

On Philosophical Maps

On a visit to Leningrad some years ago' I consulted a map to find out where I was, but I could not make it out. I could see several enormous churches, yet there was no trace of them on my map. When finally an interpreter came to help me, he said 'We don't show churches on our maps.' Contradicting him, I pointed to one that was very clearly marked. 'This is a museum,' he said, 'not what we call a "living church". It is only the "living churches" we don't show.'

It then occurred to me that this was not the first time I had been given a map that failed to show many of the things I could see right in front of my eyes. All through school and university I had been given maps of life and knowledge on which there was hardly a trace of many of the things that I most cared about and that seemed to me to be of the greatest possible importance for the conduct of my life. I remembered that for many years my perplexity was complete; and no interpreter came along to help me. It remained complete until I ceased to suspect the sanity of my perceptions and began, instead, to suspect the soundness of the maps.

The maps I was given advised me that virtually all my ancestors, until a quite recent generation, had been rather pathetic illusionists who conducted their lives on the basis of irrational beliefs and absurd superstitions. [Even illustrious scientists like Johann Kepler or Isaac Newton apparently had spent most of their time and energy on nonsensical studies of non-existing things.](#) Throughout history, enormous amounts of hard-earned wealth were squandered to the honour and glory of imaginary deities - not only by my European forebears, but (011) by all peoples, in all parts of the world, at all times. Everywhere thousands of seemingly healthy men and women subjected themselves to utterly meaningless restrictions, like voluntary fasting; tormented themselves by celibacy; wasted their time on pilgrimages, fantastic rituals, repetitive prayers, and so forth; turning their backs on reality - and some actually still do it even in this enlightened age! - all for nothing, all out of ignorance and stupidity; none of it to be taken seriously today, except of course as museum pieces. What a history of error from which we had emerged! What a history of taking for real what every modern child knew to be totally unreal and imaginary! Our entire past, except the most recent, was today fit

only for museums where people could satisfy their curiosity about the oddity and incompetence of earlier generations. What our ancestors had written was also in the main fit only for storage in libraries where historians and other specialists could study these relics and write books about them. Knowledge of the past was considered interesting and occasionally thrilling but of no particular value for learning to cope with the problems of the present.

All this and many other things of a similar kind I was taught at school and university, although not in so many words, not plainly and frankly. It would not do to call a spade a spade, ancestors had to be treated with respect; they could not help their backwardness; they tried hard and sometimes even got quite near the truth in a haphazard sort of way. Their preoccupation with religion was just one of their many signs of underdevelopment, not surprising with people who had not yet come of age. There was, of course, some interest in religion even today which legitimised that of earlier times. It was still permissible, on suitable occasions, to refer to God the Creator, although every educated person knew that there was not really a God, certainly not one capable of creating anything, and that the things around us had come into existence by a process of mindless evolution, that is by chance and natural selection. Our ancestors, unfortunately, did not know about evolution, and so they invented all these fanciful myths.

The maps of *real* knowledge, designed for *real* life, did not show anything except things that allegedly could be *proved* to exist. The first principle of the philosophical map-makers (012) seemed to be 'If in doubt, leave it out', or put it into a museum. It occurred to me, however, that the question of what constitutes proof was a very subtle and difficult one. Would it not be wiser to turn the principle into its opposite and say 'If in doubt, show it *prominently*'? After all, matters that are beyond doubt are, in a sense, dead; they do not constitute a challenge to the living.

To accept anything as true means to incur the risk of error. If I limit myself to knowledge that I consider true beyond doubt, I minimise the risk of error but I maximise, at the same time, the risk of missing out on what may be the subtlest, most important and most rewarding things in life. St Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, taught that 'the slenderest knowledge that may be obtained of the highest things is more desirable than the most certain knowledge obtained of lesser things.'² 'Slender' knowledge is here put in opposition to 'certain' knowledge, and indicates uncertainty. Maybe it is necessarily so that the higher things cannot be known with the same degree of certainty as the lesser things can be known, in which case it would be a very great loss indeed if knowledge were limited to things beyond the possibility

of doubt.

The philosophical maps with which I was supplied at school and university did not merely fail to show 'living churches', like the map of Leningrad to which I have referred; they also failed to show large 'unorthodox' sections of both theory and practice in medicine, agriculture, psychology and the social and political sciences, not to mention art and so-called occult or paranormal phenomena, the mere mention of which was considered to be a sign of mental deficiency. In particular, all the most prominent doctrines shown on the 'map' accepted the possibility of art only as self-expression or escape from reality. Even in nature there was nothing artistic except by chance; that is to say, even the most beautiful appearances could be fully accounted for-so we were told-by their utility for reproduction, affecting natural selection. In fact, apart from 'museums', the entire map from right to left -and from top to bottom was drawn in utilitarian colours : hardly anything was shown as existing unless it could be interpreted as profitable for man's comfort or useful in the universal battle for survival. **(013)** Not surprisingly, the more thoroughly we became acquainted with the details of the map-the more we absorbed what it showed and got used to the absence of the things it did not show-the more perplexed, unhappy and cynical we became. Some of us, however, had experiences similar to that described by the late Dr Maurice Nicoll:

Once, in the Greek New Testament class on Sundays, taken by the Head Master, I dared to ask, in spite of my stammering, what some parable meant. The answer was so confused that I actually experienced my first moment of consciousness-that is, I suddenly realised that *no one knew anything ...* and from that moment I began to think for myself, or rather knew that I could ... I remember so clearly this class-room, the high windows constructed so that we could not see out of them, the desks, the platform on which the Head Master sat, his scholarly, thin face, his nervous habits of twitching his mouth and jerking his hands -and suddenly this inner revelation of *knowing that he knew* nothing-nothing that is, about anything that really mattered. This was my first inner liberation from the power of external life. From that time, I knew for certain and that means always by inner individual authentic perception which is the only source of real knowledge that all my loathing of religion as it was taught me was right. ³

The maps produced by modern materialistic scientism leave all the questions that really matter unanswered. More than that, they do not even show a way to a possible answer: they deny the validity of the questions. The situation was desperate enough in my youth half a century ago ; it is even worse now because the ever more rigorous application of the scientific method to all subjects and disciplines has destroyed even the last remnants of ancient wisdom-at least in the Western world. It is being loudly proclaimed, in the name of scientific objectivity, that 'values and meanings are nothing but defense mechanisms and reaction formations' ;⁴ that man is 'nothing but a complex biochemical mechanism powered by a combustion system which energises computers with prodigious storage facilities for retaining encoded information'; Sigmund (014) Freud even assured us that 'this alone I know with certainty, namely that man's value judgments are guided absolutely by their desire for happiness, and are therefore merely an attempt to bolster up their illusions by arguments.'

How is anyone to resist the pressure of such statements, made in the name of objective science, unless, like Maurice Nicoll, he suddenly receives 'this inner revelation' of knowing that men, however learned they might be, who say such things, *know nothing about anything that really matters?* People are asking for bread and they are being given stones. They beg for advice about what they should do 'to be saved', and they are told that the idea of salvation has no intelligible content and is nothing but an infantile neurosis. They long for guidance on how to live as responsible human beings, and they are told that they are machines, like computers, without free will and therefore without responsibility.

'The present danger', says Dr Viktor E. Frankl, a psychiatrist of unshakeable sanity, 'does not really lie in the loss of universality on the part of the scientist, but rather in his pretence and claim of totality ... What we have to deplore therefore is not so much the fact that *scientists are specialising*, but rather the fact that *specialists are generalising*.' After many centuries of theological imperialism, we have now had three centuries of an ever more aggressive 'scientific imperialism', and the result is a degree of bewilderment and disorientation, particularly among the young, which can at any moment lead to the collapse of our civilisation. 'The true nihilism of today', says Dr Frankl, 'is reductionism ... Contemporary nihilism no longer brandishes the word nothingness; today nihilism is camouflaged as *nothing-but-ness*. Human phenomena are thus turned into mere epiphenomena.'

Yet they remain our *reality*, everything we are and everything we become. In this life we find ourselves as in a strange country. Ortega y Gasset once remarked that 'life is fired at us point-blank'. We cannot say: 'Hold it! I am

not quite ready. Wait until I have sorted things out.' Decisions have to be taken that we are not ready for; aims have to be chosen that we cannot see clearly. This is very strange and, on the face of it, quite irrational. Human beings, it seems, are insufficiently 'programmed'. Not only are they utterly helpless when they (015) are born and remain so for a long time : even when fully grown they do not move and act with the surefootedness of animals. They hesitate, doubt, change their minds, run hither and thither, uncertain not simply of how to get what they want, but above all of what they want.

Questions like 'What should I do?' or 'What must I do to be saved?' are strange questions because they relate to *ends*, not simply to means. No technical answer will do, such as 'Tell me precisely what you want and I shall tell you how to get it.' The whole point is that I do not know what I want. Maybe all I want is to be happy. But the answer, 'Tell me what you need for happiness, and I shall then be able to advise you what to do'-this answer, again, will not do, because I do not know what I need for happiness. Perhaps someone says : 'For happiness you need wisdom'-but what is wisdom? 'For happiness you need the truth that makes you free'-but what is the truth that makes us free? Who will tell me where I can find it? Who can guide me to it or at least point out the direction in which I have to proceed?

In this book, we shall look at the world and try and see it whole. To do this is sometimes called to philosophise, and philosophy has been defined as the love of, and seeking after, wisdom. Socrates said: 'Wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins with wonder.' He also said: 'No god is a philosopher or seeker after wisdom for he is wise already. Neither do the ignorant seek after wisdom; for herein is the evil of ignorance, that he who is neither good nor wise is nevertheless satisfied with himself.'

One way of looking at the world as a whole is by means of a map, that is to say, some sort of a plan or outline that shows where the various things are to be found-not all things, of course, for that would make the map as big as the world, but the things that are most prominent, most important for orientation: outstanding landmarks, as it were, which you cannot miss or which, if you do miss them, leave you in total perplexity. The most important part of any inquiry or exploration is its beginning. As has often been pointed out, if a false or superficial beginning has been made, one may employ the most rigorous methods during the later stages of investigation but they will never retrieve the situation.⁹ (016)

Map-making is an empirical art which makes use of a high degree of abstraction but none the less clings to reality with something akin to self-abandonment. Its motto, in a sense, is 'Accept everything; reject nothing.' If

something is *there*, if it has any kind of existence, if people notice it and are interested in it, it must be indicated on the map, in its proper place. Map-making is not the whole of philosophy, just as a map or guidebook is not the whole of geography. It is simply a beginning-the very beginning that is at present lacking, when people ask: 'What does it all mean?' or 'What am I supposed to do with my life?'

My map or guidebook is constructed on the recognition of four Great Truths-landmarks, as it were-which are so prominent, so all-pervading, that you can see them wherever you happen to be; and if you know them well, you can always find your location by them, and if you cannot recognise them, you are lost.

The guidebook, it might be said, is about 'Man lives in the world'. This simple statement indicates that we shall need to study

- 1 'The World';
- 2 'Man'-his equipment wherewith to meet 'the World';
- 3 his way of learning about the world; and
- 4 what it means to 'live' in this world.

The Great Truth about the world is that it is a hierarchical structure of at least four great Levels of Being.

The Great Truth about man's equipment wherewith to meet the world is the **principle of 'adequateness' (*adaequatio*)**.

The Great Truth about man's learning relates to the 'Four Fields of Knowledge'.

The Great Truth about living this life, living in this world, relates to the distinction between two types of problem, 'convergent' and 'divergent'.

A map or guidebook, let this be understood as clearly as possible, does not 'solve' problems and does not 'explain' mysteries; it merely helps to identify them. Thereafter, everybody's task is as defined by the last words spoken by the Buddha: 'Work out your salvation with diligence.' For this purpose, according to the precepts of the Tibetan teachers, **(017)** a philosophy comprehensive enough to embrace the whole of knowledge is indispensable ;

a system of meditation which will produce the power of concentrating the mind on anything whatsoever is indispensable; an art of living which will enable one to utilise each activity (of body, speech and mind) as an aid on the Path is indispensable ¹⁰

II

The more recent philosophers of Europe have seldom been faithful map-makers. Descartes (1596-1650), for instance, to whom modern philosophy owes so much, approached his selfset task in quite a different way. 'Those who seek the direct road to truth', he said, 'should not bother with any object of which they cannot have a certainty equal to the demonstrations of arithmetic and geometry.'" Only such objects should engage our attention 'to the sure and indubitable knowledge of which our mental powers seem to be adequate'.¹²

Descartes, the father of modern rationalism, insisted that 'we should never allow ourselves to be persuaded excepting by the evidence of our Reason', and lie emphasised specially that he spoke 'of our Reason and not of our imagination nor of our senses'." The method of reason is to 'reduce involved and obscure propositions step by step to those that are simpler, and then, starting with the intuitive apprehension of all those that are absolutely simple, attempt to ascend to the knowledge of all others by precisely similar steps'.¹⁴ This is a programme conceived by a mind both powerful and frighteningly narrow, whose narrowness is further demonstrated by the Rule

If in the matters to be examined we come to a step in the series of which our understanding is not sufficiently well able to have an intuitive cognition, we must stop short there. We must make no attempt to examine what follows; thus we shall spare ourselves superfluous labour. ¹⁵

Descartes limits his interest to knowledge and ideas that are precise and certain beyond any possibility of doubt, because **(018)** his primary interest is that we should become 'masters and possessors of nature'. Nothing can be precise unless it can be quantified in one way or another. As Jacques Maritain comments:

The mathematical knowledge of nature, for Descartes, is not what it is in reality, a certain interpretation of phenomena ... which does not answer questions bearing upon the first principles of things. This knowledge is, for him, the revelation of the very essence of things. These are analysed exhaustively by geometric extension and local movement. The whole of physics, that is, the whole of the philosophy of nature, is nothing but geometry.

Thus Cartesian evidence goes straight to mechanism. It mechanises nature; it does violence to it; it annihilates everything which causes things to symbolise with the spirit, to partake of the genius of the Creator, to speak to us. The universe becomes dumb.¹⁸

There is no guarantee that the world is made in such a way that indubitable truth is the whole truth. And whose truth, whose understanding would it be? That of man. Of any man? Are all men 'adequate' to grasp all truth? As Descartes has demonstrated, the mind of man can doubt everything it cannot grasp with ease, and some men are more prone to doubt than others.

Descartes broke with tradition, made a clean sweep and undertook to start afresh, finding out everything by himself. This kind of arrogance became the 'style' of European philosophy. 'Every modern philosopher', as Maritain remarks, 'is a Cartesian in the sense that he looks upon himself as starting off in the absolute, and as having the mission of bringing men a new conception of the world.'

The alleged fact that philosophy 'had been cultivated for many centuries by the best minds that have ever lived and that nevertheless no single thing is to be found in it which is not a subject of dispute and in consequence is not dubious'¹⁸ led Descartes to what amounted to the 'withdrawal from wisdom' and the exclusive concentration on knowledge as firm and indubitable as mathematics and geometry. Francis Bacon (1561-1626) had already pleaded in a similar vein. Scepticism, (019) a form of defeatism in philosophy, became the main current of European philosophy, which insisted, not without plausibility, that the reach of the human mind was strictly limited and that there was no point in taking any interest in matters beyond its capacity. While traditional wisdom had considered the human mind as weak but *open-ended*, that is capable of reaching beyond itself towards higher and higher levels, the new thinking took it as axiomatic that the mind's reach had fixed and narrow limits, which could be clearly determined, while within these limits it possessed virtually unlimited powers.

From the point of view of philosophical map-making, this meant a very great impoverishment: entire regions of human interest, which had engaged the most intense efforts of earlier generations, simply ceased to appear on the map. But there was also an even more significant withdrawal and impoverishment while traditional wisdom had always presented the world as a three-dimensional structure (as symbolised by the cross), where it was not only meaningful but of essential importance to distinguish always and everywhere

between 'higher' and 'lower' things and Levels of Being, the new thinking strove with determination, not to say fanaticism, to get rid of the *vertical dimension*. How could one obtain clear and precise ideas about such qualitative notions as 'higher' or 'lower'? Was it not the most urgent task of reason to put into their place quantitative measurements?

Perhaps the 'mathematicism' of Descartes had gone too far; so Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) set out to make a new start. But as Etienne Gilson, the incomparable master of the history of philosophy, remarks,

from mathematics to physics. As Kant himself immediately concluded: 'The true method of metaphysics is fundamentally the same as that which Newton has introduced into natural science, and which has there yielded such fruitful results ...' *The Critique of Pure Reason* is a masterly description of what the structure of the human mind should be, in order to account for the existence of a Newtonian conception of nature, and assuming that (020) conception to be true to reality. Nothing can show more clearly the essential weakness of physicism as a philosophical method.¹⁹

Neither mathematics nor physics can entertain the qualitative notion of 'higher' or 'lower'. So the vertical dimension disappeared from the philosophical maps, which henceforth concentrated on somewhat far-fetched problems like 'Do other people exist?' or 'How can I know anything at all?' or 'Do other people have experiences analogous to mine?' and thus ceased to be of any help to people in the awesome task of picking their way through life.

The proper task of philosophy was formulated by Etienne Gilson as follows:

It is its permanent duty to order and to regulate an ever wider area of scientific knowledge, and to judge ever more complex problems of human conduct; it is its never-ended task to keep the old sciences in their natural limits, to assign their places, and their limits, to new sciences; last, not least, to keep all human activities, however changing their circumstances, under the sway of the same reason by which alone man remains the judge of his own works and, after God, the master of his own destiny.²⁰

III

The loss of the vertical dimension meant that it was no longer possible to give an answer, other than a utilitarian one, to the question, 'What am I to do with my life?' The answer could be more individualistic-selfish or more social-unselfish, but it could not help being utilitarian: either 'Make yourself as comfortable as you can' or 'Work for the greatest happiness of the greatest number.' Nor was it possible to define the nature of man other than as that of an animal. A 'higher' animal? Yes, perhaps, but only in some respects; in many other respects many animals could be described as 'higher' than man, and so it would be best to try and avoid nebulous terms like 'higher' or 'lower', unless one spoke in strictly evolutionary terms. In the context of evolution, 'higher' could be generally associated (021) with 'later', and man was undoubtedly a latecomer and could therefore be thought of as standing at the top of the evolutionary ladder.

None of this leads to a helpful answer to the question, 'What am I to do with my life?' Pascal had said : 'Man wishes to be happy and only exists to be happy and cannot wish not to be happy,'" but the new thinking of the philosophers insisted, with Kant, that 'he never can say definitely and consistently what it is that he really wishes' and he cannot 'determine with certainty what would make him truly happy; because to do so he would need to be omniscient.'" Traditional wisdom had a reassuringly plain answer : Man's happiness is to move *higher*, to develop his *highest* faculties, to gain knowledge of the *higher* and *highest* things and, if possible, to 'sec God'. If he moves *lower*, develops only his *lower* faculties, which lie shares with the animals, then lie makes himself deeply unhappy, even to the point of despair.

With unperturbable certainty St Thomas Aquinas argued:

No man tends to do a thing by his desire and endeavour unless it be previously known to him. Wherefore since man is directed by divine providence *to a higher good than human frailty can attain in the present life ... it was necessary for his mind to be bidden to something higher than those things to which our reason can reach in the present life, so that he might learn to aspire, and by his endeavours to tend to something surpassing the whole state of the present life ... It was with this motive that the philosophers, in order*

to wean men from sensible pleasures to virtue, took care to show that there are other goods of greater account than those which appeal to the senses, the taste of which things affords much greater delight to those who devote themselves to active or contemplative virtues.²³

These teachings, which are the traditional wisdom of all peoples in all parts of the world, have become virtually incomprehensible to modern man, although he, too, desires nothing more than somehow to be able to rise above 'the whole state of the present life'. He hopes to do so by growing rich, by moving around at ever increasing speed, by traveling to the (022) moon and into space. It is worth listening- again to St Thomas:

There is a desire in man, common to him and other animals, namely the desire for *the enjoyment of pleasure*: and this, men pursue especially by leading a voluptuous life, and through lack of moderation become intemperate and incontinent. Now in that vision [the divine vision] there is the most perfect pleasure, all the more perfect than sensuous pleasure as the intellect is above the senses; as the good in which we shall delight surpasses all sensible good, is more penetrating, and more continuously delightful; and as that pleasure is freer from all alloy of sorrow or trouble of anxiety...

In this life there is nothing so like this ultimate and perfect happiness as the life of those who contemplate the truth, as far as possible here below. Hence the philosophers who were unable to obtain full knowledge of that final beatitude, placed man's ultimate happiness in that contemplation which is possible during this life. For this reason too, Holy Writ commends the contemplative rather than other forms of life, when our Lord said (Luke X.4.2) *Mary hath chosen the better part*, namely the contemplation of truth, *which shall not be taken from her*. For contemplation of truth begins in this life, but will be consummated in the life to come: *while the active and civic life does not transcend the limits of this life*.²⁴

Most modern readers will be reluctant to believe that perfect happiness is attainable by methods of which their modern world knows nothing. However, belief or disbelief is not the matter at issue here. The point is that without

the qualitative concepts of 'higher' and 'lower' it is impossible to even think of guidelines for living that lead beyond individual or collective utilitarianism and selfishness.

The ability to see the Great Truth of the hierarchic structure of the world, which makes it possible to distinguish between higher and lower Levels of Being, is one of the indispensable conditions of understanding. Without it, it is not possible to find out where everything has its proper and legitimate place. Everything, everywhere, can be understood only when its Level of Being is fully taken into account. Many things are **(023)** true at a low Level of Being and become absurd at a higher level, and of course vice versa.

We therefore now turn to a study of the hierarchical structure of the world.
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