

The Relations between the Empirical and the Philosophical Study of Man

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It is desirable that there should be a "desegregation of knowledge" among the students of the several branches of natural science, including psychology, but this is by no means easy to accomplish, both because of the degree of specialization necessary to achieve competence in any one of them and because of the diversity of objects with which these fields of study deal.

It is just as desirable and perhaps even more so that segregation between the empirical sciences as a whole and philosophy should be done away with. The difficulty in this case is vastly greater, for besides the two obstacles that stand in the way of communication between physicists and psychologists, between chemists and anthropologists, there is a diversity of method between the activities of the student of the natural sciences and the one that seeks to know philosophically. The former investigates primarily by an inductive method that seeks to establish generalizations that will account for, or imply, the facts that observation discloses. The latter endeavors to order knowledge deductively by scrutinizing propositions that seem to him to be certain in order to discover what is implied by them. The scientist seeks to know how things are; the philosopher tries to find out how they must be or how they can be.

The difficulty is compounded when the philosopher concerned is an adherent of a realistic philosophy, such as scholasticism. The method of the logical positivist, which is akin to that of the inductive or experimental scientist, has a natural appeal to the practitioner of such a science. The logical positivist is willing to be silent until the scientist has spoken and then, as has been said, to tell him what he means. The realistic philosopher, including the scholastic, insists upon speaking about the very same things that the physicist or the psychologist deals with, and often comes up with answers to the questions proposed that at least seem to be in contradiction to the answers of the physicist or the psychologist. Perhaps one reason for this seeming diversity is a difference in vocabulary; the same words sometimes stand for quite different concepts in the propositions of the philosopher from those they stand for in the propositions of the scientist. It is altogether likely that the differences are often deeper than this, but the lack of a common nomenclature is a barrier to any understanding between the two groups.

It may very well be that logical positivism does form "the correct philosophical framework" and still that it is not the sole means of acquiring knowledge of the world and, as in the present discussion, of man. The methods of realistic philosophy, which purport to have means of acquiring a certain and not merely a tentative knowledge of some aspects of the world and of man, ought to be understood at least by the practitioners of the empirical sciences, just as the methods of the empirical sciences, including the presuppositions of logical positivism, ought to be understood by those that seek to explore reality by means of philosophy by another method.

Some propositions about which there could very well be disagreement between the psychologist that works within the frame of reference of logical positivism and the scholastic psychologist are the following:

The so-called laws of thought, contradiction, identity, excluded middle.

Every event has a cause.

Everything moved is moved by another.

Every agent acts for an end.

Man enjoys freedom of choice.

All men are created equal.

All and only rational beings have rights.

The human personality has absolute value.

Good is to be done and sought after, evil is to be avoided.

Man is a political animal.

All men by nature desire to know.

The exposition of the meaning of these propositions will not of itself convince anyone of their truth. But it would be beneficial if those that practice the empirical sciences should understand what the scholastic philosopher, who also considers himself to be a student of science, means when he enunciates such propositions, just as it would be a happy day when the philosopher should take pains to understand what the scientist is talking about. Conflict between these methods of study antedates modern times; it antedates the time of Galileo, and goes back to the time of Socrates and the atomists. Perhaps this conflict is irresolvable by the human intellect. It can very well be that no man is capable of seeing all aspects of reality in their entirety. As someone recently wrote: "Only God need know explicitly the connection between all possible faces of truth; for us they will always remain, to some extent, mysteries." (1) If this is so, however, it is not a reason why we should be deterred from trying, within the limitations imposed upon us as creatures, to come at least a little closer to mutual understanding, any more than we should be prevented from seeking to know as much as we can in our own fields by the realization that we cannot know everything about anything.

Literature Cited

1. HERZFELD, C. M. Science and the church. *Commonweal* 70 :201.