

RINGS & BOOKS

PRACTICALLY all the great European philosophers have been bachelors. ^{In case} ~~lest~~ you ~~should~~ doubt ^{that} ~~so~~, here are some figures

Unmarried

Plato ~~Married~~
 Plotinus
 Bacon
 Descartes
 Spinoza
 Leibniz
 Hobbes
 Locke
 Berkeley
 Hume
 Kant

Unmarried

Socrates
 Aristotle
 Hegel

I do not cram the groaning scale with monks and friars; because there is always the chance that they had some other reason ^{besides philo} for joining their orders. Nor have I taken in the ^{pre Socratic} ~~Sophists~~, because we know too little about them to infer celibacy e silentio. I have left out Rousseau because he won't go in either column and stopped short of the present day to ^{keep doc} ~~avoid~~ litigation - ^{besides there are indications that things are changing.} I may be wrong in these and fifty other details, but whatever you do to them the figures will probably remain significant. The only question is, what of?

One answer seems obvious. Philosophers need above all to concentrate. They are not like poets (nearly all good poets marry, however ^m ~~badly~~). What they ^{most} need ~~above all~~ is space

for ^{thought} ~~undisturbed contemplation~~. This of course is true. But it proves too much. Aristotle, Hegel and Socrates seem to have managed ^{to concentrate tho' married} ~~without this aid to concentration~~. This ^{makes} ~~is a fly in the milk-jug~~, a serious snag in the argument, very much like the one which might irritate a devout Catholic if, at the close of a panegyric on celibate sainthood, he were to let his eye drop upon the phrase, "Peter's wife's mother lay sick of a fever". St ^{that central Saint,} Peter, [^] it seems, was married. But if those words were not there, how strongly we should have been assured that it was quite impossible. As for Aristotle, not only was he married, but it seems quite likely that he loved his wife. She was the daughter of a friend of his, a philosophic despot, and Aristotle when he died, many years after her, asked in his will that they should be buried in the same grave. And his opinions, if one may mention such a point, are often married opinions. Man, he says, differs from other animals in being syndyasticon zoon, an animal that goes in pairs, not only for procreation, but for all the business of life. There is ^{profound} [^] division of labour between men and women. They supplement each other, and as their functions are different, so is their goodness. Certainly Aristotle on the whole thinks men's functions ~~on the whole~~

much more important, men's virtue greater. But he has grasped the point that natures can differ, that the pursuit of virtue is not a scurry up a single narrow ladder with the devil taking the hindmost. He is not logically compelled to think women inferior, as Plato is, and Spinoza, and every other moralist who grounds virtue on the power of abstract thought. Aristotle's ideas here have by contrast all the free movement of maturity. He ^{suspected} ~~had~~ always, ^{and} still more the further he grew away from Plato, ~~anxious~~ that there were other lives and other virtues besides those of the scholar; that perhaps it did really take all sorts to make a world. Plato on the other hand, right up to his death, ^{always kept} ~~showed~~ the irritable sensibility of the adolescent in resisting the claims of temperaments alien to his own.

It will be clear that I have not, just now, taken up the topic of philosophic celibacy to point out its glories. Justice, I think, has been done to them. It is well known that the great philosophers ~~were~~ on the whole were moral men, just in their actions, continent and scrupulous, beloved by pupils, fair and honest to their patrons when they had any, liberal and ^{disinterested} ~~impartial~~ in

politics, seldom in debt, sober, industrious and kind to their cats. And all this is really of the highest importance, as one sees when one has to deal for a change with a thinker of the opposite colour. The objection to such a way of life lies in obstacles ~~springing from~~ certain difficulties which it puts in the way of intellectual development. Because independent thought is so difficult, the philosophic adolescent (even more than other adolescents) withdraws himself from the influences around him to develop ideas in harmony with his own personality. This is necessary if the personality is to be formed at all. But once it is formed, most people recoil towards experience, and attempt to bring their strengthened self to terms with the rich confusion from which it fled. Marriage, which is a willing acceptance of the genuinely and lastingly strange, is typical of this revulsion. The great philosophers did not return. Their thoughts, unlike yours and mine, had power enough to keep them gazing into the pool of solitude.

I shall mention only one point where those thoughts were weakened by isolation. It concerns the Theory of Knowledge. It is a commonplace today that this branch of philosophy got into confusion by first artificially separating the Knower

from the Known, and then sitting down to puzzle out how to connect them. ~~Not-being-sure-whether-the-table-is-really-~~ there is one of the best-known weaknesses of philosophers. Nor is there much doubt who started the trouble. It was Descartes - Descartes who, as he sat in front of his stove, solitary in the Dutch winter, or looked down from his window on those hats and cloaks which seemed to move past on springs, doubted whether anything were certain, and answered Cogito ergo Sum - Here am I, said Descartes, ^{a soul,} an isolated thinker. But this stove and this sealing-wax, and the hats and coats which you say conceal my friends - these things may all be an illusion. So he set the problem, and it has taken the best part of 300 years to show it ~~as~~ largely an artificial one. We do not see Experience these days as a narrow shaky gangway between the two towers of the Knower and the Known, but as a rich countryside, containing and building both of them. Such a view is both more fruitful and closer to the facts. The puzzle is, what gave Descartes' vision its extraordinary force? Why do we still find his experiment so moving? The reason, I think, is that it appeals to the adolescent philosopher in all of us. ^{Descartes} ~~He~~ tells us how he deliberately sought for perfect certainty; how he withdrew his belief systematically from everything he had taken on

trust, and concentrated his thought on the search for a safe starting-point; a basis on which, like Archimedes, he could rest the ~~whole~~ Universe. Nobody is satisfied with his construction. Yet when he finds his starting-point, we are all profoundly moved. ^{SUM} he says. And with astonishing ^{at once} confidence we accept the statement. We ought to see ^{at once} that it is as full of holes as a sponge. Criticism, panting after Descartes, points out that he can be sure of nothing but his momentary experience; that without memory and expectation his thoughts have no structure and no sequence; that if he is really in the moment, he is for practical purposes **NOTHING** ^{But} Against the natural solipsism of adolescence, Criticism cuts no ice. At that time of life, one's own ordered being is axiomatic. Everything else is in the melting-pot, and for sanity's sake that must be exempted. The self is sacred. Only its external relations are doubtful. Lonely among shifting and inferior shadows, it struggles continually to find within its own nature the assurance of reality, to be free of the world around and at the same time to rule it.

In this frame of mind, philosophers since Descartes have spent their profoundest thoughts on the Problem of Knowledge in the strict sense - not just problems connected with knowled

but the problem, how it is possible for us to know what we undoubtedly do know. Now nobody wants to deny that this enquiry has born magnificent fruit. All I am saying is, that the results have been delayed, and much of the lesser work entirely vitiated, by a want of good faith in approaching the ~~problem~~ ^{question}. Philosophers did not want the human soul to be mixed up in the world of objects, as it must be to make knowledge possible. They were too sensitive about its dignity. This bias seems to me perfectly certain. ^{And after} ~~But nevertheless~~ stating it, I would like to make several scandalous suggestions about how it might have been corrected. People leading a normal domestic life would not, I believe, have fallen into this ^{sort of} mistake. They would have taken alarm at the attitude to other people which follows from Descartes' position. For Descartes, other people's existence has to be inferred, and the inference is a most insecure one. We assume human souls, something like our own, behind the coloured shadows around us. But as we can never meet them directly we don't know what we are assuming, and as we don't understand the connection between our own soul and ~~it~~ ^{they are} body we don't know what ~~it is~~ ^{they are} doing there. Now I rather think that nobody who was playing a normal active part among other human beings could regard them like this. But what I am quite

sure of is that for anybody living intimately with them as a genuine member of a family, Cogito would be Cogitamus; their ^{consciousness} ~~existence~~ would be every bit as certain as his own. And if this is not so for men, it certainly is for women. And women are not a separate species. And ~~an~~ account of human knowledge which women's whole experience falsifies is inadequate and partial and capricious. Philosophers have generally talked ^{for instance} as though it were obvious that one consciousness went to one body, as though each ^{person} were a closed ^{its} system which could only signal to another by external behaviour, and that behaviour had to be interpreted from previous experience. I wonder whether they would have said the same if they had been frequently pregnant and suckling, if they had been constantly faced with questions like, "What have you been eating to make him ill?", constantly experiencing that strange ~~physical~~ sympathy between child and parent, between husband and wife, which reveals the presence of an ailment and often its nature when experience is silent; constantly lending eyes and hands to the child that requires them, if in a word they had ~~become accustomed to regard their~~ ~~thoughts~~ got used to the idea that their bodies were by no means exclusively their own. That, I suggest, is typical human experience. But you ~~hardly ever~~ ^{don't} get it in examples in the text books. It is ~~the sort of topic which is~~ supposed to be irrational ^{on} ^{topic}. Philosophers ^{when they do} want to edge close to such

- 9 -

questions ^{interplay} as the limits of ~~the~~ personality take their
examples from Psychological Research, which ^{is now} ~~has lately been~~
certified as entirely antiseptic. Great men, simply by
their ignorance of a topic, can lay a remarkably strong
taboo on the mention of it even where it happens to be
entirely relevant. I saw a singular instance of this
lately in a correspondence about the law of abortion.
A writer pointed out that many women who ^{had} wished to be rid
of their child two months after conception were eager to
bear it three months later, and finished apologetically,
"Expect no logic from a pregnant woman". But of course
there was nothing wrong with the logic. The premises
were changed. A child at two months feels like an ailment; at
five months it feels like a child. The women had passed
from the belief, "I am not well" to the belief, "I am now
two people". And the only thing wrong with that belief is
that it is one which is unfamiliar to logicians. ~~Similar~~
~~considerations would, I think, have done a great deal not only for~~
~~the women. I rather think that~~ That, ^{I suspect} is always an unphilosophic
objection.

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