

Lesson 3: A Glance at the Course of Philosophical Thought

Lesson 3: A Glance at the Course of Philosophical Thought (In The Last Two Centuries)

Objective Idealism

As was indicated earlier, after the Renaissance, no stable philosophical system came into existence, but rather different philosophical schools and views constantly have been and are being born and dying. The number and variety of schools and “-isms” has increased since the nineteenth century. In this brief overview there is no occasion to mention all of them, and we shall merely provide a brief mention of some of them:

After Kant (from the end of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century) a number of German philosophers became famous, whose ideas more or less found their source in the thought of Kant. They sought to compensate for the weak points in his philosophy by using mystical sources, and although there were differences among their views, what they had in common was that they began from an individual viewpoint and paid heed to the explanation of being and the appearance of multiplicity from unity in a poetic way, and they were called “Romantic philosophers”.

Among them, Fichte, who personally was a student of Kant, was extremely interested in free will, and among the views of Kant, he emphasized the fundamentality of morals and practical reason. He said, “Theoretical reason observes the system of nature as necessary, but within ourselves we find freedom and a desire for voluntary actions, and our consciences design a system that we must attempt to realize. Hence we must consider nature to be subordinate to the ego, and not independent and unrelated to it.”

It is this tendency towards freedom which drove him and other romantics such as Schelling to accept a kind of idealism and the fundamentality of the spirit (a characteristic of which was considered to be freedom). This school of thought was further developed by Hegel, and it took the form of a relatively coherent system of philosophy, and was called objective idealism.

Hegel, who was a contemporary of Schelling, imagined the world to be the thoughts and ideas of the absolute spirit, and that between them [the spirit and its thoughts and ideas] there are logical relations rather than causal relations, as held by other philosophers.

According to Hegel, the course of the appearance of ideas is from unity to multiplicity, from the general to the specific. At the first level, the most general idea, the idea of being, is posited, from within which the opposite, i.e., the idea of nothingness, emerges.

Then they become mixed and take the form of the idea of “becoming”. Becoming, which is the synthesis of being (thesis) and nothingness (antithesis), in its turn is posited as a thesis, and its opposite appears from within it, and from the mixture of them a new synthesis occurs.

This process continues until it reaches the most specific of concepts. Hegel called this threefold (triadic) process “dialectic”, and he fancied that this was a universal law for the appearance of all mental and objective phenomena.

Positivism

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Frenchman Auguste Comte, who is called the father of sociology, founded an extreme form of empiricism called positivism, whose basis was limited to that which is given directly by the senses, and from one perspective it was considered the opposite of idealism.^{[1](#)}

Comte even considered the abstract concepts of science that were not obtained from direct observation to be metaphysical and unscientific. He even went so far as to consider metaphysical propositions to be basically absurd and meaningless words.

Auguste Comte held that there were three stages of human thought: first, the divine and religious stage, which relates events to supernatural causes. Second is the philosophical stage, which seeks the cause of events in invisible substances and natures of things. Third is the scientific stage, which instead of looking for the reason why phenomena occur, deals with the question of how they occur and their interrelationships, and this is the stage of positive science.

It is strange that he at last confessed that religion is necessary for man, but he set humanity as its object of worship. He considered himself to be the messenger of this creed, and he set up rituals for individual and group worship.

The creed of the worship of man, which is a perfect example of humanism, found some followers in France, England, Sweden and in North and South America, who formally converted to this creed and established temples for the worship of man. It influenced others indirectly in ways that cannot be mentioned here.

Rationalism and Empiricism

Western philosophical schools are divided into two general groups: rationalist and empiricist. An obvious example of the first group in the nineteenth century is the idealism of Hegel, which even found followers in Britain; and the obvious example of the second group is positivism, which is still current today.

Wittgenstein, Carnap and Russell may be considered supporters of this school of thought.

Most of the divine philosophers have been rationalists, and most of the atheists are empiricists. Among the minor philosophers was McTaggart, who was a British Hegelian and an atheist.

The proportionate relationship between empiricism and the denial or at least skepticism regarding metaphysics is clear, and it was such that the progress of positivist philosophies was followed by materialist and atheistic inclinations. The lack of strong competitors on the side of the rationalists prepared the ground for the prevalence of such inclinations.

As was mentioned, the most famous of the rationalist schools of thought during the nineteenth century was the Idealism of Hegel. Despite its attraction which was a result of its relatively coherent system, its breadth, and its capacity for looking at problems from different perspectives, it lacked a strong logic and firm reasoning, and it was not long before it became the subject of criticism even by its own adherents.

Among them there were two kinds of simultaneous but different reactions in opposition to it, one of which was led by Søren Kierkegaard, a Danish cleric, the founder of existentialism, and another was led by Karl Marx, a Jewish born German: the founder of dialectical materialism.

Romanticism, which appeared to justify human freedom, finally took the form of an inclusive philosophical system in Hegelian Idealism, and it introduced history as a great fundamental process that advances and progresses on the basis of dialectical principles. In this way it deviated from the basic course, for on this view, the individual will lose its fundamental role. Hence, it became subject to much criticism.

One of those who severely criticized the logic and history of Hegel was Kierkegaard, who emphasized individual responsibility and the free will of man in his own self-construction. He considered the humanity of man to be due to an awareness of individual responsibilities, especially responsibilities toward God, and he said that it is closeness, nearness and relation to God which makes a man human.

This tendency which was supported by the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, led to the appearance of existentialism. Thinkers such as Heidegger and Jaspers in Germany, and Marcel and Jean-Paul Sartre in France adhered to this sort of philosophy from different perspectives, theistic and atheistic.

Dialectical Materialism

After the Renaissance, when philosophy and religion in Europe went through a crisis, atheism and materialism more or less came into vogue, and in the nineteenth century, some biologists and physicians such as Vogt, Buchner, and Ernst Haeckel emphasized the fundamentality of matter and the denial of metaphysics, but the most important materialist school of philosophy was that founded by Marx and Engels.

Marx took dialectical logic and the fundamentality of history from Hegel, and materialism from Feuerbach, and he considered the economic factor to be fundamental to social and historical changes, which he supposed to take shape according to dialectical principles, especially on the basis of opposition and contradiction. He introduced the economic factor as the cornerstone of all aspects of human life, and he considered all other aspects of culture and society to be subordinate to it.

He held that the history of man has various stages, which begin with the first level of primitive communism then passes through the stages of slavery, feudalism and capitalism until it reaches socialism and the government of the workers, and at last leads to communism, that is, the stage in which ownership is completely abolished and there will be no need for any state or government.

Pragmatism

At the conclusion of this brief review, let us take a glance at the only philosophical school of thought brought about by American thinkers, at the threshold of the twentieth century, the most famous of whom is William James the renowned psychologist and philosopher.

This school, which is called pragmatism (i.e., the fundamentality of action) considers a proposition to be true which possesses practical use. In other words, truth is a meaning constructed by the mind in order to obtain more and better practical consequences.

This point has not been explicitly proclaimed by any other philosophical school, although its origins may be found in the words of Hume, according to which reason is considered the servant of human passions, and limits the value of knowledge to its practical aspect.

The fundamentality of action in the mentioned sense was first presented by the American Charles Peirce, and then was developed into a philosophical propensity by William James, a propensity which found adherents in America and Europe.

James, who called his way radical empiricism, differed with other empiricists about how to determine the realm of experience. In addition to outward sensory experience, he included psychological and religious experience. He considered religious beliefs, especially the belief in the power and mercy of God, to be useful for mental health, and for this very reason, true.

He himself suffered a mental breakdown at the age of twenty-nine, was cured due to his attention to God, and His Mercy and Power to change man's destiny. For this reason, he emphasized prayer and supplication, but he did not consider God to be absolutely perfect and infinite, but rather, he imagined that there was also progress for God, and that basically, the lack of progress is equal to stagnation and is a sign of imperfection.

The root of this extreme and aggressive progressivism can be found in some of the words of Hegel, including his introduction to *The Phenomenology of Mind*, but more than any, Bergson and Whitehead recently emphasized it. William James emphasized free will and its creative role, and in this respect he was of like mind with the existentialists.

A Brief Comparison

With this brief glance at the course of man's philosophical thought, in addition to becoming acquainted with a short history of philosophy, it has also become clear how after the Renaissance Western philosophy has gone through ups and downs, and how tortuous has been its course, and at the present time it is shaking with contradictions.

Although from time to time subtle discoveries are made by some of the philosophers of those lands, and very precise problems are posed, especially regarding knowledge, and likewise, although enlightening flashes shine from some intellects and hearts, no stable and powerful philosophical system has been brought about.

Illuminating intellectual points have not been able to design a well-founded straight line for thinkers, but rather disorders and disturbances have always and continue to govern over the philosophical atmosphere of the West.

This is different from the state that has governed Islamic philosophy. For Islamic philosophy has always followed a straight and thriving way, and with the existence of tendencies which from time to time have appeared, it has never deviated from its main course, and various subordinate tendencies are like the branches of a tree which grow in different directions and have added to its growth and flourishing.

It is hoped that this progressive course with the efforts of religious thinkers will continue in this way so that the other dark environs may be enlightened by the illuminating rays of its light to release lives from aimless wanderings.

¹. Earlier this sort of philosophy was proposed by Saint Simon, and the roots of this thinking may be found in Kant.

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