

Phenomenology: a Meeting of West and East?

(For The Liu Academy, London)

Western science is in a crisis; and the crisis has various aspects. Most of those aspects have to do with the position of science within society. They are not, strictly speaking, scientific problems. They are of political, ethical, economic and existential orders. But some aspects of the crisis are internal to the discourse of science. They are of an epistemological order. It is of the epistemological problems that this essay will speak. But one word of caution is in order: Although Western science is in a crisis, it continues to be the most powerful tool men have invented so far to know and change the world. And the scientific method is one of the noblest achievements of human mind.

Science is an attitude toward the world. That attitude is implicit in Greek thought, and it is closely connected to the Greek concept of ("theoria") in the sense of contemplation of unchangeable forms. But that attitude was explicitly formulated as late as the Renaissance. It was only then that science in the strict sense became feasible. But once it was put into practice, it changed life on earth in every aspect. Man is no longer the same being he was before science was elaborated. The fact that the application of science has resulted in the domination of the globe by the Western part of the European peninsula for centuries is nothing but an accidental consequence of applied science. We cannot, even now, evaluate the mutation which science provoked in man, and no doubt will continue to provoke.

Thus it was obvious, from its beginnings, that science "works". But it was equally obvious, at least for those who thought about it, the "philosophers of science", that the question why it "works" is a problem. The reason is that scientific attitude is the attitude of a "spirit" which transcends the world. Scientific knowledge is the adequation of such a "spirit" to the world, (adaequatio intellectus et rei), and applied science is an act by that "spirit" upon the world, as if from outside, and it is an act which is "informed" by scientific knowledge. How can this be so?

Descartes was one of the first thinkers to analyse the problem. He defined that curious "transcendent spirit" as a thinking thing, ("res cogitans"), and the world transcended he defined as an extended thing, ("res extensa"). The structure of the thinking thing is linear: it is composed of clear and distinct elements, (concepts), which are aligned by logical threads, like words in a proposition. This is the arithmetical structure. The structure of the extended thing is pointlike: it is composed of pointlike elements which adhere to each other without intervals, which are "concrete", (which means: grown together). This is the geometrical structure.

Thus scientific knowledge is the adequation of an arithmetical to a geometrical structure. If we could attach to every point of the world a clear and distinct concept, we should be "omniscient". The problem is that those two structures cannot be fully adequated. The arithmetical structure is "empty", (there are voids between the distinct elements), whereas the geometrical structure is "full", (there are no voids in the pointlike concreteness). Thus the "thinking thing" is a dragnet through which most of the points of the world, it wants to fish, escape. This is why Descartes emphasised that any adequation of thinking to extension (any "analytical geometry"), is possible only due to "God's help", (concurus Dei), which is not a very satisfactory theory of knowledge.

Now in the course of the centuries which separate us from Descartes this idealistic rationalism of his was subject to repeated criticism and attempts to improve on him. This was the task of philosophy and of mathematics. Philosophers tried to elaborate more satisfactory theories of knowledge, and Kant is the most impressive example. He stated that although pure thinking, (the "theoretical reason"), is not competent for the knowmedge of the concrete world, (the "thing in itself") it is competent for the knowledge of the world as it is perceived by us, (the "phenomenal world"), because such a world has been impressed by the structure of pure thinking, (by the "categories of theoretical reason"). Thus, although science cannot know reality, ~~and~~ knows what matters. But even this more modest knowledge is open to objections. What we know, it may be held, is nothing but the categories we ourselves project upon the world. Parallel efforts to improve upon Descartes were undertaken by mathematicians. They tried to fill the gaps in the arithmetical structure, to make it more adequate for the structure of the concrete world, and the calculus, (Leibnitz and Newton), is the most impressive example. But even the "integrals" and "differentials", although they do fill gaps, cannot solve the problem of knowledge: they are themselves "clear and distincts"; while the world is concrete and indistinct.

Thus the original epistemological problem persisted in one way or another. But this did not bother scientific progress. Although the theoretical basis of science was doubtful, its success as a method was convincing. This is no longer the case, however. In many fields of scientific research, and most of all in pure physics on the one hand, and in the social sciences on the other, the Cartesian and Kantian problem manifests itself within the very research. To put this in shorthand: research itself shows that the observer changes his object, that he impresses his "categories" upon the world. This is Heisenberg's principle of indeterminability on the one hand, and the deformation of the

social and psychological phenomenon by the sociologist and psychologist on the other. The original epistemological problem can no longer be ignored by the scientist: it interferes in his research.

Thus we are obliged, ever since the beginning of this century, to review the very basis of science, if we are to save it. As save it we must since it is our only source of publicly controllable "knowledge and power" Husserl has shown that the fundamental error of Western science is its attitude toward the world. It assumes that man can transcend the world and look at it from the outside. As if man could dispose of a sort of meta physical crane which can lift him out of the world. In fact, the scientific attitude is God-like, and the point of view science assumes is the one God assumed during the Middle ages. This is why science can believe that its view is "objective", that its method is "value-free", and that it can be "unprejudiced". All those are Divine attributes, which science attributes to itself.

In fact, of course, man cannot transcend the world, even if he "thinks about it". He is always in the world, and his thoughts are thought of the world. He may, of course, take his distances from specific phenomena, he can "step back", but wherever he thus steps back, there is still the world. Man can "abstract", he can "reflect", he can "contemplate", or: theory is possible, but all this is nothing but an aspect of man's specific being-in-the-world. The fundamental error of Western science is its attitude as if it could step from the world into "pure theory". The error of Western science is that its attitude is metaphysical.

Once this is recognized, it is possible to reformulate science. Once it is recognized that there is no such thing as a "thinking thing", that man is always and totally committed to the world by his thoughts, his desires, his sufferings, his experiences, his emotions, science may be seen for what it is: a human, not a Divine, endeavor. There is no such thing as "pure knowledge": whatever man knows is motivated by his desire to change the world, to suffer less, and to give his sufferings a meaning. There is no such thing as "objective" knowledge: whatever man knows he knows as a subject. There is no such thing as "freedom of values": if man does not evaluate a phenomenon, he cannot know it. There is no such thing as "freedom from prejudice": man's position in the world prejudices him in everything, including his knowledge. Science must take account of this, it must take into account human limitations, which are the limitations of a being-in-the-world.

Instead of "objectivity", the aim of knowledge must be "inter-subjectivity", which is a knowledge accessible to as many as possible subjects of knowledge. Instead of "value-freedom", "consensus as to values" must

be aimed at. Instead of "freedom from prejudice", what must be aimed at is "prejudice in favor of human interests in the world". In short: science reformulated accepts the fact that it has political, social, economic and esthetic aspects, that the scientist is, in his quality as a scientist responsible for his actions just as much as is any other human actor. It accepts the fact that "pure science" is a myth, a bourgeois ideology, and that it is not only unfeasible, but that it would be undesirable if it were feasible. The whole scientific attitude is thus reformulated.

The metaphysical attitude taken by Western science has created the illusion as if the world were an object of man, and man the subject of the world. Thus the problem of knowledge became one of adequating the subject to the object. And this problem has been shown to be insoluble, "eternal", precisely because it is a false problem. Eternal questions are empty ones, and the "philosophia perennis" is bad philosophy. The error here is that knowledge was taken to be the result of an encounter between a subject and an object, (man and world). In fact, of course, the opposite is the case. If we observe man in his being-in-the-world, we find that knowledge is one of the ways by which he is in the world. It is only if we analyse that knowledge, we find that it has an objective and a subjective horizon, (a "knower" and a "known"). Knowledge is not the result of an encounter: it is prior to knower and known. It is knowledge which is the concrete reality: the knower and the known are nothing but abstractions from that concrete reality. There is no such thing as a "pure subject": a man who knows nothing, feels nothing, does nothing, desires nothing. The reality of man is the fact that he is related to the world. Man outside any relation is an abstraction. And the same goes for objects. There is no such thing as an "object in itself": to be an object, it must be the object of some subject. Any future theory of knowledge must thus begin by accepting the concrete fact of knowledge: it is one of the stuffs reality is made of. The whole of modern epistemological discussion can thus be seen to have been in error.

Knowledge is a relation. So is feeling, wishing, experiencing, suffering, acting. Reality is a tissue of relations. Of course: relations relate: they connect elements. But those elements are like provisional hooks on which the relations hang. They are not, in themselves, real. They only become real once they are related to other hooks. Reality is a tissue of relations, and the knots those relations form are not real: they are knots of relations. Man is a knot of relations. So are the objects of the world. In fact: the measure of reality of a subject and of an object is the number of relations he participates in. The more a man knows, and feels, and experiences, and acts, the more real is he. The

more an object is known, and experienced, and acted upon, the more real it becomes. Reality is a field of relations out of which crystallize, so to speak, subjects on the one hand, and objects on the other.

But the relations which make up reality are dynamic. They "flow" from one horizon toward another, they have an "intention". The horizon from which they flow will become a subject, the horizon where they flow to will become an object. Knowledge is such a relation. It is the intention of a future knower toward a future known. Thus the subject is the horizon where intention begins, and the object is the aim of the intention. Subject and object may be distinguished by the intention of the relation. I become a subject of knowledge if there is that intention, and the thing there becomes an object of knowledge if that intention points to it. There is no other criterium for the distinction between man and the objective world. Man becomes real if his intention is to know, (and feel, and act), the world. The world becomes real if it is intended to be known, suffered, acted upon. Thus both idealism and realism is shown to be naive errors.

This being so, man is always at the center of the world. Each man. Because he is the point where all the relations flow from. Where I stand there is the center of the world. But I am never alone: there are always others with me in the world. They are excentric in relation to me, and I am excentric in their relation. We live in the center of different worlds. But those worlds overlap: the others are in my world, and I am in theirs. It is possible to "recognize" the other's point of view, because it is possible to "recognize myself" in the other. Recognition is not knowledge. It is a different sort of relation. Because in knowledge there is an object, whilst in recognition there are only subjects. Recognition is intersubjective.

Each time I recognize another man my world widens. I can see it from his point of view also. My knowledge of the world becomes less subjective, and more intersubjective, because the objects of the world are now being intended from two points of view: they become more real. Intersubjectivity widens and deepens the world, makes it more real. This goes for intersubjective knowledge, intersubjective experience, intersubjective desires, intersubjective action. Because none of those relations can be separated from any other.

Now this is in fact what phenomenology, this reformulation of Western science, is all about. It is the abandon of the search of objective knowledge in favor of an ever more intersubjective knowledge. But to understand this more fully, one has to switch one's attention to the object of knowledge. Phenomena are the aims of epistemological intentions. They

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will become ~~sub~~jects of knowledge. In themselves, they are nothing. But as objects of knowledge they have an infinity of aspects: they can be approached from an infinity of angles by an infinity of subjects. This is what characterizes the objective world: it has an infinity of aspects. Those aspects can never be exhausted: there is no such thing as a complete objective knowledge. Intersubjective knowledge is the attempt to approach phenomena from a maximum of points of view, to come to know a maximum of aspects: Thus the purpose of science reformulated is not, as it is in classical science, to advance from object to object, but it is to reveal ever new aspects in the objects intended. A totally new concept of "progress".

If we accept that the world has as many aspects as there are subjects, and that it becomes real as those aspects become evident, it follows that the method of science must be one of revealing aspects. The phenomenon must be placed, so to speak, in the center of intentions, and a sort of dance from point of view to point of view must be performed around it. This is intersubjectivity as a scientific method. And this is also what Husserl means by his slogans "back to the matter" (zurueck zur Sache) and "let the things speak for themselves", (die Dinge zu Worte kommen lassen). A new humility in face of the infinite complexity of phenomena, and a new respect for the equivalence of every point of view on the world, is the result of this method. In short: a scientific attitude which is aware of human limitations, and tries to make the most of them by intersubjective action.

Let me resume this far too sketchy account thus: Western science is in a crisis, because its original "sin", its metaphysical attitude, is becoming apparent in its very research. It is possible to reformulate science by accepting the fact that man is limited by his being-in-the-world. It will then be seen that reality is not a context of subjects and objects, but a tissue of concrete relations, which are unseparable from each other, and of which knowledge is one. A new science will thus arise, which will be conscious of its responsibilities, and will search for an intersubjective knowledge. A knowledge intended to change the world so that it become a better place to live in.

I suspect that such a new vision of man in the world, and of the world as the place where man lives, has points in common with some Eastern "wisdoms". Let the reader, more familiar with Eastern thought than is the author, judge if it is so.