

## TO KNOW IS TO SERVE

Pedro Oliveira

Some of the advocates of a holistic worldview tend to identify in the philosophy of 17<sup>th</sup> century French mathematician René Descartes, and his method of inquiry into the nature of reality, the origin of most of the problems that beset us today, like environmental degradation, wars, unsustainable development, and materialism, to name only a few. They say that Descartes, by dividing reality into *res cogitans*, “the thinking thing”, the self, and *res extensa*, “the extended thing”, the world, helped to establish a fragmentation in the western mind from which it has not yet recovered.

Few can indeed doubt that dividing reality into two totally distinct compartments generates a great sense of imbalance in the mind, making it to think and act in ways that are alien to the subtle natural order. But, alas, the problem is much deeper than proclaiming the psychological and physical boundaries of reality. To find the source of the problem we have to enquire and find out what mode of knowing became dominant at the very origins of western culture. Paraphrasing the ancient saying, “all roads lead to Rome”, we can say that all enquiries about the dominant mode of knowing in pre-classical western antiquity led to one name: Aristotle.

This 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE Greek philosopher, a former student in Plato’s Academy, laid the foundations for several future disciplines in the western world, like logic, biology, psychology, metaphysics, ethics, and politics. One of his most important contributions is his conceptual and methodological framework which deeply influenced European medieval theology and modern science. Aristotle was the most articulate exponent of rationalistic thinking at the dawn of western culture.

In the very first sentence of his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle wrote: “All men by nature desire to know”. And for him the faculty we use to obtain knowledge is reason, *logos* in Greek. The word *logos* also means “word”, which makes discourse, description, categorization essential elements of knowledge. A knowledge that cannot be described in words and concepts is very often deemed irrational, literally “lacking reason”. Aristotle’s logic followed strictly the inductive method, namely, it proceeds from particulars to universals, affirming sensory perception as central to the process of acquiring knowledge. His inductive method remains, to this day, one of the cornerstones of modern science.

Surprisingly, the Greek language contains certain ‘warnings’ about viewing knowledge as only based on reason and words. The word “category”, for example, comes from the Greek *catagorem*, meaning “accusation”. Every time we use a category — name, form, space, time, causation, quantity, quality, etc — we are actually superimposing mental concepts on reality, on things as they are. Does a tree like to be known, and referred to, as a tree? Is a crow the word in our minds or the creature that delights in roaming the open spaces?

When we consider that our actions, choices, responses and relationships are so

directly influenced by our knowledge of what we think the world to be — a knowledge that, in most cases, affirms our intrinsic separateness from the world — we can understand that a superficial and discursive knowledge, mostly concerned with appearances, projections and concepts, inevitably creates a world which is a mirror-image of our own minds. Perhaps this is related to what J. Krishnamurti said: “You are the world, the world is you”.

Aristotle’s philosophy continued to be the dominant mode of knowing throughout the middle-ages in Europe through the theology of St Thomas Aquinas, and right into the modern age. Because this has been the dominant approach to knowledge in the western world for so many centuries we can well say that ours is an Aristotelian order, one in which there the primacy of knowledge, reason and discourse over reality, what is. The foundations of the present-day materialistic outlook can be traced to this Greek thinker, a towering figure in the history of western philosophy.

The Theosophical Society, in its insistence, from the very beginning, to adhering to the principle of Universal Brotherhood without distinctions, which is based on the ageless truth that all life is one, was bound not only to clash with the Aristotelian mode of knowing but, more importantly, aimed at bringing it to an end. The fierce opposition the Society and its Founders met with, not only from self-interested individuals and organizations, but also from the science and religion at that time, indicate how colossal a task they had set themselves to accomplish.

The theosophical approach to knowledge does not, obviously, deny the role of reason in the process of human evolution. Mind is a very important tool in gaining understanding, for it allows us to reflect, ponder, examine, compare, and perceive. But the theosophical view affirms that in order for us to truly know, in a direct, non-mediated way, things as they are we need to awaken the faculty of *buddhi*, spiritual discernment and perception, intuition. Contrary to the Aristotelian mode of knowing, the theosophical view suggests that true knowledge is not built on categories nor conceptual framework but is a direct seeing into the soul or essence of what exists. The very notion of perception as a process taking place between the self, the “thinking thing”, and the world, “the extended thing”, is faced with a radical challenge, for the light of *buddhi* comes as an insight which does not take place in ordinary time. This insight brings with it its own energy, as the following passage from *The Mahatma Letters to A.P. Sinnett* demonstrates:

Once separated from the common influences of Society, *nothing* draws us to an outsider save his evolving spirituality. He may be a Bacon or an Aristotle in knowledge, and still not even make his current felt a feather’s weight by us, if his power is confined to the *Manas*. The supreme energy resides in the *Buddhi*; latent—when wedded to *Atman* alone, active and irresistible when galvanized by the *essence* of “Manas” and when none of the dross of the latter commingles with that pure essence to weigh it down by its finite nature. *Manas*, pure and simple, is of a lower degree, and of the earth earthly: and so your greatest men count but as nonentities in the arena where greatness is measured by the standard of spiritual development. When the ancient founders of your philosophical schools came East, to acquire the

lore of our predecessors, they filed no claims, except the single one of a sincere and *unselfish* hunger for the truth. If any now aspire to found new schools of science and philosophy the same plan will win—if *the seekers have in them the elements of success*.<sup>1</sup>

From the above quotation it becomes clear that real intuitive insight is possible only when the mind is purified, for a perception of the sacred essence of all existence (*Atman*) is not possible when our mental field is still dominated by the notion of a separate self-craving for experiences of all sorts. It also shows that the mind is basically an instrument, albeit an important one, while the real source of true knowledge lies much deeper within, in those higher principles in us which are untainted by conditioned experience. *The Voice of the Silence*, while presenting the teaching about the Seven Portals that give access to the Transcendental Virtues (*Pāramitās*), beautifully describes the realization awaiting those who make themselves ready to discover a deeper dimension in their own consciousness through meditative insight:

The Dhyāna gate is like an alabaster vase, white and transparent;  
within there burns a steady golden fire, the flame of *prajñā* that  
radiates from Atman.<sup>2</sup>

This inner knowing brings us much closer to the real nature of things by making us receptive to what they really are. There is today ample evidence that many ancient cultures had a very profound knowledge of Nature, the cosmos, the physiology of the human body, the cycles and also of other subtle dimensions of existence. Such a knowledge was normally transmitted from generation to generation by seers who had trained and prepared themselves to obtain it. The western culture, in clinging to the so-called ‘rational’ knowledge, which led to a strongly dualistic theology and a mechanistic science, has perhaps shut itself out from its higher possibilities. This does not mean that the progress of science, in its many fields, is without merits. Far from it. The progress of science was indeed astonishing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many illnesses, for example, that used to exterminate entire populations in the past have now been eradicated thanks to the advancement of medical science. But perhaps more astonishing is the fact that the human mind, particularly in the west, has remained deeply divided, pursuing will-o’-the-wisp forms of happiness while spreading conflicts, wars, and destruction all around it. Ethnic cleansing, genocide and a policy of environmental wasteland are certainly not rational modes of action.

A great, though not explicit, denunciation of the Aristotelian order was made by Martin Buber in his book *I and Thou*, in which he exposes what he calls “I-it” relationships, those in which all life around us is considered as a mere collection of “things”, as objects for our use, whether they be people, animals and other living beings. The meaning of life is to be found in relationships which have significance, depth, reverence, and deep respect, the “I and Thou” relationships. The glaring absence of such values in many areas of human society

---

<sup>1</sup> *op. cit.*, The Theosophical Publishing House, Madras, 1962 (third edition), p. 336.

<sup>2</sup> *op. cit.*, The Theosophical Publishing House, Madras, 1964, p. 200.

today bespeaks of the reification of the human mind, for which everything has become a commodity.

But Theosophy also affirms the existence in all ages of those who kept the torch of Wisdom burning bright, of those who keep reminding humanity that, in the words of *Light on the Path*, ‘to work for self is to work for disappointment’. They are the mystics, the poets, the sages, those who have found a knowledge that does not derive from any external source, but which springs from deep within, from “the presence in man of that *which knows, without being told*” as H.P. Blavatsky wrote<sup>3</sup>. And within the western culture, between a dogmatic theology and a materialistic science, perhaps it was the poets that kept alive, through the centuries, the light of knowledge born of inspiration, the inspiration which is always available to a heart that does not seek anything for itself.

One such poet was T.S. Eliot:

In order to arrive at what you do not know  
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.  
In order to possess what you do not possess  
You must go by the way of dispossession.  
In order to arrive at what you are not  
You must go through the way in which you are not.  
And what you do not know is the only thing you know  
And what you own is what you do not own  
And where you are is where you are not.<sup>4</sup>

Such a realization naturally expresses itself as selfless service to all around us. If we consider the lives of the great reformers in recent history, like Annie Besant and Martyn Luther King, Jr, who laboured very hard for a world of justice, equality, and freedom for all, for a true Universal Brotherhood without distinctions, we can see a tremendous passion moving them: to serve humanity, to uplift their fellow-human beings, to succour, to help. In them there was no division between knowledge and action, ideal and practice, vision, and life. In them knowledge and service were one for they realized, in the depths of their very souls, the essential oneness of all humanity and acted accordingly.

---

<sup>3</sup> *H.P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, Theosophical Publishing House, Wheaton, 1960, vol. 8, p. 117.

<sup>4</sup> *Four Quartets*, Faber and Faber, London, 1959, p. 25.