THE FORTUNATE FAILURE OF PHILOSOPHY

Harper's Magazine for December, 1926, contains an enlivening lament over the "Failure of Philosophy," by Will Durant. In spite of his frank recognition of the unverifiable quality of philosophical speculations—a quality that did not interfere at all with the acceptance of such speculations as the basis of belief in an unscientific age—the author closes his article with a wish that philosophy might be restored to "her ancient scope and power." He therefore does not seem to recognize the inappropriateness of philosophical speculations as a basis for belief in a scientific age; in other words, he does not seem to see that what he calls "the failure of philosophy" in our present era is as fortunate and as profitable as it is inevitable. Of course there are still and long will be a good number of scientifically undisciplined persons who take their preferred speculations for the truth; if any solitary inquirer wishes to consort with persons of that class, he will still find plenty of company. But the greater part of Durant's article does not read as if *he* would find satisfaction in company of that kind.

He recalls the decline of philosophy "from the great days when she took all knowledge for her province and threw herself . . . into the forefront of the mind's advance." In that early time she "was the proud mistress of all the intellectual globe . . . Now . . . she stands by the wayside desolate, and none so poor to do her reverence. The sudden uprising of the sciences has stolen from her, one by one, her ancient spacious realms . . . Nothing remains to her, except the arid wastes of metaphysics, and the childish puzzles of epistemology, and the academic disputes of an ethics that has lost all influence on mankind. Even these wastes will be taken from her," as new sciences enter and possess them, and make them fruitful.

It is curious that a writer who sees all that so clearly does not see also that the change which he laments is merely a part of the evolutionary and profitable progress that has been made in the world of thought. Speculative and unverifiable philosophy very naturally threw herself into the "forefront of the mind's advance" in early times, because the verifiable sciences and more particularly the logical way of thinking about those sciences had not been developed. Unverifiable speculation was then well enough, but it is not satisfying to-day, because, as Durant elsewhere and very truly says, "the great events in the history of thought are the improvements men have made in their methods of thinking and research." Of course, speculative hypotheses must still be invented not only in philosophy but in science also; but in science such hypotheses serve only as first steps in the effort to reach reasonably verified conclusions concerning things and conditions and processes that transcend direct observation. Unless the process of verification, to which the ancient philosophers lent so little attention, is successful enough to give invented hypotheses a fair standing, the trained scientist to-day ranks them at their true and low value; that is, as nothing more than figments of the imagination which may or may not correspond to external verities, and which therefore do not deserve, as long as they remain unverified, to serve as the basis of belief regarding such verities.

But Durant does not seem willing to follow this course. He wishes philosophy to go beyond the verifiable conclusions of science and to "make vaster hypotheses about ultimate problems on which no verifiable data are at hand. It is a perilous completion of knowledge. It fills out with experimentally unprovable assumptions the gaps in our scientific knowledge of the world." This is as if a topographer, after mapping all the land areas that lie within reach of his observation, should not only draw in the features of unobserved areas to suit his fancy, but should himself believe and ask others also to believe that those fancied features deserve to rank along with the observed features as truthfully representing the face of the earth. Of course, if any one wishes to make perilous excursions beyond observation and verification, he is free to do so; and if he sets forth the results of his excursions in a plausible manner, he will likely enough find some persons so credulous as to accept his results as verities; but it is surely to the credit of the more disciplined students of the modern world that they demand something more than the mere invention of unprovable assumptions as a means of filling out the gaps in reasonably ascertained scientific knowledge. There is, indeed, no more striking characteristic of our intellectual advance than the growing demand for reasonable grounds for our beliefs, coupled with a frank and patient withholding of belief until valid grounds for it are found. Yet Durant seems to think that philosophy, even though or perhaps because it adopts "unprovable assumptions," is a sort of superscience; for he goes on to say: "Science is only the analytic description of parts; philosophy is the synthetic interpretation of the whole . . . The sciences are the windows through which philosophy sees the world"; and in looking through these windows philosophy does not see with "mere knowledge," but with the strongly different quality called "wisdom."

It may be questioned whether scientists will be satisfied with that self-complacent statement of the case.

To be sure, there are very likely some scientists who are merely learned and not wise; but there are also some—one has only to think of such men as Faraday, Darwin and Pasteur—who are wise as well as learned, and who show their wisdom not only in making synthetic interpretations of accumulated knowledge as far as seems reasonable to them, but also in not deceiving themselves by thinking that the unproved hypotheses which they or others may invent about ultimate problems deserve acceptance along with reasonably verified knowledge. And on the other hand, while there are some philosophers who are so wise as to recognize their unprovable assumptions as nothing more than mental concepts, which therefore have no ascertained relation to external verities—indeed, some of the Greek philosophers reached this stage of advance twenty centuries ago—there are, it would seem, others less wise who become so fond of their assumptions that they persuade themselves and try to persuade others also that the assumptions really do fill gaps in scientific knowledge.

No sharp line can be drawn between well-verified scientific conclusions and wholly unverified hypotheses. There are all grades of verification. The proof of the regular rotation of the moon on its axis while it moves at varying velocity around its orbit, as given by lunar libration, may be instanced as an example of complete verification. There is no comparable proof of ancient Gondwanaland between India and Africa, although the former existence of that now vanished continental area is made fairly probable by a large body of consistent geological evidence. As to the recently launched Wegnerian concept of the flotation and shifting of continents, the evidence is so uncertain that many geologists find no value in it. Unproved or unprovable hypotheses are therefore by no means the possession of philosophy alone; but philosophers would seem, according to what Durant says of them, to have the unenviable habit of thinking that they can really fill out the blank spaces in scientific exploration by the invention of "experimentally unprovable assumptions." The scientific estimate of that habit is surely that it is a bad one; and hence that the world is fortunate now that even philosophers are coming to see that philosophy, *as thus constituted,* is failing.

Durant hopes that, in spite of its failure in this respect, philosophy may still include the studious pursuit of several special subjects, such as logic, esthetics, metaphysics, ethics and religion. But it may be well contended that several of these subjects had better be taken over by the modern sciences to which they are related. It is only by a traditional and arbitrary assignment that the strictly disciplinary study of logic is associated with so speculative a subject as philosophy; it would be much more appropriately grouped with the mathematical and physical sciences, where it might be practically taught by the case method so that no formal or systematic course in logic would be needed. Esthetics and metaphysics may be well left to philosophy, although the discovery of "the final and real nature of matter," which metaphysics may perhaps claim as its very own affair, had to-day much better be given over to physics, where progress toward that discovery is advancing marvelously. Ethics may be safely redeemed from the "academic disputes" which have robbed it of "all influence on mankind," by making it an inductive and therefore a truly scientific study of the natural history of goodness; and religion may be similarly treated, to its great advantage. Thus limited chiefly to its self-selected task of making "vaster hypotheses about ultimate problems," philosophy would be to-day by no means "the proud mistress of all the intellectual globe," as it was to Socrates, when he advised that it should be examined well and truly, and followed and served faithfully; it is by no means clear that he would advise us to follow it faithfully if its chief task is to make "experimentally unprovable assumptions." Indeed, if Socrates were now born again, we may well imagine that, in view of his strong belief in the value of experience, he would be less a teacher of the idealistic Plato than a follower of the experiential Avenarius. In any case, wise as Socrates was in his time, our time is so utterly different from his that his leadership even in philosophy is now long and far outgrown.

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Mr. Dumble published some seventy scientific papers during the thirty-seven years of his activity as a geologist. These papers embrace a wide range of geologic subjects. His output is remarkable since during the entire time he was heavily burdened with administration work. Although perhaps the most successful of all economic geologists, his main interest was pure geology. His predilection was for the somewhat disheartening field of the Texas Tertiary.