

FUNCTION OF PHILOSOPHY

(Read at a symposium organized by the Department of Philosophy, University of the Punjab. The subject for the symposium was "The task of the Philosopher is not to interpret the world but to change it.")

I hold that the function of philosophy is to seek an understanding of man and his world, to disclose the significant possibilities of human experience and to project a vision of life and values. This vision is generated through imagination but is not made out of the imaginary stuff. It is in close contact with the world of fact that philosophic vision discloses the significant or realizable possibilities of experience, of collective human experience. To effect social change directly is not the task of a philosopher in modern sense of the term. A philosopher is essentially a man of vision and not a man of action. It is true that he is a child of his time, that he does not live in a social vacuum, but he is primarily a seeker after truth. Even John Dewey, who, true to his instrumentalism, is a great champion of reconstruction, refuses to assign such a role to the philosopher. In introduction to the enlarged edition of his "Reconstruction in Philosophy" he observes, "It has been charged that the view here taken of the work and subject-matter of philosophy commits those who accept it to identification of philosophy with the work of those men called "reformers"—whether with praise or with disparagement. In a verbal sense reform and re-construction are close together. But the re-construction or re-form here presented is strictly one of theory, of the type that is so comprehensive in scope as to constitute philosophy—One may hope surely that the theoretical enterprise herein presented will bear practical issue and for good. But that achievement is the work of human beings as human, not of them in any special professional capacity." (P. XII). Further I contend that philosophic vision is not to be confused with what Professor Blanshard describes as "the unprincipled indulgence of curiosity." Philosophy is not an exercise in sterile exhibition

of curiosity. It is an inquiry determined by an intellectual end, the end being an understanding of man and his world. In what follows I have contended (a) that ideas do influence social change, (b) that among the Greeks some schools of philosophy did lay emphasis on social change as the task of the philosopher—but the reason for that was the lack of specialization in various fields, (c) that the field of philosophy has been narrowed down due to the rise of sciences and that philosophy has been forced to surrender its areas and (d) that philosophy is not a competitor with science in certainty. Its function is to provide a vision—a vision of life and values, of possibilities of experience.

II

That ideas do influence social changes can hardly be denied. Just a look at the world-history will furnish strong evidence that some great social revolutions have been greatly influenced by philosophers. Political philosophy of John Locke played a great role in the American Revolution. In "Origins of the American Revolution". J.C. Miller observes : "If any one man can be said to have dominated that political philosophy of the American Revolution, it is John Locke. American political thinking was largely an exegesis upon Locke : and patriots quoted him with as much reverence as communists quote Marx today. Indeed, it is not too much to say, that during the era of the American Revolution, the 'party line' was John Locke". That the American revolution was in itself a great social and political change and further led to great upheavels in the socio-political patterns of people in different continents is a fact which can be readily assented to. Further it is well known how Rousseau was regarded, in the words of Saintsbury "with something like idolatory by the men of the revolution." The French Revolution had been inspired by the philosophical ideas of Rousseau. John Morley says of Rousseau "... it was his work more than that of any other one man that France arose from the deadly decay which had laid hold of her whole social and political system, and found that irresistible energy which warded off dissolution within and partition from without." Again in the twentieth century Iqbal's political philosophy

lies at the root of the great social and political revolution which resulted in the partition of the Indian sub-continent. The Qaid-e-Azam's Two Nation Theory was based on Iqbal's thesis that the identity of a people is determined by their religious and cultural affinity rather than by their racial or geographical unity. Iqbal denounced the Western concept of nationalism in unequivocal terms both in his poetry and prose writings and within a decade after Iqbal's death the state of Pakistan was formed on religious, historical and cultural basis despite the lack of linguistic and racial unity of the people and the want of geographical contiguity between the two provinces of Pakistan. Thus if we could rely on history the evidence is that philosophers do influence social changes. Examples of such social changes in the ancient world are not lacking. The subject of this symposium, however, pertains not to the indirect influence of ideas on social changes but rather one which seeks to limit the scope of philosophic activity to a direct one of effecting social changes. Before the advent of modern period little headway had been made in specialization in various fields, with the result that both interpretation and change constituted the function of philosophy. This is true of the Pythagoreans, the Stoics and the Neo-Platonists. Students of philosophy very well remember how Socrates laid emphasis on improving the morals of the youth by insisting on his famous maxim—knowledge is virtue. Right type of knowledge was a pre-requisite for right living. This was partly an attempt to meet the challenge of the Sophists who had in a way recommended that the task of the philosopher was not to interpret the world but to change it. The sophists were led to such a view on realizing the futility of answering the cosmological problems merely on the basis of a priori reasoning. Man, the individual man, was made the measure of all things, and this maxim was made the principle of Socio-political changes in the Athenian society. Plato rightly perceived the political and moral anarchism contained in the doctrine of the sophists and took upon himself the task of redeeming philosophy from skepticism. A balanced life in the shadowy world could be lived by a just man and only a just state could provide conditions for the rational soul to thrive. His experiment to found an ideal state failed but that was hardly Plato's function

as a philosopher. In the mediaeval period, philosophy was harnessed to theology and free thought was almost stifled. The courts of Inquisition could not tolerate differences of opinion on religious matters much less to permit the growth of independent thinking. With the Muslim Philosophers the task of seeking harmony between philosophy and religion had been of paramount importance. Starting from al-Kinidi down to Iqbal almost all muslim thinkers have shown great eagerness to provide a rational justification of the tenets of Islam. Their metaphysical systems exhibit a marked Islamic bias. Has religion exercised, on the thought of these thinkers, a sort of cramp or has it served as a foil to their systems is a debatable point. Al-Ghazali, it is true, broke away from this tradition of the philosophers but what he expounded was a sort of mystical metaphysics and a spiritual medicine for the ills of the soul.

III

Modern period has been marked by a series of retreats that philosophy has been forced to make. The fields that once belonged to philosophy have been surrendered to other disciplines. The connotation of philosopher has been narrowed down. It now includes the logician, the linguist, the epistemologist and those who theorise about what is called "the essential nature" of the universe. Philosopher in the old and wider sense includes the social and political theorist and even the natural scientist. This has been necessitated by the rise of sciences. Philosophizing both for the rationalists and the empiricists in modern period was an exercise in introspection. "cogito ergo sum" of Descartes is as much the result of psychological analysis as is Locke's assertion that all knowledge comes to us through experience. Kant's later statement that "although all our knowledge begins with experience it does not follow that it arises out of experience" is an inference from the introspected self. Thus whether the philosophers talked about the Substance or about the origin of knowledge their philosophic activity was an exercise in introspection. Hegel's Absolute Idea, the Blind Will of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche's Will to Power all depend for their nature and character on analysis of consciousness of the finite individual.

Philosophers found themselves in quandary when at the turn of the century psychology forged ahead as an independent positive experimental science. Philosophy had to withdraw itself and leave the field of consciousness to psychology.

The problem of ontology with which traditional philosophy is concerned derives its significance from the assumption that reality is eternal, beyond time and space, perfect hence changeless. The task of the philosopher was to develop his rational faculty and have a synoptic picture of the whole. Muslim Philosophers especially those who were under the influence of Greeks were much concerned with such a function of philosophy. Their doctrine of Intellect worked on this hypothesis. Even the Sufis showed a marked tendency to develop a cognitive-cum-contemplative attitude towards Reality. Ghalib voiced this feeling when he said "I hanker after a leisure which gives me an opportunity to sit for long contemplating the Beloved".

It is against such an attitude of philosophers that Carl Marx observed "Until now philosophers have only interpreted the world differently, the point is to change it". Again John Dewey regarded such a conception of the function of philosophy as a "a source of the growing popular disesteem and distrust of its pretensions." Iqbal in a poem addressed to a young Sayed who is much impressed by the glamour of philosophy says :

The flame of thy love is without heat.
 Listen, it is a soul awakening point,
 Pure reason remains deprived of vision
 Philosophy is a going away from life.
 The dumb melodies of thought
 Serve knell to the urge for action.

This reaction, I think, is primarily directed against the exaggerated claims of absolute idealism of Hegel and Bradley. Iqbal stands for philosophy of action, preaches voluntarism in which reason appears as a close ally of will. He is dead set against the concept of a fixed unalterable universe in which man is merely a bewildered spectator, a seeker and not a creator.

Russell's work on mathematical logic and Ludwig Wittgenstein's emphasis on the need of paying deliberate attention to what can and what cannot be said eliminated metaphysics. The function of philosophy became reduced to one of linguistic analysis, of making clear the conditions which make an utterance significant or meaningful. From this point of view the task of the philosopher is to frame questions with no pretensions to finding any solution to those questions. Philosophy is not a science nor a governess of sciences as was thought by earlier thinkers. The new champions of this old discipline rejoiced in pointing out that metaphysical problems as entertained by philosophers in the past were mere pseudo-problems. The task of the philosopher is to show if a certain statement is significant or not. He is also to assist experts in other fields in clarification of their notions or statements. He has a negative function to perform as well and that consists in pointing out that metaphysical problems in the past were insoluble simply because they were language muddles ; traditional metaphysics was only 'bad grammar' and perhaps the present day philosophical analysis is nothing but "good grammar". The field of philosophy has been made both narrow and dry. The goal of philosophic activity from this point of view is complete symbolic formalization. And if this happens the only competent persons to philosophise will be mathematical logicians or logisticians. And they may withdraw from the class of philosophers as the psychologists have done. If this happens the field of philosophic activity shall have to be demarked anew. But one may pause and just ask: "Is Philosophy merely "good grammar" and nothing more".

Is the prospect bright if philosophy is released from, what John Dewey calls, "its burden of sterile metaphysics and sterile epistemology" and is made to concentrate on the task of reconstruction. The function of reflective thought, for Dewey, was control, "the control of nature and society in the interest of human progress". Philosophic ideas are "instruments for directing our activities, plans or programmes of action". The truth of ideas is their success, their falsity their failure. Instrumentalism of Dewey may be anything but is not true philosophy. Social utility is no criterion of philo-

sophic worth of an idea. Berkeley's reduction of matter to ideas had socially speaking an unhealthy effect on Dr. Johnson who was forced to kick away the ideas. Even socially useful ideas are in the beginning unacceptable to the group which resists change in any form. The operative values have a great hold on the emotional life of a group and it takes a group a long time to see the reasonableness of the new ideas. 'Philosophy harnessed to a social programme' says Professor Brandshard, 'is not really philosophy at all, since it has surrendered its freedom of logical movement.' Can we say that this reconstruction could be philosophically carried on in the realm of morals. But here we have sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists and economists who may despise our interference in their areas and may secede from our group. They have already seceded and have their own reliable methods for conducting research and inquiry into values and the problems of culture.

When all this is said and done and philosophy is driven out from her fields, there is no cause to despondency. There is one function which philosophy can profitably perform. It can guide the social sciences by projecting new visions of possibilities of experience of life and values. Existentialism though nihilistic is rich in vision. When an existentialist emphasises anguish, dread, contingent character of individual existence, he directs our attention to some very potent facts of human situation. His emphasis on authentic existence is an attempt to restore the individual his status as the moulder of his destiny. An existentialist tries to release the individual from the tyranny and burden of conventions and traditions. Sartre's statement "Man is condemned to be free" is a great vision of the possibilities of the being of an individual. He is not to be a useful cog in a very lively social machine as the Marxist philosophers would conceive him but a free agent capable of creating a new world.

Philosophy does not compete with science in certainty. "Great in vision, poor in proof, philosophy at its highest has been", observed William Pepperell Montague. It is, I think, a correct appraisal of philosophical inquiry. Iqbal's greatness lies in his ego philosophy. His emphasis on the "Rising note

of egoism" in the universe is an absorbing vision of the biological evolution of man. His *Mard-e-Momin*, perfect man, is the goal of humanity. The perfect man is to appear. He will create a society of perfect individuals. As a philosophical hypothesis it is of very great value. But if it is taken as a verifiable thesis it labours under serious defects. Philosophy, as I have said, does not aim at certainty. It suggests possible truths. Could Eugenics—a movement in genetics "which aims to improve the genetic endowment of human population by scientifically directed selection"—work out a programme for making the appearance of Iqbal's perfect man possible? Eugenics may not succeed but philosophy has done its job. Physics of today is metaphysics of yesterday. May we hope that metaphysics of today be science of tomorrow.