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Philosophy As A Hobby

By Gordon H. Clark

Instructor in Philosophy

Ely Culbertson is credited with explaining the popularity of bridge by conditions resulting from the depression, for during those unhappy years a recurring problem was the employment of enforced leisure time. Following such a wide-spread experience, it was natural that more recently magazines have featured the various devices by which people relieved the tedium. In many cases a hobby of long standing enabled them to forget their trouble. As might be expected some of these hobbies were absurd time wasters. Others were of intellectual and cultural value, and in a few cases the hobby relieved the anxiety in a financial manner.

The depression, we trust, is ended; leisure time continues to exist and it must be spent in one way or another. Obviously the more legitimate and valuable activities offer the more reasonable choices. If, then, the desirability of an avocation is recognized, philosophy may be permitted to state its advantages.

One advantage which non-intellectual hobbies do not possess at all and which other intellectual activities possess in different degrees, but which is conspicuous in the case of philosophy, is the wide variety of approach. No matter what one's natural inclinations are, some one of philosophy's many aspects is certain to appeal.

Briefly, he begins to philosophize who attempts to understand the relationships existing between any two human interests. It was a philosopher who, in the attempt to unite two fields of study, invented analytic geometry; another philosopher invented calculus; and symbolic logic today is working its way to a more satisfactory solution of the problems of probability.

But suppose one is more interested in history than in mathematics. Is it not true that philosophers have often summed up in systematic form the guiding principles of a closing era? Such might be the case in Aristotle's defining the State as the partnership which includes all partnerships. And this sounds something like the modern totalitarian

state. Here also it is apposite to recall that another philosopher, Plato, for his peculiar reasons, urged the nationalization of gold and an isolationist policy based on the destruction of international commerce. Not only have philosophers summed up the vaguely recognized principles of a preceding age, in some cases, of which Hegel and Marx are striking examples, philosophers have assumed principles which in later centuries become powerful directive forces. And occasionally also a philosopher affects and is affected by his contemporaries.

Omitting zoology with its unanswered question, what is life, omitting many of the spheres of intellectual endeavor, let us consider music as a final illustration of the wide variety of approach to philosophy. Music is one of the finest of the arts and has also been lauded as an exceptionally worth-while hobby. No one denies its value or legitimacy. As a hobby, however, it has one disadvantage which personal experience has impressed on the writer. With some instruments, perhaps with all in some degree, a day or two without practice seriously reduces the level of skill attained. In philosophy this is not so, and once any degree of facility is achieved, periods in which no philosophy is read provide the needed opportunity for an unconscious maturing.

Further, the attempts of a novice to play an instrument turn his evening at the orchestra into exquisite torture. To hear and to see the professional musician playing with ease the most difficult passages in Bach or Beethoven is to drink the bitter dregs of hopeless defeat. Quite likely, this feeling of utter incompetency can be experienced in every field of activity; but in philosophy it is less frequent mainly because there are fewer acknowledged experts. Comparison of oneself with Plato, Aristotle, or Hegel is endurable because first, they are admittedly geniuses, and second, they are all dead. Living philosophers are not, as a rule, so discouragingly formidable, and anyone who tries philosophy as a hobby will find abundant opportunity without the stifling atmosphere of perfection.

But to return to the point, while the orchestra is undoubtedly enjoyable, there is, apart from listening to music, a relationship worthy of investigation between music and literature. And to expand one more degree, there are relations holding among aesthetics, religion, sociology, and all the arts and sciences.

The study of these relationships is philosophy and, when rightly undertaken, it is at least as engrossing and as legitimate as any particular art or science. The specific sciences and philosophy both have their dangers as well as their advantages. Science without philosophy is narrow; philosophy without specific knowledge is superficial. But just as the scientist is justified in running the risk of narrowness, the philosopher is justified in facing his danger, superficiality. And civilization may profit even from the poorer men who succumb to their dangers. Certainly it will profit from the better men who do not succumb.

As we come better to understand the scope of philosophy, we come to see also that a man never decides whether he will philosophize or not; he decides only to philosophize ill or well. The artist, the historian, the scientist, is driven irresistibly to consider the relation of his particular field to the next. The reflective mathematician or linguist must examine his basic principles and consider their derivation. He must philosophize. If he continues, and, if the vast scope of philosophy emerges in distinctness, he faces a magnificent panorama, including the harmony of an orchestra and the harmony of the spheres. The arts and sciences become pawns on the chess board of the universe. Well, call music a bishop if that be more honorable than a pawn, and zoology will be a knight; perhaps economics is a pawn. But the whole is a game not of our choosing; we play it because play we must and even resignation is a play. It is the game of existence, life, and civilization; we are the king struggling by our understanding of the factors of the universe, that is, by our philosophy to avoid a final check and mate.

If all this appears to be getting too serious for a hobby, if it is taking on the aspect of the main business in life, a philosopher would point out that making a life is more of a hobby than making a living and that the leisure ordinarily connected with hobbies is essential to philosophic progress. In professional life a certain amount of work must be completed in a given time or else we do not get paid. Often we are in a hurry to finish and when our work has risen above minimum requirements we let it pass. In a hobby and in philosophy, there can be no time limits; our thoughts are on the quality of the product and we are straining after perfection. Time has no hold on us. If we do not understand a certain factor tonight, we can restudy it tomorrow; there is no rush. We are neither deceived nor discouraged by the illusion of making no progress. Philosophic puzzles are

in this respect similar to other puzzles. In solving them, we make many false starts, we encounter many dead ends, and experience a great deal of bewilderment. On the surface, this appears to be failure, but when, with a suddenness often amazing, the correct solution strikes, we see that our failures have constituted real progress. In scientific research and in philosophy results are demanded, but those who make such demands sometimes fail to see that a negative result is none the less a result, that the failure, in so far as at least one possibility is now eliminated, is progress in disguise. Like the negative results of experimentation, so too the blankness of our mind, the daze and apparent vacuity, are later found to be among our most fruitful moments. And without the leisure to make mistakes, without the liberty to disregard time limits, not much permanent progress can be expected.

The process of puzzling out a solution is in itself extremely pleasurable; the discovery of a solution eclipses totally the physical pleasures which content so many. Plutarch, in praising the intellectual enjoyments, compares Epicurus with Archimedes. Was any dinner which Epicurus ate, he asks, ever so enjoyable as to cause him to jump up from the table, run through the streets, and shout, "I have eaten?"

But when one has grappled with a problem for two years, five years, ten years, without apparent success, and then in a fraction of a second, the solution arrives, whether in a bath-tub as with Archimedes or, to mention the contemporary fashion, while shaving, it gives one a thrill unparalleled and an abiding satisfaction which bountifully repays the already delightful labor. Most of our pleasures are evanescent, but a philosophic solution is a joy forever.