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# Inquiry

108  
P 414  
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## REPLY TO STANLEY H. ROSEN

by

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1. I took great interest in reading the reflexions evoked by the publication in "Inquiry" of the English translation of my exposé presented at the Warsaw meeting of the International Institute of Philosophy, concerning the theoretical relations of thought and action. My text covers, in a few pages, a vast field, a central one to philosophical thought; its interpretation therefore calls for both some attention and a minimum of intellectual sympathy. I am glad to see Mr. Rosen found in it an occasion to expound his own ideas, but I am not sure that he made the effort required to take effective cognizance of mine.

In my exposé, I contrast a classical philosophical tradition (whose most characteristic representative is Descartes) with the contemporary tendencies represented by philosophies as different as marxism, pragmatism and existentialism. The object of my perspective is to take the doctrines which assert the superiority of the eternal over the temporal, of contemplation and science concerning the immutable over practice, production or technique, the superiority of essence over act or existence, and contrast them with the doctrines which judge the Theory by practice, the principles by their consequences, and assert the superiority of existence over essence.

Mr. Rosen, identifying this opposition with the distinction between rationalism and empiricism, observes that following up my statements, one should situate Hume in the rationalist tradition. Mr. Rosen is surprised to see how much I put into my "rationalism", because — as he writes — "this would imply that empiricism is a form of rationalism." (p. 6)

I am making a point of stating clearly, in order to avoid further misunderstanding, that what I call the classical tradition, starting with Plato and Aristotle, continues with St Augustine, St Thomas, Duns Scotus, Descartes, Leibniz and Spinoza and is *carried on by empiricism and logical positivism*, as it is represented by early Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.<sup>1</sup>

This classical tradition includes all the philosophies which are satisfied with a definition of truth as conformity with the real and see in true knowledge only a reflexion of what is.

Mr. Rosen takes me to task for blending into this tradition Greek with Christian philosophers; he dwells, at considerable length and rightly so, on what differentiates them. He might be the more surprised to learn that, from more than one point of view, the great English empiricists, as well as a fair number of the positivists, equally belong to this tradition. In my opinion, it is not at all a question of confusing, but rather of applying a different principle of classification. I am sorry to have failed to clarify its terms sufficiently, seeing that it seemed possible to identify it with the classical opposition between rationalism and empiricism, whereas, as far as I am interested, I draw no essential distinction between them.

2. In order to make myself clear I shall restate very briefly that the tradition I called classical assigns but little importance, as far as achieving science and contemplation goes, either to practice or to the historical and situated aspects of knowledge. This tradition will recognize the role of practice as far as "doxa", opinion, is concerned, but in the field which is considered philosophically important it asserts a complete separation between valid knowledge and practice.

This viewpoint is held in common by Plato and Aristotle, as well as by thinkers such as Descartes. One has but to recall the Greek word *theoria* which means contemplation, and compare it with the meaning acquired by the word "theory" in modern thought, in order to understand the change in perspective to which I would like to draw attention.

The tradition I call classical includes all those who believe that by means of self-evidence, intuitions — either rational or empirical — or supernatural revelation, the human being is capable of acquiring knowledge of immutable and eternal truths, which are the perfect and imperfect reflexion of an objective reality. There is nothing unusual in the fact that various thinkers of the classical trend would differ on a great number of points, nor in the fact that Christian thinkers present some particularities alien to Greek philosophy.

Socrates would be accepted by Mr. Rosen as a representative of the Greek tradition which, though asserting the superiority of the absolute value of reason, does not believe that the latter could furnish us with precise rules of action, for all knowledge according to this tradition is "open to continuous correction, permanently and intrinsically incomplete" (p. 15). This certainly is not the viewpoint of Aristotle, for whom no error is possible as far as fundamental truths are concerned.

It is desirable that an exact historical study should not only bring out differences between Greek and Christian thinkers but should also make an effort not to confuse various Greek philosophers between themselves.

3. In the second paragraph of his article, Mr. Rosen endeavours to show how nonsensical it is to try to make action provide a criterion for thought.

It all depends on the meaning attached to such an expression. The superiority of action over thought is, in my opinion, simply tantamount to refuting that the truth of a statement should stem exclusively from intuition, self-evidence or revelation, and to implying that elements furnished by practice, by decision and choice are involved in every knowledge. It is tantamount to asserting the superiority of *practical reason*, which implicates the refutation of an outright separation between thought and action.

At this point, Mr. Rosen's views are fairly akin to mine, and I could share his criticism concerning Hume's position, which Mr. Rosen is somewhat inclined to identify with my own ideas.

4. Mr. Rosen is at liberty to qualify as rationalist any position which attributes to the exercise of reason, i.e. to philosophical activity (and generally to scientific activity) superiority over any other human activity. It gives him the opportunity of contrasting the Greek rationalism with Christian tendencies, salvation of the soul being for the latter the essential objective of every person. It is permissible to characterize rationalism, as Mr. Rosen does, from an axiological viewpoint, whereas we usually qualify by this term an epistemological attitude.

I will merely insist, in this context, on the ambiguity of the meaning of *reason*, which may constitute the center of an absolute and dogmatic philosophy as well as of a relativistic and critical one.

My own purpose was to make a distinction between two great philosophical tendencies, neither of which, although diametrically opposed to each other, allows an adequate place to practical reason, seeing that the former slights the practice and the latter ignores reason. It seems to me that my effort goes, by a somewhat devious way, to join Mr.

Rosen's own. I shall end by expressing the hope that, if indeed lack of sufficient comprehension opposes us, more comprehension will be able to bring out what unites us.

#### NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> See on the subject my article "De la preuve en philosophie" (of which the *Hibbert Journal* (1954) carried an English translation), published in *Rhétorique et Philosophie*, Paris, 1952, as well as: Ch. Perelman & L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *Traité de l'Argumentation*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1958, pp. 1-3.

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