SCIENCE BETWEEN PRESUPPOSITIONS AND DECISIONS

BY

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The brevity of this title may give cause for some misunderstanding. This must be prevented. The subject indicated by the title involves the question as to the role science has in the area of practical decisions as well as the part presuppositions have in science. We shall be primarily concerned with the systematic position of presuppositions and decisions. Of course, an exhaustive investigation of especially the former is impossible.

Although it is true that the specific character of presuppositions and decisions varies with each science, they have a primarily general character. That qualifies both of them as philosophical subjects for philosophy takes up a comprehensive position with regard to the special sciences.

Philosophy happens to be a rather peculiar discipline. Among the sciences, it even takes up an exceptional position. An illustration of this peculiarity is the phenomenon of the existence of a multitude of philosophical schools. When examined more closely it even seems that each philosopher establishes his own school. The philosopher is someone who constantly disagrees. It seems that philosophers diverge rather than converge as is generally the case in the special sciences. Each philosopher appears to hold on to his own Winkel für die Welt.

This is not very encouraging, especially when one expects some assistance from philosophy, such as in the case of our subject. However, before we turn our backs on philosophy altogether we ought to consider the fact that philosophizing is done incessantly. But above all we should regard ourselves cautioned by the observation that really all people philosophize.

Apparently, philosophy is concerned with something extremely important to man. Indeed, it is true that in philosophy the most fundamental issues are at stake. The peculiar aspect of these questions concerning man and the world is that man cannot answer them definitely. He is occupied with them, for human existence depends on it, but he cannot solve them completely. It is this experience that faces the philosopher who approaches these same questions scientifically. The philosopher finds himself at the very horizon of human insight: his problems are problems at the ultimate borderline of thought, or simply border-line problems. To philosophize means to be dealing with especially these matters.

Also when approached from this angle it seems that philosophy is a futile pursuit. Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that the special scientist who would hurl such an accusation at philosophy is handling a boomerang. Among these problems are his own unsolved problems also — what is justice, what is language, what is time, space, etc. The philosopher is the one who investigates them.
However, there are answers as well. No philosophical book exists that offers the reader a menu of problems only. It supplies answers and I believe rightly so, although it is a suspicious state of affairs that most philosophical books — in fact, not one escapes this suspicion — create the impression of giving definite answers. For the contents ought to continually show that the given answers challenge the reader to unsolvable problems. It is in fact the old problem which is implied in the answer.

Where then do the answers come from if it be true that philosophy's scientific possibilities are at their very limit? We cannot but assume here that it is at this point where convictions of a faith character penetrate the area of science and present answers. This could be called the view of reason (theoria, intellectus) but such a designation does not bring this faculty of knowledge on the level of scientific exigencies. Such knowledge is to be believed and, seeing that one person will believe something that someone else will deny, there are many philosophical schools. In philosophy, therefore, which we wish to confront with the problem of presuppositions and decisions, we are surrounded by and subject to presuppositions that can also be called scientific prejudices. Science is also acquainted with them. More accurately, there they are named hypotheses. They can never be proved or completely verified.

The difference between the special sciences and philosophy in this matter is that the former places such an expression of faith at its starting-point while continuing from there, whereas in philosophy it remains an issue throughout and if the philosopher does come up with an answer it merely indicates the old problem in a new mold. Wonderment is the beginning of the special sciences; it is, says Plato, the philosopher's very situation.

We hope that in the following we shall not forget that philosophy finds itself in this embarrassment when we reflect on the problems of presuppositions and decisions.

It is intriguing to ask ourselves why it is that at present presuppositions and decisions are of interest to science. It has not always been this way. Science has kept itself aloof from practical decisions for a long time. Until recently, the idea of science being dependent on presuppositions, on a faith, was predominantly considered an abomination. Now that presuppositions are at last receiving scientific limelight, it even is questionable whether recognition of the relationship between science and faith is more than lip-service.

After we have traced the history leading to this interest in decisions and presuppositions, we must reflect on both of them in a systematic way. It will become clear that finally the problem of presuppositions will demand explicit attention.

The newness of the modern period, which has dawned in this century as being the third in the history of Western thought, is derived from especially the amazing power of modern man, a power unknown before in the history of mankind. It is a power that shows itself particularly in modern technology, in modern organization and in science. The significance of this is that the natural conditions in which man by and large used to live are continually being forced back and replaced with a man-made environment. As such, future events are presently almost completely dependent on men and especially on their decisions. The world is filled with man's power and,