The True Purpose of Philosophy

William Blanchard*

*Iowa State College

Copyright ©1946 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
The True Purpose of Philosophy

William Blanchard

Abstract

SINCE the first stirrings of human thought man has sought something in life beyond pleasure and the satisfaction of his biological needs. When man has reached the highest stage of pleasure, he still retains the impression that somehow this is not enough...
The True Purpose of Philosophy
William Blanchard

SINCE the first stirrings of human thought man has sought something in life beyond pleasure and the satisfaction of his biological needs. When man has reached the highest stage of pleasure, he still retains the impression that somehow this is not enough. He has an inner feeling that the top of one stage of development (the enlargement of physical and mechanical progress) is only the groundwork for a higher and greater stage.

Spinoza expounded this desire to look beyond everyday existence as follows: "After experience had taught me that all the usual surroundings of social life are vain and futile, I finally resolved to inquire whether there might be some real good having power to communicate itself which would affect the mind singly, to the exclusion of all else, of which the discovery and attainment would enable me to enjoy continuous, supreme, and unending happiness."

This development of learning began with solitary thinkers such as Socrates and Plato who first began to seek knowledge in a different manner than by a mere collection of facts. They refused to accept the doctrines of their fathers and sought concepts of virtue and immortality which penetrated beyond the fanatical dogmatism of their contemporaries. Spinoza says in his "Ethics," "Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself . . . And perhaps . . . immortality is not the reward of clear thinking, but clear thought itself; such thought is immortal because every truth is a permanent creation, part of the eternal acquisition of man."

Slowly this new kind of knowledge called philosophy began to develop, taking more men into its scope, until it branched out into mathematics, chemistry, biology, physics, and the related fields. The various branches became too much to keep in one brain, and scholars began to specialize. They began gradually to perfect their particular field until many of them regarded philosophy as the dried and empty ovary from which the newer and more important seeds of civilized thought had sprung.
The universities and colleges, taking the cue, began to polish their education in the same manner: throwing out what was "not strictly necessary" until we have that triumph of education, the modern industrial college, which promises jobs instead of knowledge and trains men for the position of Chief Cog (or Chief Subordinate Assistant Cog) in the mammoth industrial machine.

The individual is taught to specialize, taught that he cannot make a living in a world of competition unless he devotes himself to one line of work. His sense of the eternal is frustrated by too great a demand for the immediate. If he makes any contact with philosophy, he usually finds that it is taught in the same manner as chemistry and physics: memorization of theories and men's names, concentration upon the logical steps to proving a theory instead of consideration of the worth of the theory from an objective viewpoint. A study of formal logic can teach a person of high I. Q. how to prove almost any theory in a most admirable manner—with words. But what relation has high I. Q. and clever word manipulation to good judgment?

When the normal individual feels the desire to expand, he is confused by the attitudes of those about him. Confused at first, perhaps, but as he is subject more and more to the ideas of those around him, his imagination loses its impetus and he takes refuge in religion or the banalities of human society.

The aim of philosophy, then, is to establish a sound foundation upon which the individual can build. The essential unity of the once formed philosophical mind is not easily scattered or confused. This unity, however, is usually difficult to achieve. The world has pounced upon the average individual before he recognizes a need for philosophy.

As a rule the individual is born into a world of creatures who insist upon talking babytalk to him and reserving their own language for each other. He begins his life by living and loving honestly and thinking (what ever tiny stirrings of thought he may have) clearly. Slowly the world begins to weave a net around him and draw him closer to the bosom of its conformity. He is told that there are rules by which he must govern his life and that people do not always mean what they say. When he tries to disregard the rules or simplify them according to his own needs he is either laughed at for a fool or frowned upon as a villain. The net tightens. He is told that he must grow up, learn a vocation,
earn money, get married, have children, and die. All with as little fuss as possible so that his children may grow up and do the same thing. At first he is resentful. He struggles violently, but the net is strong. Sometimes he rebels and leads a life of crime. Sometimes, as the net threatens to close in upon him, he finds his escape in the cool waters of a river at night, and those who would have wrapped him in the net mourn his death and weep for him.

Most of the time, however, he never escapes, but is taught to accept the net as the horse accepts his halter. Once in a while, perhaps, he finds an opening in the top of it and looks out. “Why should I obey the rules?” he says. “The worst that can come is death and that will come anyway. Is there a purpose in life and a mind behind the universe? Why not live my life the way I want to and hang the consequences?”

But soon his friends see him and notice the “bad” signs. Perhaps he has been working too hard. He is lonely, poor fellow. They slap him on the back, get out a deck of cards, look in the paper for the latest movie, turn on the radio in his ear, and laugh and shake his hand. Soon he is laughing, too, but when he goes back to look for the opening in the net, it is gone.

When man refuses to smile and shrug his shoulders at the net of human complexity he has made the first step towards philosophy. By obtaining a philosophical outlook the individual reaches that broadness of vision that carries him beyond the mere acceptance of circumstances. Nirvana is not the end of philosophy, but it is the basis upon which philosophy works and moves. Not that man may reduce his desires to nothing, but that he may regard his desires at their true worth. That he may use his desires and ambitions and not let them use him. That he may see clearly his own position with respect to human society and the material universe instead of fighting with pieces of it separately. That he may integrate science, music, literature, mathematics, history, and art, and see beyond them without leaping ahead into the aimless ramblings of wild speculation. That he may live, in short, as an integrated human being who understands the universe as much as it will yield itself to understanding and not as a mass of restless somatic cells tossed about by his immediate environment.

Few men have reached such a goal, it is true, but those who have managed to remain individuals despite the dissolving in-
fluence of the environment have gone on to build and shape the destiny of man. The peoples of the earth have destroyed beasts of prey, built cities, produced clothing and food, and provided comforts for themselves; but men like Spinoza, Christ, and Leonardo have looked beyond Homo sapiens as he appears to his fellows, with the idea that this simple, fumbling creature called man might have divine possibilities. All the real progress of civilization has been made by such men, though we all bask in its glory. Many have provided the pericarp, but the seed of civilized thought is small and fine.

* * *

Retribution
Meredith Jones

A Little Boy:
There's an old, old man lives on our street,
And his hair is white, like winter's snow.
He walks bent over, like his back is broke,
And he talks to himself in a voice so low
That ya scarce can hear when he passes by,
(Us kids know, 'cause we always try)
But when we see his scarred-up face, we run,
• 'cause it scares us so.

A House Wife:
There's an old, old man lives on our street,
And I certainly think it's a crime
How some folks will let their relations go
To rags, as if they hadn't a dime
To give them, if they're hungry or cold;
And this man seems so very old
That even a heart of stone would melt, after
a little time.

An Old Man:
There's an old, old man lives on our street,
Older than I with my eighty years.
His face is a mirror of hardship and trial;