

THE PHILOSOPHY OF PLURALISM*

by

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Like most philosophical notions, the notion of "pluralism" as opposed to "monism" is confused since, when used in different contexts, its meaning and scope change.

Although our everyday experience reveals a variety of different beings and phenomena, the birth of Western metaphysics is to be traced to the great poem of Parmenides, who sets against this multiplicity of appearances an eternal and uniform reality conforming to the demands of reason. Parmenides' philosophy takes the form of an ontological monism which by treating them as appearances disqualifies all phenomena whose existence we commonly accept.

Monotheism, which states that there is but one true God who pervades the whole universe or who is the creator of everything that exists, is a form of monism which considers as mere idols the very many divinities of primitive religions. The philosophical concept of this unique God recognizes in Him a perfect being, a model of human reason and a guarantee of every truth. According to St. Augustine human knowledge shall be understood as only a pale and imperfect reflection of divine knowledge. For centuries, the learned man's ideal has been to discover the truth that God knows through all eternity.

The idea that God knows the solution to all moral problems, that there exists a just solution, known to God, for any problem of behaviour has fostered axiological monism, namely the idea that in any conflict of values there is a way of reconciling all differences of opinion by reducing all values with their infinite diversity to one single value designated in terms of perfection, usefulness or truth. The various phenomena and values will be regarded merely as aspects of a basic reality and they will be arranged in a hierarchy and systematized in an unambiguous fashion. In this perspective, all conflicts among men arise from the fact that they do not allow themselves to be led by reason alone, but are influenced by their imagination, their interests and their passions. Spinoza's philosophy, a prototype of a monist philosophy, states in *Ethics* (Book IV, proposition 69) that he is free who is led by reason alone and since freedom is conformity to reason, what reason counsels to one man, it advises also to all men (Book IV, proposition 72). Therefore free men cannot but agree among themselves.

Ontological or axiological monism will most often be associated with a methodological monism according to which there is but one method to follow to reach the truth. This is the demonstrative method used by mathematicians which should in all areas provide us with the same certainty as is provided by mathematical knowledge.

The last monism I wish to mention is the sociological monism which envisages the relationship of an individual to society along the same lines as his relationship to a single God. For sociologists like Emile Durkheim the rules, which conscience commands everyone to obey, would not be God's commandments, but injunctions of the collective conscience, an expression of the society where they live. From this point of view, the state, namely a politically and legally organized nation, would instill into all its members through tradition and

THE PHILOSOPHY OF PLURALISM

education, the whole range of recognized values and compulsory behaviours, by specifying for each member of that society what is forbidden, ordered, and desirable.

The advantage of monism in all its various forms is that it provides in every sphere a systematized and rationalized conception of the universe, thus securing a single and true solution to all conflicts and differences of opinion.

The drawback to monist ideologies is that they promote a reductionism which is sometimes barely tolerable. When they do not succeed in persuading everybody of the truth of their point of view, they may justify coercion and the use of force against the recalcitrants in the name of God, of reason, of truth, or of the state's or party's interests. Those who resist have to be reeducated, and if they do not allow themselves to be persuaded, they must be punished for their obstinacy and reluctance.

The religious wars which bathed Europe in blood during the 16th century, first led to a political compromise recognizing the right of each prince to determine the religion of his subjects (cujus regio, ejus religio) and then brought about some religious tolerance.

The fight for human rights, for freedom of thought and speech, for religious and political freedom, associated with the progress of democratic spirit, has led 20th century thinkers to oppose to monist philosophies pluralistically inspired ones. Having suffered from totalitarianisms of the left and of the right and having witnessed the abuses resulting from a combination of monist ideologies with the use of force to impose them, theorists of democratic regimes have developed various pluralist ideologies which make the concrete individual the starting point of their investigation.

One of the most striking and fertile philosophies in this respect is the doctrine developed by my teacher Professor Eugène Dupréel (1879-1967). Its application to both political and economic problems has been discussed in a little book published just after the last war and entitled "Le Pluralisme Sociologique".¹

Instead of setting off the individual against society as if they were entities independent of each other, Dupréel bases his general sociology on the idea of the social relationship which "exists between two individuals when the existence or activity of one of them influences the acts or psychological condition of the other. A reciprocal influence, actual or virtual, is the normal case".²

To be able to influence others - a typical feature of social relationship - to achieve the desired result one will resort sometimes to coercion, sometimes to persuasion and sometimes to an exchange of goods and services. He who possesses this ability to influence the actions and feelings of others through one of the above means or a combination of them is endowed with a social power of variable size.

Social relationships are quite varied; their duration and nature are quite different. They are positive if they are based on agreement, consent or cooperation. They are negative if one of their components is opposition, conflict or competition. While any positive social relationship increases in some way the social power of each of the parties, a negative relationship is destructive of social power. Social relationships of opposite signs may coexist, e.g. sports competitions between clubs which cooperate within national and international federations.

Two social relationships interpenetrate each other if they include a common term. In such a case one of these relationships will be complimentary to

the other if it strongly influences either the existence or the nature of the latter. Because the judge exerts an authority over the policeman, he exerts an influence over the defendant, the first of these relationships being complementary to the second. ³

By means of the concept of complementary social relationship, Dupréel defines another basic notion, the notion of a social group. A social group or society is a collection of individuals united together and distinguished from other individuals by positive and complementary social relationships. ⁴

Families, nations, religions, universities, sports teams, professions, etc. are such social groups. Social relationships among groups vary greatly depending on whether these are of the same nature or heterogenous. Normally groups of a similar kind are external to each other, having no common members, whereas heterogenous groups most often have common members. These groups are said to live in symbiosis.

Sociological pluralism results from the fact that individuals are simultaneously part of several groups which sometimes cooperate and at other times oppose each other. Each group seeks to signal its existence and whenever possible its autonomy. The spiritual life with its own peculiarities expresses itself largely by the way the individual arranges his or her participation in social life, with all these groups living in symbiosis, each group seeking that individual's cooperation and calling on his or her loyalty and solidarity.

It is thanks to sociological pluralism that notions so central to moral philosophy as freedom and individual responsibility can be explained.

The newborn child is raised like a young animal. He spontaneously imitates his parents and those who surround him. He is taught the behaviours which conform to the habits and rules of the group. Through signs of approval or disapproval, he will know what behaviour is expected of him and what is condemned. The more a society is homogenous and isolated from outside influences, the more it will be conformist and traditional. But as soon as society is diversified and the individual integrates into a plurality of groups living in symbiosis, then conflicts are bound to occur when the rules of two groups in which an individual simultaneously participates prove to be incompatible. The typical case is that of an individual who is part of both a national group and a religious group which no longer blend in developed societies. What should he do if the national group drafts him into the army while the religious group forbids him to kill and even sometimes to carry arms? Faced with these incompatible orders, the individual is forced to make a choice. If he behaves as a good citizen, he will violate his religious sect's prescriptions and vice-versa. It is with such a conflict that a conscientious objector is faced. Rather than conforming to the requirements of one or other of the groups in which he participates, he is often led to take a position toward them. He will have to make comparisons, to make judgements on the rules of the groups from the vantage point of a value which transcends the conventions of one group or the other. In this way, in opposition to the closed society, universalist ideals are developed, (ideals of the open society, as Bergson calls them), and the individual, who no longer completely identifies with any group of which he is a part, acquires a certain consistency of his own. His autonomy, his freedom and the development of his conscience are a result of sociological pluralism, since he no longer identifies entirely with one of the groups of which he is a member. It may be that, as in the case of Antigone, he rebels against the orders of an authority which he deems unacceptable. It may be also that a man, placed in a difficult situation, initiates efforts to eliminate incom-

THE PHILOSOPHY OF PLURALISM

patibilities, to reduce the conflicts which threaten to develop between groups living in symbiosis and of which he is a member. 5

Social life consists not only of efforts at cooperation but also of conflicts between individuals and between groups which tend to dominate, to establish hierarchies and sometimes to annihilate the opponent.

The history of mankind, after long periods of disorder and violence, has led to the development of a remarkable institution, the politically and legally structured state to which is entrusted the monopoly of the use of force within its boundaries. Individuals and groups have renounced in principle the right to defend their interests through force of arms and take justice into their own hands. It is the establishment of the legal structure of the state with its courts, its police force and its army, which has underlain international public order since the Middle Ages.

In the pluralist conception, the state can efficiently fulfill its role as the guardian of order and as an arbitrator between individuals and groups living in symbiosis on its territory only by not identifying itself with any one of these. Over the years other missions have been added to the liberal conception of the state as guardian of order, essentially those missions which individuals and groups are unable to perform or which they perform in an imperfect fashion. But if the state should identify itself with anyone of the existing groups by assuming the interests and aspirations of such a group, it is likely that it will not be able to perform its crucial mission, that of being the guardian of order, vested with the monopoly of the use of armed force. When the state -a group based on power- adopts an ideology or religion, or wields economic power, it tends to become a totalitarian group tolerating neither independent groups nor individuals unwilling to obey its orders. It may wish to dictate to all those who live within its boundaries the truths they should abide by and the ideals they should pursue. The head of such a state, if he is not equated with a providential and omniscient god, will be at least treated as a providential man whose words and deeds cannot be challenged. This monism which makes the leader the source of all truth and values, will be accompanied by a contempt for human rights as well as by persecution of all groups claiming to lead an existence independent of the government of the state. No human aspirations, whether national or religious, scientific or artistic, economic or recreational, will be promoted or even tolerated unless they serve the objectives of the central power. They will be subject to this fundamental consideration, which serves as a general criterion. This criterion will be defined and interpreted by the only recognized authority -that which holds the power- and by those who derive directly from it. In the totalitarian state, the monism of values complements the ideological arsenal of the central power. Most often this is associated with the monopoly of communications media; the state alone wishes to hold social power. Any opposition is considered revolutionary and, consequently it can fight only by recourse to force organized sometimes within, sometimes outside the state.

The pluralist state, however, is based on respect for individuals and for the many groups which sometimes cooperate with each other and sometimes oppose one another. It recognizes that the exercise of rights and freedom may have some drawbacks and create trouble: the state's function is not to suppress these liberties, but to moderate their most dangerous excesses. This pluralism renounces any aspiration to a perfect order based upon a single criterion. Rather, it recognizes the existence of a pluralism made up of incompatible values. Hence the need for reasonable compromises resulting from a permanent dialogue and a comparison of opposing views.

The social and political life of a democratic society -along with freedom of belief, freedom of the press, and freedom of meeting and association, which keep it alive- offers a well known form of sociological pluralism. Each one of these freedoms may obviously create abuses and infringements upon the rights and freedoms of others. It is up to the lawmakers, to the courts and to the jurisprudence to establish and maintain a balance, always delicate, between legitimate claims. In each situation, it is a matter of seeking a solution which is acceptable, reasonable and fair because it is well balanced.

You will note that the terms employed to describe these solutions correspond to vague notions which cannot be expressed in quantifiable figures. These notions derive from such heterogeneous elements as the rights of individuals and groups, the proper operation of institutions, general welfare, fairness and social usefulness, protection of the weak, social trust based on expectations, respect for traditions and a concern for innovation and for social and technical progress. Pluralism is not at its best with precise and quantifiable rules as these imply the reduction of one value to another, and of heterogeneity to homogeneity. On the contrary, respect for diversity implies a search for solutions adapted to situations whose elements may vary from time to time requiring a sensitivity to all existing values. A judge who is accorded a power of evaluation in performing his duties must not follow his subjective views, but rather try to reflect those shared by the enlightened members of the society in which he lives and by the views and traditions prevailing in his professional milieu. Indeed, a judge called upon to give a legal opinion in a specific case must attempt to render a judgment acceptable to the higher courts and to an enlightened public opinion as well as being acceptable, in the case of a Supreme Court judgment, to the legislature which will not fail to react if it considers the Supreme Court's decision unacceptable. ⁶

It should be noted in this connection that the power of evaluation or discretion granted to both the judiciary and the executive branch implies that the competent authority may choose from among a number of options that which has its approval. But this power of evaluation, this discretion, always has certain limits. Every time a decision appears unreasonable it will be considered as an intolerable abuse of power.

We should note that what is reasonable or unreasonable in a given society at a specific stage of its development may cease to be so in another environment or at another time. Consider, for example, the motivation of the Belgium Supreme Court in a decision of November 11, 1889 concerning the admission of women to the legal profession. A Belgian woman meeting all requirements of the law had requested her admission to the Bar by arguing that Section 6 of the Belgian Constitution proclaimed the equality of all Belgians before the law and that no provision had expressly prohibited the access of women to the Bar. To this request, the first in Belgian history, the Court replied that "if the legislator has not excluded women from the Bar by a formal provision, this was due to the fact that it held as a truism too obvious to need to be expressed that the administration of justice was reserved for men".

A statement which looked obvious nearly a century ago, would seem not only unreasonable but even ridiculous today. Let me state, by the way, that it was not until April 7, 1922 that the Belgian legislature set aside the reasons invoked in 1889 and allowed women to practise law. ⁷

Insofar as law is seen as an expression of national will, it is natural that it should appear to be a collective work, based on custom and on general principles

THE PHILOSOPHY OF PLURALISM

developed over the years but which could be formulated and interpreted differently in different systems. Most of the time, law will be the work of a collective law maker and democratic systems see to it that it is applied by judges independent of the executive branch before whom it is advisable that opposing views be argued by competent lawyers. In important matters, a single judge will be replaced by a tribunal consisting of several justices or by a common jury. Provision is usually made for actions before an appeal court and a supreme court, so that a judgment in a lower court does not acquire the authority of a res judicata until it has been subjected to several reviews.

Such a variety of precautions is unknown in mathematics or natural science. This is because methods of reasoning in law are of a quite different nature depending normally neither on simple observation nor on formal proof. Pluralism, as it is manifested in politics, in law and in morality cannot be envisaged without a methodological pluralism. For the plurality of disciplines there corresponds a plurality of methods. This is what Aristotle observed in a famous fragment of Nicomachean Ethics: "Precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions any more than in all the products of the crafts...it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician as to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs" (Book 1, 1094b) "...for a carpenter and a geometer investigate the right angle in different ways: the former does so insofar as the right angle is useful for his work, while the latter inquires what it is or what sort of thing it is" (Book 1, 1098a).

Aristotle, who is the father of formal logic, stressed the fact that beside analytical reasoning used in demonstrations, one must recognize the existence of dialectical reasoning used in dialogues and controversies as well as in those situations in which one attempts to persuade and convince by argumentation. He examined these forms of reasoning in his well known Rhetoric and claimed to be the first to discuss the techniques of controversy in his Topics.

Indeed, when it is a matter of deliberating and judging, selecting and deciding, the reasons given for or against do not constitute constraining proofs but arguments which are more or less strong, more or less relevant, more or less convincing. But what seems to be a good argument for one person may seem to be worthless for another. A convincing speech must be adapted to the audience that has to be convinced, as this conviction comes from what the audience concedes. The orator who does not follow this basic rule is bound to make the most serious mistake in argumentation, petitio principii, or begging the question.⁸

Monist philosophers have always attempted to reduce the plurality of opposing views to the uniqueness of truth. To achieve this, they have imagined a divine reason, a guarantee of truth and justice, of which the human reason is a mere reflection. This eternal and unchangeable reason, by giving recognition to the self-evidence of certain propositions would thus guarantee their truth, this being in turn accepted by all reasonable beings. Thus, for rationalists such as Descartes or Spinoza, the geometer's method which proceeds by intuition and demonstration would serve as a model for the solution of all human problems, rules that are valid in mathematics being applicable to all areas. But before one begins to philosophize and to seek the required solution, it is first necessary to purge one's mind of all passions, emotions, concerns and fancies, indeed of all those prejudices which fill the mind.

In order to be able, under the guidance of reason, to share the same truths, men must also forget their beliefs and creeds, the heritage of history, tradition and culture, all equally disqualified as prejudices. This would be the utopia of

the universal society based on reason, the avowed ideal of the French Revolution.

But it is known that this ideal of universal brotherhood was a prelude to the revolutionary and the Napoleonic wars. And even the Code Napoléon, that most worthy work of this rationalistic spirit, appears today as but the incarnation of bourgeois ideology at the beginning of the 19th century.

Consequently we should ask whether pluralist philosophy must dispense with the ideas of truth and reason.

The idea of truth should serve as a criterion for opinions, but only to the extent that the techniques of control and verification allow it to be appropriately used without attempting to impose questionable ideologies in the name of truth.

As for the idea of reason, pluralism does not see it as an eternal and unchanging faculty shared by all men and separate from all other faculties as well as from history, but considers it to be an ideal of universality peculiar to western philosophy. The appeal to reason whose philosophical tradition goes back to the Greeks should be envisaged as an appeal to agreement by all men who are not disqualified as members of this universal audience. Striving to convince this universal audience by his discourses and writings -the greatest effort which may be required from a philosopher- the orator must renounce persuasive techniques and arguments which are not likely to win the agreement of that audience. To appeal to reason is to submit to the exacting demands that Kant imposed on moral action; that is to conform to the categorical imperative according to which only arguments which can be universally admitted shall be used. But it is obvious that in philosophical pluralism, unlike classical rationalism, the idea of reason is not limited only to those reasoning methods used by mathematicians. Each philosopher elaborates this ideal of rationality in his own way, in line with what he holds to be acceptable to the universal audience. 9

This idea, or rather this ideal, that each philosopher holds, must always be subject to the test of experiment, that is to say to dialogue.

Monist rationalism, having recourse to self-evident facts, is thus able to proceed directly from the consent of one to the consent of all by disqualifying those who do not share the same self-evident ideas. However, as debate is never compelling, a philosopher proficient in pluralism will admit that different reasoning may correspond to the changing view one has of the universal audience. Instead of aspiring to impose an eternal truth, the pluralist philosopher has lesser pretensions; he is satisfied with presenting a view of the world which seems reasonable to him and, as such, likely to win the agreement of the universal audience. This is only an imperfect endeavour although it is capable of being improved upon through dialogue and debate. 10 To the extent that he believes that they can be generalized, it is the opinions and aspirations of his milieu that inspire a philosopher's efforts.

Keeping open the possibility for such a dialogue favours a conception of society which allows everyone to participate; this is yet another argument with which philosophical pluralism could support those who present themselves as champions of human rights. 11 Having as its starting point the concrete human being engaged in social relationships and groups of all kinds, philosophical pluralism refrains from granting to any individual or group, no matter who they are, the exorbitant privilege of setting up a single criterion for what is valid and what is appropriate -a privilege that can lead only to excess and totalitarianism, as it is likely to oppress and suppress other individuals and other groups equally worthy of respect.

Philosophical pluralism demands a search for moderate and thus well-bal-

THE PHILOSOPHY OF PLURALISM

anced solutions to all conflicts which it considers nevertheless as unavoidable and recurring. Under the sign of reasonableness, pluralism does not claim to provide the perfect, unique and final solution, but simply human solutions --acceptable but capable of being changed and improved-- to the ever-recurring problems created by the coexistence of men and groups, who prefer a fair compromise to the coercion imposed in the name of a unique value irrespective of how important or even pre-eminent that value may be.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Office de la Publicité, Brussels, 1945, 80 pages.
- 2 E.DUPRÉEL — “Sociologie générale,” Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1948, p. 5.
- 3 Cf. Ibid, pp. 10-19.
- 4 Ibid, p. 20
- 5 For a more detailed analysis see E.DUPRÉEL — “Traité de morale,” Editions de l’Université de Bruxelles, 1967 2nd Edit., Vol. II, pp. 398-440.
- 6 Cf. Ch. PERELMAN — “Logique juridique,” Dalloz, Paris, 1976, p. 75.
- 7 Cf. Ch. PERELMAN — “Le problème des lacunes en droit, essai de synthèse,” in Le problème des lacunes en droit, Bruylant, Brussels, 1968, pp. 547-548.
- 8 For Petitio Principii, cf. Ch. PERELMAN et L. OLBRECHTS—TYTECA The New Rhetoric, Notre Dame University Press, Notre Dame, 1969, p. 28
- 9 For the idea of the universal audience, cf. Ch. PERELMAN et L. OLBRECHTS—TYTECA The New Rhetoric, pp. 6-9.
- 10 Cf. Ch. PERELMAN — “Philosophie, rhétorique, lieux communs,” in Bulletin de la Classe de Lettres et des Sciences morales et politiques de l’Académie Royale de Belgique, 1972, pp.144-156.
- 11 Cf. Ch. PERELMAN — “Peut-on fonder les droits de l’homme,” in Droit, morale et philosophie, Librairie générale de Droit et de Jurisprudence, Paris, 1976, 2nd Edit., pp. 67-74.

*Public lecture presented at McGill University, Montreal, November 1, 1977.