

-2 JUL 1959

Reprint from Inquiry No. 2 - 1958 - Vol. 1.

392  
Varia

son de M. Terelman - juillet 1959

108

P 414

n° 48

## THE THEORETICAL RELATIONS OF THOUGHT AND ACTION\*

by

*Charles Perelman*

Université Libre de Bruxelles.

Owing to the combined influence of marxism and pragmatism, of existentialist as well as of scientific trends — which claim to be anti-metaphysical —, contemporary philosophy, when it examines the theoretical relations of thought and action, gives without hesitation the superiority to action, which becomes the criterion of the value of thought. Whether it is a matter of judging the value of theory by practice or the value of ideas by their consequences, whether the concrete is said to be superior to the abstract or politics to metaphysics, whether one assimilates the truth of a proposition to its possibilities of verification, in all those cases, the success of a certain action is what ultimately makes it possible for different minds to reach agreement about the validity of a thought. Critical thinking to-day gives little credit to ideas; the latter must pay cash, under the guise of immediately observable effects, for all support which they endeavour to gain. In Aristotelian terms this would be expressed as the superiority of the act of essence, and it would even go so far as to reduce the essence to the acts which are its manifestations.

It is hardly necessary to observe that this actualistic tendency, so widespread in our age, is completely opposed to the classical tradition of Western metaphysics, which in looking for first principles and necessary truths, has, since Plato and Aristotle, seen in rational thought the guide to all action and the basis of all wisdom. The classical tradition does not hesitate to assert the superiority of the eternal over what is subject to time, of contemplation and science of the immutable over practice, production and practical learning, knowledge of what is convenient. Let us remember that for many philosophies which belong to this

\* Delivered at the meeting of the International Institute of Philosophy held in Warsaw, on July 17th 1957.

tradition, — mentioning especially Stoicism and Spinozism, — action is not opposed to thought, but to passion. What matters is not pointless movement, but free action in which one feels oneself genuinely active and not the plaything of external influences, the slave to one's own passions. We avoid them, we avoid sensory delusions, error and immorality, when our behaviour is determined by our own appropriate ideas, by the rational part of our being. The superiority of thought reveals itself in the fact that it is thought which allows us to draw a distinction between action and passion. Only the wise man is free, because his action is autonomous. But what must he do when in doubt or hesitation? Without the guarantee of self-evidence, without being motivated by clear and distinct ideas, may he commit himself? Descartes recognised that "actions in life generally tolerate no delay, and it is an indisputable truth, that when we are unable to recognise the truest views, then we must follow the most probable" (*Discours de la Méthode*, Part III). This is also the reason why he establishes a clear distinction between theory and practice, between what is suitable in the search for truth and what is to be recommended in the actions of life. But is it not understandable that within this prospect the wise man will increasingly renounce action, the conditions of which seem to him uncertain, and prefer instead a contemplative and mystical way of life, for which he will, if necessary, prepare himself by ascetic and purificatory practices?



The two philosophical trends which we have characterised schematically are as diametrically opposed in their theory of knowledge as in their theory of action.

For the classical tradition, true knowledge and free action consist in conformity with an order existing prior to all human action. Human interference is a cause of subjectivity, that is to say of error and immorality. The disagreements of men, their discrepancies throughout history, are equal proof of the imperfection of their knowledge and of their action. A preliminary asceticism is required to repel everything which will estrange them from the universally valid order. Everyone must free himself from his passions and prejudice, from everything that carries the stamp of his personality and environment. The best way of guiding our reason consists principally in a purificatory discipline, which leads one to attach oneself only to clear and distinct ideas; these are understood by means of evident intuitions which guarantee the truth of their object.

Knowledge develops from certainty to certainty, while it follows the good order which progresses from the simple to the complex. Only knowledge elaborated in such a way deserves the name of science. Infallible understanding will result from the proper use of reason — a faculty common to all normally gifted men, and complete in each of them.

A science founded upon rational intuitions would be a perfect image of the reality it describes. But, in order to justify this conception of truth as corresponding to reality, one must presuppose that the reality itself which is revealed to the intuition is composed of true propositions, independent of all human language. The true propositions of scientific language must reflect the very structure of the real in as transparent a way as possible, without ambiguity, and without confusion. The concepts employed must conform with the natural classification of the things.

Like the true proposition, the virtuous action conforms to an established order. The free action of the wise man will follow the objective rules of morality and natural law revealed to him by his reason. From St. Augustine to Leibniz, the Christian tradition of philosophy, including St. Thomas, Duns Scotus and Descartes, finds in God a guarantee to human thought. Since the divine intelligence knows in advance the solution of all problems, and makes these known to us by natural and supernatural enlightenment, Christian optimism gives confidence to the philosopher. The Christian rationalist knows that all problems have their solution within eternity, and to discover it he only needs to exercise skilfully his natural faculties. It is fully understandable why an atheistic rationalism cannot boast the assurance of a Descartes, and cannot advance the same intellectual imperialism. It must reduce the scope of its assertions to the single field to which exact science appears to provide a key, declaring the normative field, the rules of which should govern our action, as being beyond reason. Thought, capable of knowing the real, becomes incapable of justifying human behaviour rationally. One has to give up a science of ends, for these are alien to the real. Only a descriptive science can base itself on facts. That which ought to be not being the image of what is, there is no truth in the normative field. The latter eludes rational knowledge: the ideal of practical reason proves to be an illusion, if not a contradiction in terms.

•

Whatever the difficulties of the classical tradition, and however insurmountable they may appear, it has least the advantage of having produced

coherent theories of truth, reason and freedom. As to the contemporary schools, for which neither truth nor freedom conform to a pre-established order, and which refuse to see in reason an immutable faculty, can these schools offer us satisfactory criteria for what is a valid thesis, a reasonable choice, a justifiable decision? This is, in effect, how questions relative to truth, freedom and reason must be formulated in a philosophy which asserts the superiority of action over thought. It is not enough to say that every assertion pre-supposes action; that we regard as true the theses on which we are prepared to base our behaviour; and that the success of the latter alone guarantees the appropriateness of our ideas: it is also required that we be able to point out the criteria of effective action and reasonable choice and to define the conditions of error and failure. All this demands a theory of practical reason, all the more indispensable because it must furnish at the same time rules of action and of thought. This theory moreover has to avoid the difficulties of classical philosophy.

I should like to discuss one or two suggestions which seem to me to provide a solution to the problem with which we are concerned.

In classical philosophy theories of knowledge have considered the individual as being alone in the presence of the universe. Whether the individual's thought develops as a result of his experience of the real, or whether reality is the reflection of rational thought, true thought appears to be that which corresponds to the real. But, in fact, interposed between the individual and the universe is his social environment with its traditions, language and technology. Before arriving at a personal outlook, each man has undergone a moral, political or religious education and has been initiated into one or other of the innumerable sciences and technologies of his age. *Ab initio* all knowledge is tradition, instruction and conformity. Not only language, common as well as technical, but also the rules and methods of verification and proof are elaborated by tradition and taught by initiation, prior to creative work. In addition to the rules and critical methods common to all exercise of thought, each discipline develops procedures and specific methods which enable it to discriminate between what is relevant and what is not in its proper sphere of research. In this way, each intellect is conditioned by its training and education. All ready-made knowledge, passed on from generation to generation, seems natural and conformable to the real; it raises scarcely any problems as long as rules and methods which have already been elaborated can be applied without difficulty to new situations. But if a difficulty does arise, if a problem presents itself where

all the known methods are unable to afford a solution, then a creative effort immediately becomes necessary. It becomes necessary to invent new procedures or to adapt old techniques, to formulate a new theory which will require the creation of a new terminology, to make the previous rules more flexible through modifying their fields of application. In the effort of adaptation to the new problems which result from circumstances or which the inventive intelligence of the scientist postulates, creative thought will modify or question the frame itself in accordance to which the situation had been first examined. Thus every new theory and every new practice, which tends to eliminate the imperfections of one or other elements of the cultural heritage, should demonstrate its superiority over that which it tends to replace, in a manner convincing to the minds trained in the discipline to which the new proposition belongs. This will rarely be a matter of formal demonstration, but an assessment of the advantages and inconveniences of the two theories or practices. In sciences and in technology the arguments will rely on such concepts as coherence, simplicity, clarity, fecundity, yield, utility; whereas in politics, morals or religious matters the following will be involved: freedom, justice, purity, faithfulness or sanctity. All these concepts are more or less indeterminate because the ways in which they are used are diverse. These ideas are defined and modified at the time they are used and it is this flexibility which prevents their formalisation. An argument which uses these concepts will appear the less immediately convincing, the more revolutionary the changes which it supports. One can more easily plead the cause of an innovation the less it disturbs our habits and the schemes of our thought. At their first onset revolutionary changes have rarely been accepted as part of the cultural heritage.

This process of evolution in our ideas and our techniques obliges us to reconsider, in terms alien to the classical tradition, the fundamental problems of knowledge and action, and most especially the concepts of truth and freedom elaborated in view of these problems.

Let us begin with the classical theory of truth as the correspondence of that which is said to be true with the object of the assertion. What does this correspondence mean when one believes that language is a human instrument, more or less adapted to the real and to the needs of communication with others? When we say that a proposition is true, do we not, at the same time, give an implicit judgment on the terms which are used? Let us imagine an account of an experiment by a sixteenth century alchemist in the language of his period; shall we say that his account is exact even if his terminology seems to us outmoded? Suppos-

ing that we could test the phenomena to which the account refers, will we not say that it is imprecise, mentions details which are superfluous and that it ignores important precisions, that it implies invalidated assertions and that we would have preferred an account in a less out-moded terminology?<sup>7</sup> Shall we say that the present-day account would be truer than the old one? But if we use the word "true" in this sense, how can an intuition, by its self-evidence, guarantee for us the truth of a statement? If we set aside language, by which we describe this intuition, can we still speak of truth in such a situation? Is not truth relative to signs? And where there is neither sign nor meaning, can any other concern remain than a concern about data, which are neither true nor false?

It seems to me that all we can say, in this respect, is that to consider the truth of a proposition as indisputable amounts in any case to the presupposition that there is no need to discuss the terms of the language which furnished the means to express it; and very often, in fact, language is not at stake. But are we to conclude from this — whether we be realists or nominalists — that questions of language are alien to the definition of truth?

Personally I do not believe this. I believe that we are satisfied with the language employed, not because it is arbitrary, nor because it is the image of the structure of the real, but because it is convenient to us, at least till further orders: there is an implicit judgment of adherence to the language used and through it to the tradition by which it has been elaborated. When we wish to change the use of a term because it appears to us equivocal, or because it may encourage errors, or because it is based on a unsatisfactory classification, then we do not hesitate to challenge the propositions which until then had been considered true.

We detect the existence of a value judgment in terminological reform. Why then deny the existence of a value judgement in the use of tradition-accepted terminology? To renounce the exercise of a freedom amounts in a certain way to a use of this freedom.

In fact, freedom is not only adherence to a pre-ordained order. It is the choice of a line of conduct. We perceive this freedom when we depart from the automatic, from the routine, from the normal line of conduct. But in conforming are we not using freedom? The integrity of the judge who follows precedents is as much involved as that of the one who digresses. He has, nevertheless, an advantage over the latter in that he normally does not need to justify his behaviour. His decision, by virtue of the fact that it is traditional, does not need justification.

But the one who digresses from the norm seems to render himself more accountable, for he has to justify his initiative in order to make it appear rational. This justification must gain the support of those to whom it is addressed and whose habits of thought are being modified. Arguments will be used which will vary, depending on the frame in which the justification moves and which will furnish the criterion of their relevance. These arguments will be scientific, technical, legal, political or philosophical, according to the frame into which they are inserted and the order which they seek to define or to modify. It is within this prospect that the idea of dialectical reason becomes understandable. Changes in the frame of reference result from the individual initiative of a creative mind, but for this initiative to be recognised, and for the resulting propositions to be absorbed into the frame which it modifies, reasons must be found which appear valid according to criteria that were recognised before.

To define truth and freedom only as conforming to an unchanging and perfect order means to support implicitly a theological vision which is that of classical metaphysics. But when the order is human and imperfect, to define truth and freedom as conforming to this order, does not mean to respect the absolute, but to respect tradition. To conform one's thought and action to the latter means to commit oneself, even if this commitment, owing to its conformism, appears to be normal and does not need justification. But because the order concerned is an order which men have created and perfected, and which remains always perfectible, the concepts of truth and freedom as conformity to an order reveal themselves as insufficient, and they must be completed by a concept of truth which allows us to conceive the superiority of one frame of reference over another and to understand why to abandon this latter frame and replace it by a new one constitutes a reasonable decision.