

PHILOSOPHY
AND
THE SOCIAL PROBLEM

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τὸν μὲν βίον
ἡ φύσις ἔδωκε, τὸ δὲ καλῶς ζῆν ἡ τέχνη.

— UNKNOWN DRAMATIC POET.

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**PHILOSOPHY AND THE SOCIAL
PROBLEM**



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TO
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HISTORICAL APPROACH

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PHILOSOPHY AND THE SOCIAL PROBLEM

INTRODUCTION

THE purpose of this essay is to show: first, that the social problem has been the basic concern of many of the greater philosophers; second, that an approach to the social problem through philosophy is the first condition of even a moderately successful treatment of this problem; and third, that an approach to philosophy through the social problem is indispensable to the revitalization of philosophy.

By "philosophy" we shall understand a study of experience as a whole, or of a portion of experience in relation to the whole.

By the "social problem" we shall understand, simply and very broadly, the problem of reducing human misery by modifying social institutions. It is a problem that, ever reshaping itself, eludes sharper definition; for misery is related to desire, and desire is personal and in perpetual flux: each of us sees the problem unsteadily in terms of his own changing aspirations. It is an un-

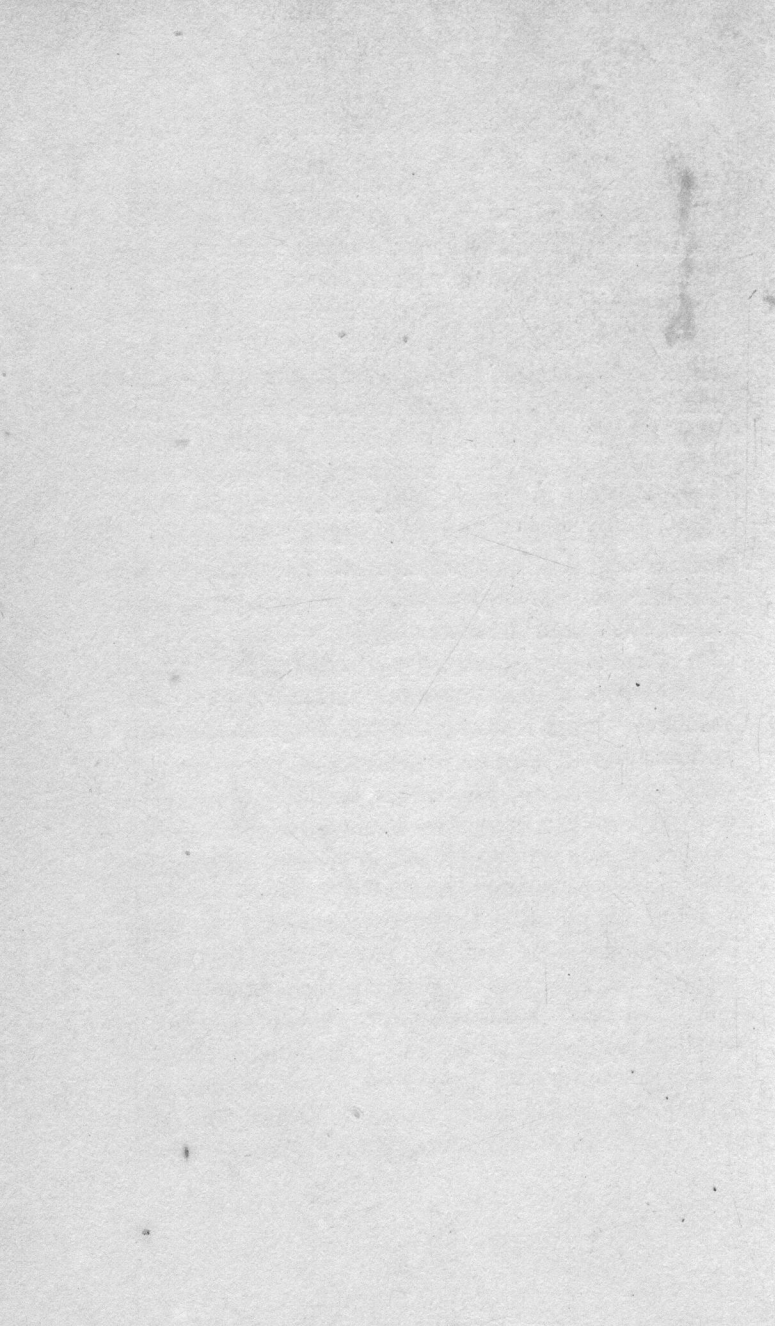
comfortably complicated problem, of course; and we must bear in mind that the limit of our intention here is to consider philosophy as an approach to the problem, and the problem itself as an approach to philosophy. We are proposing no solutions.

Let us, as a wholesome measure of orientation, touch some of the mountain-peaks in philosophical history, with an eye for the social interest that lurks in every metaphysical maze. "Aristotle," says Professor Woodbridge, "set treatise-writers the fashion of beginning each treatise by reviewing previous opinions on their subject, and proving them all wrong."¹ The purpose of the next five chapters will be rather the opposite: we shall see if some supposedly dead philosophies do not admit of considerable resuscitation. Instead of trying to show that Socrates, Plato, Bacon, Spinoza, and Nietzsche were quite mistaken in their views on the social problem, we shall try to see what there is in these views that can help us to understand our own situation to-day. We shall not make a collection of systems of social philosophy; we shall not lose ourselves in the past in a scholarly effort to relate each philosophy to its social and political environment; we shall try to relate these philosophies rather to our own environment, to look at our own problems

¹ Class-lectures. As Bacon has it, Aristotle, after the Ottoman manner, did not believe that he could rule securely unless he first put all his brothers to death.

successively through the eyes of these philosophers. Other interpretations of these men we shall not so much contradict as seek to supplement.

Each of our historical chapters, then, will be not so much a review as a preface and a progression. The aim will be neither history nor criticism, but a kind of construction by proxy. It is a method that has its defects: it will, for example, sacrifice thoroughness of scholarship to present applicability, and will necessitate some repetitious gathering of the threads when we come later to our more personal purpose. But as part requital for this, we shall save ourselves from considering the past except as it is really present, except as it is alive and nourishingly significant to-day. And from each study we shall perhaps make some advance towards our final endeavor, — the mutual elucidation of the social problem and philosophy.



CHAPTER I

THE PRESENT SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SOCRATIC ETHIC

I

History as Rebarbarization

HISTORY is a process of rebarbarization. A people made vigorous by arduous physical conditions of life, and driven by the increasing exigencies of survival, leaves its native habitat, moves down upon a less vigorous people, conquers, displaces, or absorbs it. Habits of resolution and activity developed in a less merciful environment now rapidly produce an economic surplus; and part of the resources so accumulated serve as capital in a campaign of imperialist conquest. The growing surplus generates a leisure class, scornful of physical activity and adept in the arts of luxury. Leisure begets speculation; speculation dissolves dogma and corrodes custom, develops sensitivity of perception and destroys decision of action. Thought, adventuring in a labyrinth of analysis, discovers behind society the individual; divested of its normal social function it turns inward and discovers the

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self. The sense of common interest, of commonwealth, wanes; there are no citizens now, there are only individuals.

From afar another people, struggling against the forces of an obdurate environment, sees here the cleared forests, the liberating roads, the harvest of plenty, the luxury of leisure. It dreams, aspires, dares, unites, invades. The rest is as before.

Rebarbarization is rejuvenation. The great problem of any civilization is how to rejuvenate itself without rebarbarization.

II

Philosophy as Disintegrator

The rise of philosophy, then, often heralds the decay of a civilization. Speculation begins with nature and begets naturalism; it passes to man — first as a psychological mystery and then as a member of society — and begets individualism. Philosophers do not always desire these results; but they achieve them. They feel themselves the unwilling enemies of the state: they think of men in terms of personality while the state thinks of men in terms of social mechanism. Some philosophers would gladly hold their peace, but there is that in them which will out; and when philosophers speak, gods and dynasties fall. Most states have had their roots in heaven, and have paid the penalty for it: the twilight of the gods is the afternoon of states.

Every civilization comes at last to the point where the individual, made by speculation conscious of himself as an end *per se*, demands of the state, as the price of its continuance, that it shall henceforth enhance rather than exploit his capacities. Philosophers sympathize with this demand, the state almost always rejects it: therefore civilizations come and civilizations go. The history of philosophy is essentially an account of the efforts great men have made to avert social disintegration by building up natural moral sanctions to take the place of the supernatural sanctions which they themselves have destroyed. To find — without resorting to celestial machinery — some way of winning for their people social coherence and permanence without sacrificing plasticity and individual uniqueness to regimentation, — that has been the task of philosophers, that is the task of philosophers.

We should be thankful that it is. Who knows but that within our own time may come at last the forging of an effective *natural* ethic? — an achievement which might be the most momentous event in the history of our world.

III

Individualism in Athens

The great ages in the history of European thought have been for the most part periods of

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individualistic effervescence: the age of Socrates, the age of Cæsar and Augustus, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment;—and shall we add the age which is now coming to a close? These ages have usually been preceded by periods of imperialist expansion: imperialism requires a tightening of the bonds whereby individual allegiance to the state is made secure; and this tightening, given a satiety of imperialism, involves an individualistic reaction. And again, the dissolution of the political or economic frontier by conquest or commerce breaks down cultural barriers between peoples, develops a sense of the relativity of customs, and issues in the opposition of individual “reason” to social tradition.

A political treatise attributed to the fourth century B.C. reflects the attitude that had developed in Athens in the later fifth century. “If all men were to gather in a heap the customs which they hold to be good and noble, and if they were next to select from it the customs which they hold to be base and vile, nothing would be left over.”¹ Once such a view has found capable defenders, the custom-basis of social organization begins to give way, and institutions venerable with age are ruthlessly subpœnaed to appear before the bar of reason. Men begin to contrast “Nature” with custom, some-

¹ The *Dialexeis*; cf. Gomperz, *Greek Thinkers*, New York, 1901, vol. i, p. 404.