THE HORIZON OF EXPERIENCE

A PHILOSOPHY FOR THE MODERN MAN

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Un vaste espoir, venu de l'inconnu, déplace
L'équilibre ancien, dont les âmes sont lasses.
La nature paraît sculpter
Un visage nouveau à son éternité:
Tout bouge—et l'on dirait les horizons en marche.

VERHAEREN, *La Foule*

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PREFACE

It is argued in this book that the "modern" attitude towards the world is mainly a sense that on the horizon of our present experience are new forms of truth and beauty. But no attempt has been made to analyse or criticize the whole modern attitude. It is assumed to be the attitude of a few in the more highly developed intellectual and artistic circles of Western society. The sense of the horizon, as we now know it, is thus taken as indicating one of the characteristics of the world we live in: that is to say, part of the subject is philosophical. And in this respect it is argued that the fine arts and the "artistic" elements in science, morality and religion, reveal aspects of the real world which have been too often neglected in philosophies based mainly upon the physical sciences.

It is not implied that to be "modern" is necessarily good. Indeed, it seems as if to be modern meant only to be uncertain of the future. The sense of the horizon does not cause satisfaction or peace. But if the inadequacy of one's inherited beliefs and customs and moral and aesthetic standards is deeply felt, one cannot take refuge from the danger of chaos in a return to the old order. The only hope lies on the other side of the horizon. And although what lies beyond is unknown, what lies *on* the horizon is not entirely out of sight. We can see the twenty-first century beginning, at the limit of our present world.

It is by no means certain that the next century will be better than this. Some of the evils we endure may be abolished: but others may come. I cannot believe that we shall continue to maintain an economic system so absurd that it induces some to try to "make money" by investing in machines whose products no one can buy, because all the money has gone to make more machines. I cannot believe that we shall continue to prepare for national wars by "defending" ourselves against other people's defence of themselves against us. But clearly we

may abolish poverty at the cost of an universal enslavement. We may cease to fight as nations, in order to fight as social classes. That would not be an improvement.

On the other hand, we may contrive to establish the predominance of those elements on our present horizon which promise a better world; but we shall do so only if to-morrow, long before the next century begins, is better than to-day. The first step towards one part or the other of the horizon is made from where we now stand. It is the direction which makes the greatest difference. Even in our present uncertainty, therefore, some direction can be taken: and for that purpose a scrutiny of what lies on the horizon is necessary.

If, however, I pretend to see on the horizon at present a promise of the actual world of to-morrow, it is not because of any special competence of my own. But by a series of accidents I have come to look forward; and because a book of observation and exploration should be impersonal, I may perhaps be permitted to be personal for a moment in the preface. I seem to myself to have passed through, as many others must have done, several ages in my own lifetime, like those of the history of Western thought. I began to think in an environment sufficiently primitive to contain, not indeed an anthropological savagery, but such simple standards as are expressed in Homer. Three thousand miles from England on the shores of an Atlantic island, I lived among the "Achaeans" of the white domination, with a background of divination and friendly carelessness among the descendants of slaves. I had the mediaeval tradition of Catholicism in my bones. I do not mean a theological creed, but the music of plainsong, the statues of saints and the "style" of ceremony. At the next stage I knew, not the mere logic of mediaeval theology but the tradition of insight and communion which survives under the crust of ecclesiasticism. Then the formulation which I had accepted was shattered by a sort of Renaissance scepticism, due to the obvious inadequacy of a point of view which had been based upon a vanished society. That is to say, I came to feel that the body was

altogether "spiritual," that the external world of sensation and action was not a danger or temptation but full of deity. And so, through scepticism, I came to a sort of confidence in the possibility of a new formulation on a new basis, corresponding to the confidence of the nineteenth century. Now, however, one is aware of a flood of new experience in unforeseen situations which make all new formulations seem premature. This I take to be a common attitude among those who think that to be worthy of one's own tradition one must be at least as bold in rejecting it as those were who made it, by rejecting what they had inherited. Again it is not merely an intellectual change; for the arts and social life are also affected by new impulses. The dominant attitude at this stage welcomes even the most subversive new elements in experience, in view of some later possible formulation in some new "order." But at the moment our task is only to extend the basis on which any adequate order must rest. One's own experience, however, may indicate that the dissolution of old beliefs points forward to new formulations.

The interest in what follows is philosophical. But philosophy in this sense is not a "subject" to be studied among other subjects. It is rather a corrective in all studies, indicating that every separate "subject" must be in some way a misrepresentation of the real world. In that sense an ordinary educated man is a better philosopher than some of those who profess philosophy. His mind may be confused: but it is hospitable. He may suffer from an undesirable vagueness in thinking; but it is better to try to know something about everything than to know so much about so very little as many scientists do.

The argument in this book implies that, at certain times and, for example, in the modern world now, the chief aim in philosophy should be to be comprehensive, because experience of a new kind is available. In particular, the recent growth of experience in those of its aspects expressed in works of art, is of great importance. And although I have not attempted to formulate a system of philosophy to include all the data, I

have been compelled to use some conceptions which imply a system. These, however, may be disregarded by the reader who is shy of metaphysics; and I sympathize with him at least enough to admit that it may be unwise to attempt to say anything at all about the Universe as a whole.

It will be clear that I owe much, not only to Plato, but also to my friends Professors Samuel Alexander, Sir Percy Nunn and A. N. Whitehead. My debt to others is acknowledged in the course of the book. I have specially to thank my friends J. A. Hobson and Professor J. H. Muirhead for suggestions on the whole argument, Alan Mainds for assistance with respect to the plastic arts and William Busch with respect to music.

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The history of thought indicates a rhythm of attention, directed at certain times to the *assimilation* of new factors in experience, at other times to the *formulation* of acquired experience. In a period of assimilation of new factors there is an acuter "sense of the horizon." In our tradition there have been three great "formulations"—the Greek-Roman, the mediaeval and that of the nineteenth century. We are now in a third period of assimilation of new factors. The modern mind has once again an acute sense of the horizon.

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For the modern mind the "given" world is new, because of recent changes in social customs—the new position of women and of children and the new contact with non-Europeans. Also there have been great changes recently in the fundamental concepts of the sciences. In this world, which is given, "facts" are distinguishable from "values." The simplest experience is an experience of values. There are no facts given before the "pull" of values is felt. These values are the sources of change in experience and of all the arts.

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The increased sense of the horizon is not a mere extension of what is common but a change in the *kind* of experience. The way in which we react at different moments implies different *levels* of observation. So also different traditions may differ not as more or less but as different angles of vision differ.

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But in recent experience, the contact with primitive and non-European arts has changed the character of our experience in the arts. We see different kinds of beauty. This may have its effect upon our vision of "facts": but it inevitably transforms our impulse towards values.

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Exceptional experience may be below or above the normal. The abnormal which has been most carefully studied in recent psychology is the *sub*normal, not the *super*normal—lunacy, not genius. But we are more interested here in new truth than in illusion. We can, however, derive some knowledge of the supernormal from psycho-analysis and current psychology. For a knowledge of the growth of experience, however, and of the kind of relation in which genius stands to common sense, we must use educational psychology. This shows how ignorance passes into knowledge, and how the person who knows is related to those who do not. The peculiarities of genius or ability and its relation to common sense indicate how the horizon of experience is passed.

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The sense of the horizon causes discovery in science. But the process of discovery is an art. The forms of the art include the selection of certain factors which promise to indicate a connection between diverse facts. The particular form of selection, or the hypothesis, is influenced by some new aspect of the situation, as in the case of mechanism and, recently, of electricity. The art of selecting and building up a "picture" of the real world does not lead to "fiction" in the sense of falsity, unless what is omitted from the original assumption is then taken to be unreal or illusory. Then indeed science is illusion, when scientists forget that it is an art.

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Works of art are typical of the age in which they are produced. They are the reactions of the age to the "value" in experience, called beauty. This beauty, however, is not complete. It has its horizon. It acts as a hint of beauty not yet realized, which is then brought into the real world in the works of art. But the modern mind is a breakaway from the forms of beauty recognized in tradition and so in a double sense has the experience of the horizon of beauty in its works of art, both because all works of art draw upon horizon values and because our horizon is new.

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In the actual forms of the different fine arts to-day we find the influence of the primitive and the influence of non-European traditions.

(A) In *Dance* as a form of fine art we have the modern sense of the unity of the person and the essential "spirituality" of the body. Rhythm is brought over from the horizon of experience in the beauty of the dance, which may be only now a pure form of art.

(B) In *Music* our tradition has been so recently at a high development that the modern composers seem to be repudiating what is beautiful rather than discovering new forms of beauty. But already we have had two quite "finished" formulations in our musical tradition, the Greek and the mediaeval, both of which passed away. The latest formulation of the eighteenth century therefore is not likely to be final. We draw out of possible sounds and rhythms the actual beauty of the piece of music.

(C) In the *Plastic Arts* the works of art *last* too long Therefore it is difficult for most people to feel plastic art as an inner creation of a form which does not exist. A picture is appreciated only when it can be felt as coming into existence. But this we can feel best in the modern experimentalism in pattern, form and colour. We draw out of the world of sight and touch the world of beauty in plastic art.

(D) In *Literature*, which is the fine art of speech, the emotive aspects of words act as hints of a world beyond

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the feeling of the moment, which is the "real world" of drama and poetry, beyond the horizon of the actual. But that world is brought into existence by the "pull" of the horizon value, beauty; and it may deeply affect the attitude towards the world of common sense. In modern literature the subject-matter is the unconscious which was beyond the horizon of fifty years ago, and the forms are experimental.

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Morality is not a complete system of rules to be applied but a form of art. The modern sense that there are new kinds of desirable life in "personal" relations and public policy is due to the breakdown of the traditional formulation. For us morality is an experiment in a new field—aiming not at harmony of impulse, but at a freedom which points to a new social order, whose form is hardly surmised.

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All the great religions in the world are now undergoing changes in practice and belief. Conscious modernism is perhaps less important than the gradual dissolution of old certainties among the non-intellectual. Religion is a kind of art: religions differ not as better or worse but as different angles of vision. The common element is a pull towards some form of "deity," which acts as a sort of value, and in its horizon aspect induces the religious man to transform the tone or atmosphere in which he lives. But the very excellence of the old traditions makes it difficult to go beyond them to new realizations of "deity." The last test of the excellence of a tradition is the power it gives to pass beyond it.

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Experience is always one whole. The aspects so far considered are not "wholes": for no man is a scientist only, or an artist only. Experiencing, over against the experienced world, is a distinct kind of real factor,