The End of Metaphysics

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> Whenever I hear someone indulging in that kind of denunciation of classical metaphysical enquiry without any apparent prior comprehension of the issues involved, I am reminded of an occasion in Oxford many years ago, when a distinguished Oxford philosopher (*not* Professor A. J. Ayer) was indulging in similar denunciation, and Sir Isaiah Berlin said that *he* was reminded of a man who had not had any breakfast attempting to vomit; a process as pointless as it is disgusting.

These are Donald MacKinnon's words, not mine. But I sympathize with the sentiments expressed. They were quoted by Nicholas Lash in a tribute to Fergus Kerr.[1] Lash was not suggesting that Kerr indulged in denunciation of classical metaphysical inquiry without a comprehension of its issues. But he had doubts about his attitude to metaphysics. I share those doubts. Moreover they seem to me to have some relevance to the present state of philosophy. It will be useful, therefore, to consider what Kerr has to say.

Kerr's views may be illustrated by his treatment of the "realist/idealist" dilemma. He believes the dilemma a false one, from which we have been delivered by Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's views are characterized as follows.

"Things do not reveal their properties to us as if we were wholly passive recipients, with no contribution of our own to make. Nor are we absolutely free to impose whatever grid we like upon the raw data of sensation . . . There is no getting hold of anything in the world except by a move in the network of practices which is the community to which we belong."[2]

"Wittgenstein with his radical anti-idealism, keeps reminding us that our action, on the whole, is an unreflective and instinctive reaction to the manifold pressures and appeals of the common order to which one belongs. And the point of reminding us of this really rather obvious fact, is to persuade us not be to ashamed of it."[3]

Kerr says also that if idealism "in the philosophical sense, means that ideas are more fundamental than action, or that meanings are all in the head, then it is hard to imagine a more radically non-idealist

[1] *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 82, No. 969, p. 495.
[2] Ibid., p. 487.
[3] p. 487.

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way of thinking than Wittgenstein's . . . With his emphasis on action and life, practice and primitive reactions, Wittgenstein's way of thinking is as non-idealist as any philosophical reflection could be. His metaphysics-free vision of human life is radically non-idealist."[4]

So far, one may get the impression that Wittgenstein's views are what in the metaphysical tradition would be called realist. In short, he holds that our ideas get their sense from our relation to an objective world. But that, on Kerr's view, is an illusion. The realist is no less metaphysically deluded than is the idealist. For both have succumbed to "the myth that speaking and *a fortiori* thinking and meaning are, fundamentally, ostensive definition of physical objects". That statement is not entirely clear. But what Kerr is suggesting, I think, is that for the realist the world can impose its meaning on us only in a manner which is *external* to our activities or practices. Thus he says that the "metaphysical tradition might even be defined as the age-long refusal to acknowledge the bodiliness of meaning and mind"; and again that the "metaphysical tradition just *is* the disavowal of the mundane world of conversation and collaboration in which human life consists."[5]

Kerr's view, in short, is that the metaphysical tradition, whether realist or idealist, imposes a *gap* or *dichotomy* between our activities or practices and the world itself.[6] Wittgenstein dissolves the tradition by showing that the world is grasped *through* those activities or practices themselves. The metaphysical tradition, on Kerr's account, is revealed as culpable not simply on intellectual but also on moral ground. For its effect is to alienate us from the condition of our lives. It is not simply false; it is offensive. Fortunately in recent philosophy, and especially in the work of Wittgenstein, we have an antidote. In dissolving the metaphysical tradition, Wittgenstein has reconciled us to our common humanity.

What is one to make of Kerr's account? Those who are sympathetic to the tradition he criticises may be inclined at first to suppose that his account is based on errors and that these are easy to indicate. For example, Kerr holds that the metaphysical tradition excluded the body and its senses from knowledge, confining knowledge to the intellect. Aristotle and Aquinas are prominent in that tradition. Both distinguish between sense and intellect. But for both there is nothing in the intellect which was not first in the senses. In short, for both there is no dichotomy between sense and intellect; they work in combination. Plato is the other philosopher central to the tradition. In his early work, he distinguishes more sharply between sense and intellect than do the others. That is because he believes that sense experience is unintelligible without certain categories that cannot be reduced to sense experience

[4] pp. 481–8.
[5] p. 488.
[6] p. 489.

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itself. But even in the *Phaedo* he emphasizes that these categories are elicited by the senses. It is through sense experience that we are reminded of those categories which are the source of intelligibility. In other words, Kerr's account at this point seems based on error.

The trouble is, however, that his account involves other errors which seem hardly to have arisen from simple misapprehension. They seem, rather, to have arisen from a deep going prejudice against the metaphysical tradition as a whole. For example, take his view that the metaphysical tradition just *is* the disavowal of conversation and collaboration. In the entire history of philosophy, no one has placed more importance on conversation or discussion than has Plato himself. He held that it is indispensable to the very growth of understanding. All his work is in dialogue form. In short, he portrayed philosophy exclusively in the mode of discussion or conversation. In his *Seventh Letter* he denied that he had attempted, in his work, to advance an overall doctrine or system. He denied, indeed, that writing is an adequate form for the development of philosophical understanding. It can arise only through a living exchange between embodied individuals. Plato's work left its stamp on the whole metaphysical tradition. It is essentially dialectical or dialogic. Medieval philosophy, for example, is very frequently in the form of question and answer, the answers being divided between those that are for and those that are against a given thesis, the aim being to arrive at the correct conclusion by working dialectically through the opposing opinions. One may say that the whole tradition conceives of philosophy as essentially dialectical and collaborative. In short, Kerr has denied to the tradition what is in fact one of its most obvious features.

The above error, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, seems too big to be a simple blunder. Kerr is reflecting a prejudice which is not his alone but which runs through the philosophy of the modern age. It is idle to tackle error without first addressing the prejudice that occasions it. To address a prejudice we must consider how it has arisen. We must turn to the history of philosophy.

Let us begin with the "gap" or "dichotomy" to which Kerr refers. He is referring to the sense that there is a problem about the relation between mind and world. There seems to be a "gap" between the two. Now it is distinctive of the metaphysical tradition that nowhere within it do we find a sense that there is any problem about the relation between mind and world. Nowhere does the so-called gap appear. Indeed it is often acknowledged that the gap first appears in *modern* philosophy. It is usually attributed to the philosophy of Descartes and especially to the radical distinction he drew between mind and body. In fact this distinction was forced on Descartes not by his *philosophy* but by his *physics*. He followed Galileo in holding that the physical world can be explained in purely quantitative terms. In attempting to develop a purely quantitative physics, Galileo was confronted by a problem. Many physical

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properties seem qualitative rather than quantitive. Consider, for example, the difference between red or blue. It is not that the one contains *more* or *less* of what is contained in the other, the difference seems purely qualitative and therefore incapable of being handled in quantitative terms. Galileo solved this problem by attributing all qualitative properties to the mind of the observer. The qualitative properties of an object are secondary; the quantitative ones, primary. But it is only the primary ones that really belong to the object; the secondary ones belong to the mind. Here we have a genuine dichotomy. A dichotomy holds among pairs which exhibit incompatible properties. Galileo has defined the properties of matter so as to exclude those of mind and the properties of mind so as to exclude those of matter. Here, in short, is the true source of the "gap" or "dichotomy" which Kerr attributes to the metaphysical tradition.

Let us note that the source of the dichotomy is not in philosophy at all, whether metaphysical or otherwise. It is in physical science. Indeed the more physical science developed the more acute became the problem of the relation between mind and world. Especially significant are the developments in physiology. The point has been well made by Kemp Smith.

"So long as the eyes can be regarded as windows through which the mind can look out, every observer may directly apprehend the real external objects. But when it is discovered that the eyes are not exits but only entrances, that they are not passages through which the mind may issue out but only entrances, through which currents pass into the brain, the mind then appears to be shut oft from direct communion with the external objects . . .".[7]

Perception, in common experience, seems intentional. In short, it takes an object. My awareness runs from myself to the object of which I am aware. In physiology, the relation seems to run the other way. The object, as cause, initiates a chain which ends with an event in my mind. The question naturally arises of how an event thus subjective can provide knowledge of what is at the other end of the chain. Here we have the problem of knowledge which runs through the whole philosophy of the modern age. No such problem occurred to the main thinkers in the metaphysical tradition, for none of them supposed that knowledge has its source in purely subjective experience. For them, the world is a cosmos or ordered whole and the mind exists only through partaking of that order. There can be no problem of knowledge, for the mind is adjusted to the world by its very nature. It is the development of science, not the metaphysical tradition, that has alienated us from the world.

[7] *The Credibility of Divine Existence*, London, Macmillan, 1967, p. 163.

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With hindsight, it should be evident that Galileo made a disastrous blunder. The blunder did not consist in treating the material world in quantitative terms. That is a method or technique which has proved fruitful but which, like any other, is bound to have its limitations. The blunder consisted in his treating a mere method or technique as though it revealed the absolute nature of the material world. It is this which produced the "gap" or "dichotomy". Much the same point applies to the development of physiology. No dichotomy occurs so long as physiology is treated simply as indicating certain conditions necessary for perception. It occurs only when physiology is treated as supplying a sufficient explanation for perception itself.

Unfortunately, from the 17th century onwards, the prestige of science was such that the absolute nature of scientific claims was accepted even by philosophers. It became axiomatic that a problem about the relation between mind and world could not have arisen from science. It could have arisen only in the confused understanding of philosophers themselves. Consequently it was the task of philosophers to remove the problem, or rather to "dissolve" it, i.e., to show that it is merely apparent. Moreover they had to attempt this task whilst accepting that matter is purely quantitative and sensory experience entirely subjective. In short, they had to remove the problem whilst accepting all the conditions that give rise to it.

For all that, there has been no lack of such attempts. It was Kant's which has proved the most fateful. Kant attempted to solve the problem of the relation between mind and world by arguing that the world as known is internally related to the categories of the mind. The world conforms itself to mind. Hence there can be no gap between the two. Mind and world are one. But there is still a problem. An internal relation is one of necessary dependence. To say that the world is internally related to the categories of the mind seems to imply that without the human mind the very world would not exist. That is not plausible. Kant's attempt to solve this problem gave rise to yet another dichotomy, perhaps the most fateful of all. This is the dichotomy between the *immanent* and the *transcendent*. He argued that it is only the world as known, or *phenomenal*, which is immanent in, or internally related to, the categories of mind. The world itself, or *in* itself, is transcendent or noumenal. In short, it is radically distinct from the categories of the mind. As such it cannot be known at all. Here, again, is a genuine dichotomy. The transcendent and immanent are so defined as to exclude one another.[8]

[8] In fact Kant was inconsistent in handling this dichotomy. Sometimes in his work it ceases to be a dichotomy and becomes the distinction between appearance and reality. But that is irrelevant to our present purpose.

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Now that dichotomy is entirely alien to the metaphysical tradition. In that tradition, the human mind is internally related to the world in the sense that it necessarily depends upon it. But the world is not necessarily dependent on the human mind. Rather it transcends it. A simple example will illustrate the point. Being a bachelor necessarily depends on being a male. But obviously one can be a male without being a bachelor. Indeed even an example that simple will enable us to reveal the bogus nature of the dichotomy between the immanent and the transcendent. Thus bachelorhood is a manifestation of maleness. As such, maleness is immanent in bachelorhood. But obviously it is not exhausted by it. Should the institution of marriage disappear, there would be no bachelors. But there would still be males. This maleness both transcends and is immanent in bachelorhood. For the latter is a manifestation of the former.

Allowing for the roughness inherent in any analogy, the above example will illustrate how the metaphysical tradition treated the relation between mind and world. Mind is internally related to the world, for it cannot exist without partaking of its order. But obviously the order of the world is not exhausted by its manifestation in the mind. Should the human species disappear, that would not effect the existence of the world. On this account, the world transcends the human mind but the two are not radically separate. Quite the contrary, the latter is a manifestation of the former. It is through what transcends it that it exists. In short, the dichotomy between the immanent and the transcendent is entirely bogus.

But we must return to Kant. His view of the relation between mind and world was not deemed satisfactory by subsequent philosophers. They reacted, however, not by removing the dichotomy but by eliminating one of its terms. The transcendent or noumenal was rejected; the phenomenal was retained. It was held, in other words, that one could account for the problem of mind and world by treating the world as phenomenal, as wholly immanent in human experience. It is this view which dominated subsequent philosophy. One might describe it as the philosophy of the *radically immanent*. Its effect is the *complete loss of transcendence*.

The influence of this philosophy is especially evident at the end of the nineteenth century, the time when scientism became dominant in the culture. The leading school at the time was the positivist. The positivists rejected the very idea of what transcends human experience. They treated it as incoherent. But we find the same view in other schools. For example, there was a revival at the time of Kant's philosophy. But in reviving this philosophy the Neo-Kantians eliminated the noumenal. This made Kant's philosophy hardly distinguishable from positivism itself.

We must note also the influence of Nietzsche. There are few of his works which do not contain some diatribe against the metaphysical

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tradition. The metaphysicians, on his view, treated the phenomenal world, the world of human experience, as inferior to the transcendent. In fact the transcendent is a mere fantasy. But metaphysics is not simply false. For its effect is to alienate us from the world of human experience, the only real world. It is not simply false; it is offensive.

Nietzsche's view was not at all original. One may find it advanced earlier, for example, by Feuerbach and Marx or even by a literary artist such as Heine. But by the end of the nineteenth century it had become persuasive. Let us note that it presupposes the Kantian dichotomy. Thus it is unintelligible unless we presuppose an incompatibility between the immanent and the transcendent. As we have emphasized, within the metaphysical tradition there was no such incompatibility. The metaphysical tradition was closely allied to the religious. For both, it is precisely through its source in the transcendent that the human race has its dignity and grandeur. But by the end of the nineteenth century such an idea was hardly conceivable. One had to choose one or the other, the human or the transcendent. Moreover if one chose the transcendent, one became an enemy of the human race.

There is another aspect of Nietzsche's criticism which may be noted. That is his emphasis on language. According to him, it is only through a corruption of language that metaphysics has arisen. Again, this view is not original. We can trace it back to Bacon at the end of the sixteenth century. The view is not that linguistic confusion may cause difficulties in philosophy, which no one has ever denied. The view, rather, is that the traditional problems of philosophy are *nothing but* linguistic confusions. Plato especially has suffered from this view. It has been widely held, for example, that his doctrine of the Forms arises simply from his reification of abstract nouns. The Form of Beauty, for instance, is simply the abstract noun treated as a thing. This view has survived for centuries. Heidegger believed that the entire Western philosophical tradition is based on such a process of reification. In the case of Plato, the absurdity of the view will be evident to anyone who is aware that before Plato's time the Greek language was relatively poor in abstract nouns. It was enriched later by the terms that Plato himself coined in order to express his philosophical views. This is hardly consistent with the view that Plato's philosophy is a mere reflection of language. The relevant language was in fact produced by his philosophy.

It may already have been noticed that Kerr's criticism of the metaphysical tradition, no less than Nietzsche's, works within the categories of post-Kantian philosophy. This is especially evident in his treatment of realism. As we have seen, he treats the realist as holding that the world is *external* to human experience or language. In short, Kerr attributes to the realist a sharp *contrast* between the world of human language or experience and the world itself. The

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realist is under the delusion that he can *step outside* human experience or language and make contact with a world external to it. Now that is evidently to describe realism entirely from within the categories of the Kantian philosophy. As an account of classical realism, the realism of the metaphysical tradition, it is entirely incoherent. The classical view is that human experience or language depends for its sense on an objective world. It is indeed nonsensical to suppose that we can step *outside* all human experience or language. But that is because it is nonsensical to suppose we were even *within it*. The whole contrast is bogus. There is sense in human experience or language only because it is *already* in contact with an objective world. For the realist there are not two worlds, one phenomenal, the other noumenal. There is only one world which, though it transcends or goes beyond human experience, is not radically separate from it. Indeed it is only through this world that there is sense in human experience.

Let us conclude this melancholy story by turning to Kerr's treatment of Wittgenstein. It is evident, at a number of points, that his treatment is influenced by the writings of Stanley Cavell. Indeed in the preface to his *Theology After Wittgenstein* he acknowledges this influence. There is a passage by Cavell, often quoted, in which he states what he takes to be Wittgenstein's essential view.

"We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humour and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness; of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation – all the whirl or organism Wittgenstein calls 'forms of life'. Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying."[9]

Here surely we have Wittgenstein viewed from within the philosophy of the radically immanent. On Cavell's view our words, our lives, depend on nothing but ourselves. In short, we are the source of all meaning. Thus we project words from one context to another and agree in doing so. At one point, Cavell seems to suggest that this agreement can be explained by our shared points of interest, sense of humour, etc. But that cannot be so. For each of these itself depends on our agreement in projection. For example we can hardly agree in

[9] *Must We Mean What We Say*, New York, Scribner's, 1969, p. 52.

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our sense of humour unless we agree in our words. The truth is that our agreement depends on nothing at all. Certainly it does not depend on an independent world. Or rather, this agreement in projection depends simply on ourselves. This is why the vision is so terrifying. In fact, this is the familiar vision of humanity in an alien world having no warmth except in one another. The resonance of the passage depends on the pathos this vision evokes. Nevertheless it is a vision we must acknowledge. That is the message of any number of passages in Cavell's writings. The cost of not doing so is that we refuse to acknowledge our humanity. The trouble is that if we do acknowledge our humanity, on Cavell's terms, there is also a cost. We become alienated from the rest of the world.

Let us consider for a moment what Cavell calls our projection of words from one context to another. "Projection" perhaps is metaphorical. But in that case the metaphor is a bad one. For it surely suggests that between one context and another, in our use of words, there is a gap which we can bridge only through our own efforts. Indeed, apart from this suggestion, it is hard to see how the process can be made to appear a precarious or frightening one. But the suggestion is quite nonsensical. A child has learned the use of a word only when it would never occur to him that there is a such a gap, only when he applies the word *as a matter of course*. Nor is there anything surprising in this. For a child is not related to the world through the use of words. When he comes to the use of words he is already rooted in the world. For example when he comes to the use of colour words he is already related to the world through his experience of colour. His use of colour words is an extension of that relation. The impression of danger or precariousness is entirely bogus. It is produced by abstracting human life from its roots in a wider world. The point is one that would have been evident to anyone in the metaphysical tradition.

But it is one that Wittgenstein also emphasized. It is true that the emphasis is comparatively late. In the early 30's, he treated language in abstraction from its context in a wider world. But in his last writings his view is very different. Here he repeatedly emphasized reactions which are natural or primitive. It is not that language has a sense which happens to have arisen through those reactions. Quite the contrary, it is through those reactions that language has its sense. Language is an extension of our natural relations to the world.

This point is best seen by distinguishing between different types of concepts. Take, for example, the concept of chess. Chess is a human invention. This means that the concept or rules of the game are prior to its exercise. But *language* is not a human invention. Nor, therefore, are the concepts essential to it. Take, for example, the concept of intention. It is not false but incoherent to suppose that the concept of intention might be *prior* to intentional activity. It could have arisen

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only among creatures who are *already* related to the world through such activity. In his last writings, Wittgenstein returned to a realism hardly distinguishable from that of the metaphysical tradition.

It is to be hoped that we do not see the end of metaphysics in its traditional sense. But we can dispense with the word in its modern usage. Look at how the word "metaphysics" is used not simply by Kerr but more widely in the literature and you will find it is almost invariably pejorative. Simply to use it, in its modern sense, is to misrepresent what it purports to classify and simultaneously to enforce the categories of the post-Kantian or positivist worldview. So by all means let us see the end of "metaphysics". But let us retain what it used to mean, for that is simply the activity of philosophy itself.

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