principles and categories indispensable to correct theories or sound policies of action.”¹

(b) Philosophy is the integrating vision of reality and its coherent interpretation.

The latter, which is also generally the Indian view, is however becoming a view very difficult to sustain, for three reasons:

(1) Such an undertaking requires the integration of all available knowledge; the expansion of human knowledge in the present century has been so vast as to preclude the possibility of any one mind, even with the aid of a most sophisticated computer and information retrieval system, integrating it all into a coherent pattern;

(2) Even if one mind could coherently comprehend all knowledge, the knowledge by itself is not capable of yielding categories and principles by which to integrate it and extract therefrom the meaning of the whole.

(3) Modern science is far from sanguine about the objective givenness of the world. It was only classical physics that could think of ‘Nature’ as a deterministic system subsumable under deterministic

1. This particular definition is taken from Andrew J. Reck, “Wilmon Shelon’s Philosophy of Philosophy” in *Tulane studies in Philosophy*, Vol. VII, on the *Nature of the Philosophical Enterprise*, Tulane University, New Orleans, 1958, p. 111.

laws. Quantum Physics does not see causality and determinism as universal; the universe is a system indeed; but only partly determined; in large part it is a system of possibilities, with a high degree of indeterminacy.

Does this situation lead inevitably to a total abandonment of the larger philosophical enterprise in the west? Not really, Certainly even today the west is more productive than the East in generating new philosophies. But an examination of these new systems or types of philosophy will reveal some clear differences between the philosophical enterprise as we understand it in east and as they conceive it in the west.

If one take a survey of western philosophy today, the only current speculative systems we can find are the closely inter-related systems of Bergson in France and Whitehead in the U.S.A. These two ways of philosophizing fall within the category of modern philosophy only in the sense that they pay a great deal of attention to modern scientific and cultural data. But they are different from other systems of philosophy in their boldness in using the speculative method which is practically forbidden by the scientific tempo of the age. This was certainly one reason why the acutely empiricist outlook of Anglo-saxon philosophy has chosen to ignore both Bergson and Whitehead. We will come back to some comments on their philosophy later on, along with some others of a similar kind. Of course Neothomism remains an openly religious philosophical system.

The prevailing schools of philosophy in the west other than, Neothomism, Bergson and Whitehead are of live types.

a) Philosophies which may be broadly classified as Existential, e.g. Heidegger, Sartre, Marcel, Jaspers.

b) Phenomenological systems - e.g. Husserl, Meinong Merleau - Ponty, Brentano.

c) Linguistic analysis: Moore, Wittgenstein, Ayer, Carnap, Warnock, Urmson, Austin and so on.

d) Structuralism: Levi-Strauss, Lucien Goldmann, Roland Barthes, etc.

e) Marxism: This is still vital and growing, despite western affirmations to the contrary, both in western Europe and in the socialist countries.

This does not take into account more restricted philosophical endeavours like new developments in the Philosophy of Science, the Philosophy of Language, Hermeneutics, or Aesthetics. Nor does it do justice to the largely inarticulate philosophy of western civilization which has its roots in Pragmatism and Utilitarianism. Perhaps one should also mention among current western philosophical systems the whole new search for a 'Style of Life' and a 'Quality of Life', connected with the environmental crisis now facing the industrialized societies.

What impresses one when one looks at almost all of these systems or ways of philosophizing is the attention and respect they pay to the scientific method and to the content of scientific knowledge. One could almost say that the most decisive element in modern philosophy is its attitude towards modern science in both method and content. And an examination of the roots of this attitude may prove illuminating.

The Quest for Certainty

The Western tradition developed fairly early - during that Golden Age of the Spirit which gave birth to Buddha as well as the Vedas and Upanishads, the Pre-Socratics as well as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, Lao-tsu, the West Asian sages like Moses and Elijah, Christ and Mohammed, and many unsung and unhonoured spiritual heroes of all climes and cultures.

If Tagore was right in that beautiful insight,² it was the same Indo-Aryan peoples who developed the unitive-synthetic vision of the Indian Sages and the descriptive analytic systems of ancient Greece. As the ancestors of the Indo-European peoples came down from the heights of the Caucasus, those that crossed the Indus faced the vast woodlands of Aryavarta and sought to *synthesize* the spreading complex in which they could roam and wander freely; those that went to the small and crowded Greek peninsulas had to analyse,

2. R. Tagore, Sadhana, *The Realisation of Life*, Macmillan, 1913, pp. 3 ff.

measure and chart their world, to build city-states. Thus they developed two different attitudes, the one primarily unitive, the other, primarily analytical.

But not exclusively. Our Indian philosophers were just as keenly analytical in their thought as any sophisticated western mind. One cannot accuse a Sankara or a Panini of simpleness or muddle-headedness. All our Lokacharyas were also analytical minds, second to none in the world in the clarity and precision of their conception and articulation as well as in their category structure.

And how can we call either Socrates or Plato an exclusively analytical mind? Certainly Plotinus was highly synthetic and unitive as any Oriental!

None of us are really exclusively one or the other. One of the most fascinating fields of research in that analytically inclined western world is Brain Research. And there we have some interesting discoveries which have significance for philosophy itself.

While it may not be pertinent here to give a full account of this new field of research,³ it is useful to point to just one aspect of it.

The brief reference here is mainly to a new field of research in Biology called Hemispheric Asymmetry in Human Brain Function. The scientific material is in the Bulletin of the Los Angeles Neurological Societies (BLANS). No. 34 of 1969, which gives the third of a series of articles - this one called "The other side of the Brain III, the Corpus Collosum and Creativity" by J. E. Bogen and G. M. Bogen. A more comprehensive presentation is in Robert E. Ornstein (Ed), *The Nature of the Human Consciousness*.⁴

The main point is that biological experiments have now revealed a basic asymmetry of function between the two inter-connected hemispheres of the human brain controlling cerebral cortical function.

3. For such a survey I recommend Marilyn Ferguson, *The Brain Revolution, The Frontiers of Alpha Research*, Bantam Books, New York, 1975. The particular aspect I discuss here, however, is not in that book.

4. New York, The Viking Press, 1973.

One (the right) is more intuitive, unitive, and the other (the left) is more analytical. The right hemisphere perceives wholes, while the left registers details, pursuing linear analytic rationality.⁵ This corresponds in some ways to the two halves of the Indo-Aryan migration - the Athenian and the Bharatiya.

Perhaps the Athenian, the analytic-discursive, line has been over-developed, and human beings trained in the Western system of education, (which I understand is followed in this institution as well, despite its being a centre of Bharatiya culture), develop one side (the left) of the brain in an unbalanced way. How will we get the other side of the brain, the right side which is a dreamer, a perceiver, a seer of visions, with the capacity to see wholes rather than detailed parts, to catch up with the left side, so that our human vision is more truly human?

The two Poles of Knowledge - the Subjective and the Objective

In any case, the west has gone far on the analytic path, practically neglecting the holistic and the intuitive-synthetic. And as they have proceeded further on that road, they became feebler and feebler in their capacity to have holistic visions. And as they progressively lost sight of the transcendent in which this world is grounded, they had to ground their certainty in an analysis of either the ‘objective world’ given to consciousness, or of the ‘Subjective world’ of consciousness itself.

One can see almost all modern western philosophical systems as attempts to find certainty either through systematic, careful detailed analysis of the subjective consciousness (phenomenology) or of a more feeling-and-will generated subjective determination (Existentialism) on the one hand, or on the other a meticulous analysis of some part of external reality (in this case, human language, as in Analytical Philosophies) or of the whole of external reality (modern Structuralism, which will be discussed later, and Marxism).

5. For a fuller description see Solomon Katz, “Toward a New Science of Humanity” in *Zygon*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (March 1975), pp. 12-31.

Thus we see five out of the eight different dynamic systems of modern western philosophy trying to ground themselves in either subjective consciousness (Existentialism and phenomenology) or in an analysis of external reality (Linguistic Analysis, structuralism, and Marxism). The three other systems which are more speculative, i.e. Neothomism, Whiteheadian Process philosophy and Bergsonian or Teilhardian duration philosophies are different from these precisely in terms of a heavier dependence on a religious tradition.⁶

The Three Pramanas

In India traditionally we have always held the *pramanas* to be three, *Pratyaksha*, *Anumana* and *Agama* or *Sabda*. In fact the same three principles are acknowledged also in European Medieval Scholastic Philosophy, though not quite clearly enumerated as three. These three *pramanas* or principles corresponded also to the three fundamental realities to be known - the world was intuited as *pratyaksha*, the self supplies the *anumana* and God or *Easwara* or *Brahman* is known by *Agama* or *Sabda*.

Just as there is an ascending hierarchy of being between world, humanity and God, the three *pramanas* also have an ascending order of superiority, *Pratyaksha* comes from the senses, *anumana* coming from reason is above that, and *agama*, or *Sabda* comes above all.

This hierarchy of principles was often used by religious leadership to affirm their own superiority since they are the custodians of the highest principle, namely scripture and tradition. This leads quite often to society dominated socially and economically also by the priestly class as happened in Medieval Europe, as we see in India during certain periods of our history.

The Rise of Secularism

France is one place where we can observe the transition to the present situation most perceptibly. 1789 made a difference to world

6. This dependence is less obvious in both Whitehead and Bergson, compared to Teilhard de Chardin. But the dependence in both cases is not difficult to establish.

history, but the French development is a clear paradigm of what happened to the whole European quest for intellectual certainty.

The situation before 1789 was one of strict ecclesiastical control of both institutions and thought patterns. As Alex Vidler of Cambridge put it:

“The clergy were a privileged class. The Catholic Church had no rivals, for since the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, Catholics alone had the right of citizenship. The clergy had their own courts, and marriage was under ecclesiastical control. The Church possessed immense wealth and property, which was exempt from taxation. It had a monopoly of education and care of the sick.”

The Church thus controlled both philosophy and Science as also health, education and welfare. Remember this was the Age of Reason, but the Church had sought to control that Reason, despite the Encyclopaedists and Voltaire and Rousseau who all mocked the church.

So when that authority structure finally collapsed with the French Revolution, and after the brief Napoleonic inter-regnum, the Third Estate, the bourgeoisie, i.e. the professionals, commercial interests and bankers, took over power from the previous alliance of clergy - nobility, and both thought and institutions were secularized. European educational, sanitary, economic and political institutions were developed in this context by a basically anti-religious bourgeoisie, and it is this that we have also inherited through the British in India.

Science and Technology as we now have it, developed in this anti-clerical, anti-religious milieu and bear its marks. They deal with only two realities - Man and World, and use only two *Pramanas*, *Pratyaksha* and *Anumana*. The missing reality is God, which was till then regarded as basic to the other two realities. But now it became an unnecessary hypothesis in the Laplacean sense. You could make sense of reality without dealing with something called God or using a

7. Alex R. Vidler *The Church in an Age of Revolution*, Pelican, 1961, p. 12.

pramana such as Revelation or Tradition or *agama* or *Sabda*.

Certainty without Revelation

Having inherited such a civilization which was dichotomous rather than trichotomous in both the number of aspects of reality and in the number of principles to be used, it was clear that certainty could no longer come from religious faith. The only methods of seeking certainty were (a) to make a meticulous analysis of the knowing process and to ground certainty in the conscientious use of the process or method or (b) ground all certainty in strict correlation with the external world, empirically given. This is the ground of certainty in Science and Technology gives the pragmatic proof of certainty to the discoveries and to the conclusions of Science.

Western Philosophy has thus only two options. If dogma and metaphysics are ruled out, if theology and tradition are relegated to the status of an archaic interest, what is left is a certainty grounded in an analysis of the individual consciousness and its knowing process, and or in a meticulous analysis of the external world or some manageable part of it. In Existentialism, the attempt was to set aside altogether the fundamental questions about objective reality as a whole, and to be concerned only about the experiencing subject. Not only was there a retreat from knowledge of the external world, but even from knowledge itself, concentrating more on feeling and will than on Intellect.

This was understandable in the days of the French Resistance against occupying Nazi troops. When you are put in jail or in a concentration camp, and can be shot or gassed today or tomorrow or ten days hence or not killed at all, there is no use looking for certainty anywhere in the external world, since that world is totally unpredictable, depending only on the caprices of the Nazi officer commanding the prison or camp. The only way was to find certainty by accepting the facts of death and meaninglessness, and make a resolution within the subjective will and feeling not to break down in face of the uncertainty of the external world. Existentialism arises and becomes popular in a context where the preceding unity and harmony of the external world have been suddenly lost, where no

certainly can be found in the every day world from which one is deeply alienated. The aim is liberation from attachment to and dependence on that external world, by grounding one's certainty in the decisions of the subjective ego, irrespective of what goes on in the outside world.

That situation, where the Danish Kierkegaard of a century before was miraculously restored, where an Orthodox Berdyaev and a Catholic Marcel could join hands with an unbelieving Sartre to create a movement of de-alienation called Existentialism, is now past in France. They have now arrived at some stability in the external world, an economic stability which they did not have in the immediate post-war Europe; stability through economic progress with the aid of science, technology and a little skillful exploitation of the ex-colonies of Africa. In this situation of new-found socio-economic stability, one can afford to go beyond the extreme individualism of Existentialism, and try to create a new philosophy like Structuralism. Man is not "condemned" to an "absolute freedom." Man need not be afraid of the reflective ego with its cogito as Sartre was, and need not try to go into the pre-reflective cogito of direct awareness. One can now afford to know and control external reality which provides sustenance. That is what Science and Technology are there for. The reflective posture of the social scientist and the anthropologist, the rational mind which organizes and computes, is not so alienating as one thought. Even if they alienate, they bring affluence, and that is all right.

But is it not too much of a jump, from the "absolute freedom" of Existentialism, to the almost absolute determinism of Structuralism, where the effort is meticulously and carefully to analyze and label the various components of reality in their identity and in their structural relations, and to put them together into a unitary structure? Is not the Social Scientist and the Structuralist treating human society as a colony of ants or bees?

Not at all, says the structural-anthropological philosopher. But he does not believe that total meaninglessness is the structure of reality, as the Existentialists seem to affirm. There is meaning, and if there were no meaning at all, there would not be language. There is the

word, the sign and the symbol. They mean something. They point to realities beyond themselves. The signified and the signifying are not the same thing. There is a science called “Semeiology” or the discourse about meanings. Hence Levi-Strauss’s words in the closing chapter of *Structural Anthropology*,⁸ that “Anthropology aims to be a semeiological science and takes as a guiding principle that of ‘meaning’.” Structure does not annihilate freedom any more than words and their precise meanings and grammar annihilate freedom in language.

The reality of life is social and not merely individual. It is objectively structured and not merely subjective. The freedom of the individual cannot be absolute. It receives shape and meaning through structure and form. Freedom and structure are not two realities, but different aspects of one coherent pattern. In fact structure itself is a product of freedom, because it is a creation of the human spirit in seeking to comprehend reality as an ordered whole.

The fight in France today is a three-cornered one - Existentialists trying to hold a line against sweeping anti-individualist currents, Marxists coming back with various forms of Marxism (Russians would call nearly all of them Revisionist) and Structuralists taking bits of Existentialist activism and Marxist class thinking and putting a structural frame on them to make their philosophy the last word.

The great Structuralists are three - Claude Levi-Strauss (born 1908), Lucien Goldmann (born 1913) and Roland Barthes (born 1915) - all past 60 today. The three have different backgrounds and interests. Levi-Strauss is a cultural anthropologist; Goldmann is a literary critic and sociologist; Barthes is a ‘Semeiologist’, i.e. a scientist who deals with signs and their meanings.

Their common effort is to create a ‘poetic cosmography’ a world which is faithful to the details of reality and at the same time vibrant and dynamic in its structure; Structure is what humanity contributes to reality. It is wrong to bracket Structuralism with political conservatism or philosophical Scientism. It is related to the computer

8. New York, Basic Books, 1963.

culture and the modern mathematics of *systems analysis* but not a wooden computerized understanding of social reality. It is an ambitious appeal to humanity to give meaning to social existence by dreaming up the right kind of structure.

It is interesting to consider the fact the Structuralism has the same ancestry as Linguistic Analysis. Both go back to the Prague Circle (formed March 1925) which was the parent of the Vienna Circle which on English soil gave birth to Linguistic Analysis.

Sartre has today largely abandoned his existentialism and has become more out-and-out Marxist, fighting Structuralism with Marxist Dialectical Reason. But neutral experts like Jean Piaget have certified that the differences between Marxist constructionism-historicism and the Structuralist quest to construct a structure which helps to remake historical society, are not so great. In any case, the anti-rational, purely subjectivist Existentialism is now on the wane. French philosophy is moving away from the Cartesian kind of solipsism to a vision of reality grounded in an objective social analysis of the external world, structurally and historically conceived.

This swing of the pendulum between individual consciousness on the one hand and meticulously analyzed perception of social reality on the other seems to indicate the only two options for a philosophical approach that feels with only two aspects of reality, Man and World, and uses only two principles - sense - experience and reason. All the five approaches - phenomenology and existentialism on the one hand, and Linguistic Analysis, Marxism and Structuralism on the other suffer from this limitation of subject - matter and method.

Bergson and Whitehead, as I have stated, represent a different line. They speculate on the basis of *Sabda-pramana*, but do not acknowledge the *pramana*. They do not ground their certainty either in the subjective consciousness or in the rational analysis of the external world. Bergson, if anything, is anti-positivistic. Neither did he like Kant very much.⁹ Kant was again the father of this method of seeking to ground certainty in an analysis of the knowing process

9. Madeleine Barthelemy-Madaule, Bergson, *Adversaire de Kant*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1966.

(*Critique of Pure Reason*). Neither did Bergson care for the Evolutionary Method of Spencer, which sought to find Spirit in Nature, but without a notion of time which was an essential aspect of nature. It is this time, which we experience as duration (*duree*), which constitutes the experience of the Absolute *sub specie durationis*. Positivism eliminates time and therefore the Absolute. To recover time by the 'simple act' of experiencing is already to go beyond the relative to the absolute. But the Catholic Bergson has an Oriental streak in him, drawn from Plotinus the Neo-Platonist and the Christian Fathers. So has the Anglican Whitehead; and precisely for this reason their philosophies came in conflict with the scientific tempo which wants to eliminate both the Absolute and the *Agama* or Tradition.

Teilhard de Chardin is on the same line as Bergson and Whitehead, only more explicit in affirming his dependence on the Christian tradition. And for that reason the Empiricist-rationalist tradition of the Anglo-saxon and French world pay but scant attention to any of them.

So the quest continues - to ground certainty in either the subjective consciousness or on objective social analysis. But uncertainty gnaws at the entrails of western man. The taboo against asking the fundamental questions about reality, which is the question about its ground and source, will remain operative even in the university so long as the authority of Tradition or Revelation remains unrecognized and has to be smuggled into philosophy secretly. There is neither being nor knowledge except from the ground of all being and all knowledge. But a secular atmosphere even in a university founded with generous assistance from religious institutions, precludes the possibility of serious research into the ground of being or the nature of revealed knowledge. This secular atmosphere which once provided the freedom for knowledge to emerge from the Tutelage of religion, becomes today an oppressive element both in society and in the university. This oppression has yet to develop to the point where science and Technology as well as the university as an institution can be enlisted in the struggle for release from that oppression.