

N.K., EX-CATHOLIC, USA (PART 4 OF 5)

Rating: 4.3

Description: A Catholic who rejects his faith and takes to Philosophy, and then later accepts Islam due to many unanswered questions. Part 4: More unanswered questions in Philosophy and readings into Islam.

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These considerations were in my mind the second year I studied at Chicago, where I became aware through studies of philosophical moral systems that philosophy had not been successful in the past at significantly influencing peoples morals and preventing injustice, and I came to realize that there was little hope for it to do so in the future. I found that comparing human cultural systems and societies in their historical succession and multiplicity had led many intellectuals to moral relativism, since no moral value could be discovered which on its own merits was transculturally valid, a reflection leading to nihilism, the perspective that sees human civilizations as plants that grow out of the earth, springing from their various seeds and soils, thriving for a time, and then dying away.

Some heralded this as intellectual liberation, among them Emile Durkheim in his "Elementary Forms of the Religious Life", or Sigmund Freud in his "Totem and Taboo", which discussed mankind as if it were a patient and diagnosed its religious traditions as a form of a collective neurosis that we could now hope to cure, by applying to them a thorough scientific atheism, a sort of salvation through pure science.

On this subject, I bought the Jeremy Shapiro translation of "Knowledge and Human Interests" by Jurgen Habermas, who argued that there was no such thing as pure science that could be depended upon to forge boldly ahead in a steady improvement of itself and the world. He called such a misunderstanding scientism, not science. Science in the real world, he said, was not free of values, still less of interests. The kinds of research that obtain funding, for example, were a function of what their society deemed meaningful, expedient, profitable, or important. Habermas had been of a generation of German academics who, during the thirties and forties, knew what was happening in their country, but insisted they were simply engaged in intellectual production, that they were living in the realm of scholarship, and need not concern themselves with whatever the state might choose to do with their research. The horrible question mark that was attached to German intellectuals when the Nazi atrocities became public after the war made Habermas think deeply about the ideology of pure science. If anything was obvious, it was that the nineteenth-century optimism of

thinkers like Freud and Durkheim was no longer tenable.

I began to reassess the intellectual life around me. Like Schopenhauer, I felt that higher education must produce higher human beings. But at the university, I found lab people talking to each other about forging research data to secure funding for the coming year; luminaries who wouldn't permit tape recorders at their lectures for fear that competitors in the same field would go one step further with their research and beat them to publication; professors vying with each other in the length of their courses syllabuses. The moral qualities I was accustomed to associate with ordinary, unregenerate humanity seemed as frequently met with in sophisticated academics as they had been in fishermen. If one could laugh at fishermen who, after getting a boatload of fish in a big catch, would cruise back and forth in front of the others to let them see how laden down in the water they were, ostensibly looking for more fish; what could one say about the Ph.D.s who behaved the same way about their books and articles? I felt that their knowledge had not developed their persons, that the secret of higher man did not lie in their sophistication.

I wondered if I hadn't gone down the road of philosophy as far as one could go. While it had debunked my Christianity and provided some genuine insights, it had not yet answered the big questions. Moreover, I felt that this was somehow connected I didn't know whether as cause or effect to the fact that our intellectual tradition no longer seemed to seriously comprehend itself. What were any of us, whether philosophers, fishermen, garbage-men, or kings, except bit players in a drama we did not understand, diligently playing out our roles until our replacements were sent, and we gave our last performance? But could one legitimately hope for more than this? I read "Kojves Introduction to the Reading of Hegel", in which he explained that for Hegel, philosophy did not culminate in the system, but rather in the Wise Man, someone able to answer any possible question on the ethical implications of human actions. This made me consider our own plight in the twentieth century, which could no longer answer a single ethical question.

It was thus as if this century's unparalleled mastery of concrete things had somehow ended by making us things. I contrasted this with Hegel's concept of the concrete in his "Phenomenology of Mind". An example of the abstract, in his terms, was the liminary physical reality of the book now held in your hands, while the concrete was its interconnection with the larger realities it presupposed, the modes of production that determined the kind of ink and paper in it, the aesthetic standards that dictated its color and design, the systems of marketing and distribution that had carried it to the reader, the historical circumstances that had brought about the readers literacy and taste; the cultural events that had mediated its style and usage; in short, the bigger picture in which it was articulated and had its being. For Hegel, the movement of philosophical investigation always led from the abstract to the concrete, to the more real. He was therefore able to say that philosophy necessarily led to theology, whose object was the ultimately real, the Deity. This seemed to me to point up an irreducible lack in our century. I began to wonder if, by materializing our culture and our past, we had not somehow abstracted ourselves from our wider humanity, from our true nature in relation

to a higher reality.

At this juncture, I read a number of works on Islam, among them the books of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who believed that many of the problems of western man, especially those of the environment, were from his having left the divine wisdom of revealed religion, which taught him his true place as a creature of God in the natural world and to understand and respect it. Without it, he burned up and consumed nature with ever more effective technological styles of commercial exploitation that ruined his world from without while leaving him increasingly empty within, because he did not know why he existed or to what end he should act.

I reflected that this might be true as far as it went, but it begged the question as to the truth of revealed religion. Everything on the face of the earth, all moral and religious systems, were on the same plane, unless one could gain certainty that one of them was from a higher source, the sole guarantee of the objectivity, the whole force, of moral law. Otherwise, one mans opinion was as good as anothers, and we remained in an undifferentiated sea of conflicting individual interests, in which no valid objection could be raised to the strong eating the weak.

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