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MONTHLY LETTER

Devoted to Spiritual and Philosophical Problems -- by Manly P. Hall

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Dear Friend:

The fifth department of Philosophy is termed Epistemology, and is devoted to the essential nature of knowledge itself. It is the province of Epistemology to distinguish between absolute and relative truth, and to examine the validity of the premises upon which the assumption of knowledge is based.

The existence of an absolute knowledge to be comprehended by any individual entity is a mooted problem. Man is a partially evolved animal creation, enjoying certain animal extensions of consciousness, but also circumscribed by certain animal limitations of consciousness. The human organism has achieved to no ultimates of refinement, therefore—is it possible for a structure, itself greatly limited, to serve as the medium for the transmission of final perfect conclusions? In other words, is an imperfect man capable of perfect wisdom?

There are at least two sides to every question. Epistemology may be approached from several angles. To the inspirationalist, man is capable of at least momentary extensions of consciousness beyond the normal limitations of his organic quality. Such

flights of realization are denied by the rationalist who maintains that each man's perception is limited by the quality of his perceiving part.

To the average person it might seem that the rationalist has the better of the argument, for there is a certain reasonableness in his conclusion. But the inspirationalist is also supplied with an admirable amount of supporting testimony. He can advance numerous incidents of illumination and transcendental extension of consciousness to support his contention that, by a certain divine dispensation, some men perceive a fuller measure of the Universal Plan than is accorded to the average individual.

Nearly all of the world's greatest philosophers have been hesitant to approach the problem of ultimate knowledge. The wisest men of all time have approached wisdom with the realization of their own unworthiness. There is considerable concord among the sages in this respect. Buddha refused to discuss the nature of divinity, declaring the glory of First Cause to infinitely transcend the human capacity to understand. Confucius acted upon the same premise. Mohammed attempted no detailed

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"Teach me today, my Father, to forget the worries and wrongs of yesterday. Help me with a clearer mind and conscience to remember the duties and responsibilities of today. May thoughts of love, cheer and happiness crowd out all of the disappointments that went out of my life with the setting of yesterdays sun."

interpretation of the Universal One, Its substance, or Its activities. Socrates declared the examination of the divine attributes to be singularly unprofitable. "To define God is to defile God" summarizes the Classical approach.

As the ancients regarded Deity as identical with wisdom, and coeternal with the principle of truth, their attitude towards Epistemology can be inferred from their attitude towards God and First Cause.

While it was pretty generally accepted that the finite cannot grasp the Infinite, it did not necessarily follow that man was incapable of extending his consciousness beyond the limitations imposed by the animal existence. In the ancient Mysteries, inspiration inferred an extension of consciousness, but not necessarily a grasp of ultimates.

Thus a man may become relatively all-knowing and yet be comparatively ignorant when estimated in terms of Absolute truth. Plato was one of the wisest men who ever lived; his intellect greatly exceeded that of the ordinary man. This does not infer however that Plato possessed absolute knowledge, or that his consciousness extended beyond the vista proper to man. Plato died with the books of Sophron under his head. He died studying. His quest for knowledge was identical with the impulse to live. His complete dedication to the achievement of wisdom was rewarded by a high measure of mental excellence. Yet Plato himself would have been the last to even infer his own perfection. The wisdom which he possessed probably revealed to him most of all the vastness of Truth and the incapacity of the human mind to ever comprehend it.

Epistemology opens an interesting field of operative philosophy. It explains the failure of science to accomplish the high measure of good which knowledge and skill should accomplish. Epistemology points out that the scientist himself is the weakest element in science. The numerous delicate instruments which man has evolved as aids to human research have small intrinsic virtue. Their value lies in the aid which they give to limited human perceptions. The scientist uses these instruments to bridge the interval between himself and the universe. With the microscope he unites his consciousness with the infinite diversity of minutiae; with

the telescope he diminishes the optical distance between himself and the star. The laboratory with its numerous delicate mechanisms is itself an apology for the evident insufficiency of man. Sad to relate, intricate machinery cannot think. Although it can contribute a certain measure of increased vision and comprehension, it is only useful to the degree that it supports a consciousness and a rational intellect.

If the measure of what we think with is the measure of what we think, then the scientist himself is the vital factor in science. All the progress of science must be measured by the intellectual progress of the scientist.

Some of the East Indian systems of philosophy have evolved intricate theories concerning the substance of knowledge. These theories are neither truly inspirational nor rational, but belong to a curious metaphysical positivism. These premises involve: The acceptance of a supreme, unchanging, unconditional, eternal state of Truth, identical with spirit and God—all terms regarded impersonally. This Absolute knowledge, though undefinable to the concrete perceptions, has at least the limitations of permanence and unchangeability. Metaphysically speaking, it is qualified by the condition of "being." Thus it may be approached as having certain distinct boundaries. Or, men may depart from the fullness of it, thus inferring that it possesses condition.

In the Eastern systems of Absolutism, it is regarded as possible—through the annihilation of personality, individuality, and all moral, mental and physical polarity—for the human being to achieve union and identity with Absolute Truth, through special metaphysical disciplines.

While this viewpoint may seem to differ entirely from Western concepts of Epistemology, the differences are more imaginary than real. The Eastern mystic does not presume that the imperfect mind of man is capable of thinking perfect thoughts. He surmounts the difficulty by ceasing to think, and permitting Universal Wisdom to flow through him. Thus the mind cannot know Universal Wisdom by itself, but may serve as an instrument for the perpetuation and manifestation of that which trans-

cends itself. Thus, for example, the horse probably has no understanding of the purposes of the man who rides or drives it, but still the horse is an instrument for the achievement of the man's purposes. It cooperates even without understanding.

This is not only good Eastern metaphysics; it is excellent Christian theology. In the days of ecclesiastical glory, what Christian would have dared to presume that he understood either God or the Cardinal? Other men might question why; his duty was to do and die. Religion, it seems, has always assumed that men could be instruments in the accomplishment of divine purpose, although the substance of that purpose transcended their estimation. Thus, the prime requisite of religious well-being was faith, not only in the substance of things unseen but in the truth of things unproven.

To the rationalist faith is the acceptance of the undemonstrated or the undemonstrable. Thus, faith assumes the presence of a Divine Plan behind world affairs, remonstrating this plan by recourse to history, which undoubtedly reveals in no uncertain terms the ultimate triumph of virtue over vice and justice over injustice. The rationalist, though perfectly willing to accept history and to acknowledge the necessity of certain codes of human relationships, denies that these demonstrate any absolute wisdom at the root of life. He offers as a substitute human behaviorism, with its biological and psychological chemistries. To the rationalist, therefore, the circumstances arising from human action may be accepted not as consequences of absolute law but merely as relative conditions arising from human characteristics.

The inspirationalist dominated ancient and medieval thought, but the rationalists, realists and neo-realists predominate in the modern school. There is always a question as to whether realism increases in an industrial era, or whether an industrial era increases during an age of realism. In our opinion, philosophy must precede practice, for individuals do not proceed along lines inconsistent with their preferences or beliefs.

To the Darwinian type of thinker, mind grows up with man, and there is no intellect in the universe apart from or superior to evolving material

creatures. Civilization is the socializing of the human mind. Industrialism, the industrializing of the human mind. The experiments of culture are the mind groping for reasonable courses of action, and mind coming of age in man. This all sounds well, and the realist is rather proud of his euphony and his dictum.

The inspirationalist, conversely, following the Orphic and Platonic tradition, perceives mind as a super-essential principle which has existed in a perfect state throughout all eternity. Thus, man grows up to wisdom. Wisdom does not grow up in man. By certain courses of thought and action, the individual elevates himself to union with the various attributes of reason. Inspirationalism infers a monarchy of mind; rationalism a democracy of impulses. The universe, to the rationalist, is governed by a parliament of opinions; mind makes the law. According to the inspirationalist, the world is governed by a hierarchy of divinely enlightened Beings make the man.

The Platonic doctrine of Ideas postulates the unfoldment of life according to certain patterns or archetypes established in the Divine Mind. According to this doctrine, the processes of evolution are molding the universe into a likeness which has existed for uncounted ages in the universal consciousness. The doctrine of Ideas may certainly be interpreted as signifying that progress is moving towards an already existent goal. True, this goal is materially intangible. But, as an end towards which all life is moving, this goal becomes worthy of the most profound consideration.

Plato's theory of Archetypes would certainly justify the development of Epistemology as a practical department of philosophy. If Epistemology could only establish the prophetic import of archetypes it would solve one of the greatest problems of human existence—namely, destiny. To the Middle Academicians, destiny was more than merely culminative. Destiny did not depend entirely upon the accident of action. Law determined the end; man only devised the means to the accomplishment of that end. If the doctrine of Archetypes is accepted and justified, a tremendous field of speculation is opened.

Accepting a certain natural consistency through-

out Universal action, it would follow that nature would contain numerous Archetypes—patterns of numerous purposes. Quite in accordance with such a doctrine, the Cosmos may be regarded as being Itself the objectification and fulfillment of a vast Archetype in which the perfect relationship and ultimate state of all beings are already clearly defined. This ultimate state and perfect relationship of all natural organisms and their consequences, might be regarded as constituting a body of absolute fact, absolute wisdom, and absolute law, beyond which no recourse is conceivable.

Most of the great Mystery Schools of the older world held opinions consistent with the Platonic idea. They taught growth by intent and not by accident. They envisioned man growing into a destiny which had been prepared for him while the worlds themselves were being formed. PROGRESS WAS A MOTION TOWARDS CONSISTENCY WITH ARCHETYPES. Man became nobler and more illumined as the interval between himself and the pattern of his perfection grew less. To the Greeks happiness was peace between man and his pattern. If an individual lived in a manner utterly inconsistent with the archetype of his species, that man suffered from an inharmony set up by this inconsistency. It is not what a man does that causes him to suffer—it is the inharmony between what he does and what he should do that causes suffering.

If we regard Absolute knowledge as the perfect comprehension of the pattern or Idea of being, then Epistemology determines the measure of man's ability to perceive the purpose of himself. We cannot agree with the materialist, or the behaviorist, that progress is achieved solely through the accumulation of actions and attitudes. Yet presuming that a purpose-pattern actually does exist, how can the average individual become aware of it? By what disciplines and developments can man distinguish the true reason for himself and segregate the real values of his life? If Epistemology is directly concerned with the intrinsic factors of knowledge, it must be equally concerned with the use-value of such conclusions as it may reach.

Having thus briefly summarized some elements of the philosophy of knowledge as generally considered, let us now approach the matter in a more

esoteric manner. Let us try to discover what Epistemology means to the student of mystical philosophy who desires to use all the tools of wisdom in the perfection of his character.

In the initiations of the Dionysians, man is represented as composed of a confused mixture of spiritual and material elements. The human form was molded from the blood of Bacchus and the ashes of the Titans. By the blood of Bacchus was inferred the spiritual life principle, and by the ashes of the Titans the elementary substances of the inferior or material world.

The ancients expressed this in the simple formula: form is a compound arising out of the mingling of spirit and matter. All forms must necessarily contain a certain proportion of spiritual and material agencies. It is decreed by the Universal Archetype that in the ultimate the spiritual part of each form must increase in domination over the material parts, until spirit or consciousness transmutes matter into soul, and finally absorbs even the soul itself so that only spirit remains, triumphant over the illusions of inferior nature.

Such a doctrine presupposes that the spiritual part of man is itself an aspect or fragment of the Divine Spirit and the Divine Mind. As the Divine Nature includes among its attributes Absolute wisdom, it would follow that the divine part of man is itself all-wise and all-knowing. Socrates and his pupil Plato both accepted this tenet as the key to human salvation. Socrates did not believe that any man could be taught inasmuch as all men contain within themselves a divine wisdom which cannot be increased. Education therefore, as the word itself originally inferred, is a process by which wisdom is drawn out of man.

Every man's true teacher is his own higher Self, and when the life is brought under the control of reason, this higher Self is released from bondage to appetites and impulses, and becomes priest, sage and illuminator. Plato expressed the same idea in the words: learning is only remembering.

Plotinus, the great Alexandrian neo-Platonist, regarded the higher spiritual nature of man as a more or less complete individuality, an Over-Self. In our

(Continued in Supplement)