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KNOWLEDGE AND VIRTUE

Abstract: The paper begins with the premise that in the humanities of today the balance between knowledge and virtue, between consciousness and conscience has been impaired. Following the enlightenment ideal, the contemporary science has put the major accent on the importance of facts, their validity and applicability. In that way, morality, responsibility and the importance of virtue have been neglected. As a consequence, we have witnessed an increased tendency towards efficiency and excellence in science, which become almost unique criteria of scientificity.

This paper emphasizes the need to search for a new balance and a synthesis between knowledge and virtue. More precisely, it points out to the fact that knowledge without virtue leads to correctness, but only with virtue makes truthfulness. The knowledge existing without virtue can be very destructive when applied. The (ab)use of the contemporary science proves this.

The connection between knowledge and virtue, through their complex relation, opens up big questions of contemporary gnoseology and axiology, such as the problems of truth, sense and dignity. That refers not only to humanities, but also to their protagonist – man. Such an approach also implies the need for reaffirmation of ethics and ethicality in science. Through them, the contemporary science gains new legitimacy thus connecting wisdom and humanity. It is also an attempt of creating a new type of personality in the scientific research, whose basic characteristic is the tendency to restore its integrity.

We live in an age of spiralling speeds, fragmented time, and distracted sensibilities. We are becoming faster, more efficient, and better informed. Yet the reverse of these processes is that humans are becoming colder and lonelier and find themselves at a loss as to the purpose of their lives. More precisely, it seems that the increase in efficiency and velocity was seconded by a decline in humanity. All of which indicates that we have departed from something essential.

Contemporary spiritual situation is marked by an imbalance which is most readily observable in the degradation of nature, the pronounced aggression in hu-

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man social life, and the feeling of alienation in humans themselves. Human life is therefore directed not only to the pursuit of lost time but also of a new balance.

The perception and feeling of this disturbed balance varies of course with one's standpoint and conditions of life. Yet the fundamental predicament, whatever form and manner it might assume, remains a key feature of the world to which we belong.

This sets the context within which I wish to raise up the question of the relation between knowledge and virtue, a question which seems to have lost all relevance in our time. I single out three key points of this relation.

Firstly, the modern society, of which the beginnings may be traced to the 'autumn of the Middle Ages', has built knowledge into its foundations. The philosophy of the new era sought in the human intellect a cornerstone for man and his world.

The European Enlightenment took up the idea as its own battle cry. Enlightened philosophers believed that the light of human reason provided an inerrable guide in setting up social institutions, state-building, and giving purpose to private lives.

This function of the intellect underscored the importance of empirical and rational cognisance. And it is precisely upon this kind of knowledge that modern science was founded and wherewith enabled the taking off of the industrial revolution, leading to a qualitative and quantitative change of the world and conditions of human life.

Simultaneously, this development led to a certain kind of ratiocentrism, in which the noetic was identified with the conscious, and validity of either was subject to the trial of their empiricism and their applicability. Measurability and efficiency thus became the basic criteria of rationality. They found their highest expression in science, that is to say natural sciences.

This tended to reflect on social and humanistic sciences, which began turning more and more to indicative statements and away from the normative ones. Humanistic and social disciplines were required to utter statements on reality and to put aside statements on values. Positivism gave this tendency its definite and most clear-cut form. The character of this knowledge has also profoundly influenced our daily life, where it emphasised speed, efficiency, and keeping up with information. This in turn introduced anxiety into human life, without making it any more meaningful. An increasing demand was placed on succeeding, without necessarily defining a goal to success.

The second point I wish to single out as emerging from this kind of knowledge is its progressive alienation from virtue. Knowledge, scientific knowledge, is obsessed with the questions of how and why; i. e. it studies the causes and effects of phenomena, analyses, describes, quantifies, and classifies them, growing ever more precise and accurate.

But the question of *to what end*, which is meant to provide us with an answer as to the purpose of things, has consequently suffered neglect. That is a question which may not be answered by mere accumulation of facts, precision, and efficiency. It rather demands an answer from those layers of personality in which reside humanity and charitableness. It is from these layers that the need for virtue springs, virtue being, above all, such activity as is directed to the pursuit of good.

In the modern world the passages between these layers have become sparser and narrower. We might say that we live in a world in which the intellect is more knowledgeable and more lucid, but the heart has not grown warmer thereby. We live in an age of naked knowledge, the kind of knowledge which feels no need for virtue.

And it is only in the light of virtue that the world of human values, by which humankind is distinguishable from other animals, comes into being. At the same time, this rupture points to an important distinction between the accurate and the true. The first always pertains to a detail, the latter contains a whole.

It is natural that in an atomised and fragmented world the accurate should suppress the true, as the detail takes up the place of the whole. But so fragmented a mind leads to a fragmented conception of time and life, whereas a purposeful existence is only holistically conceivable.

This imbalance between knowledge and virtue, the mind and the heart, accuracy and truthfulness is becoming one of the defining characteristics of the modern man. The great works of art, the great philosophical, anthropological, sociological, and ethical works of our epoch tell of the man who has uprooted himself and cut off his ties with something essential. They highlight the need for a new balance which should at the same time be a new synthesis.

This brings me to my third point. I wish to make a case for the restoration of the lost balance between knowledge and virtue. I believe that knowledge without virtue may be conveniently likened to money without bullion, government without legitimacy, life without purpose. The opposite of which may be found in the Ancient doctrine of the golden mean and the idea of wisdom as the fulness of the intellectual and the virtuous.

The modern man is likely in need of the restoration of these ideals. They give him to understand that efficiency is not the same as success, that speed need not be the quickest way to an end, that contentedness is not happiness. They urge him to a renewal of the holistic mind, a renewal which shall not only strive to bring the broken pieces back together, but to deepen the picture with new dimensions.

This approach calls also for the restoration of humanistic ideals as the mission of humanistic sciences. These ought to strive to effect a return to man and his forgotten humanity; it is their modern calling to remind us of the oblivion of humanity, a calling which shall be fulfilled not merely by reminding but by overcoming the oblivion. One way of achieving this is the introduction of courses in ethics in elementary and higher education. It is necessary for the mind at a tender age to become aware not only of the limits of its development but of the purpose of its development. This awareness constitutes the maturity of the human mind. That is why I think that school curricula should include a subject on the attainment of good in human life and on virtue, and their importance for man.

Thereby the realm of culture gains ground at the expense of the ruthless domain of politics and the vast expanse of economy. It is perhaps therein that, in spite of all the differences, the possibility of a deeper understanding of others and of a more balanced existence with the world and oneself is to be found. The field of culture as an area of human contact with the other greatly enhances the prospect of

human communication and understanding, and is likely to lead to the elimination of aggression towards nature, intolerance of the other, and alienation from oneself in the modern man.

Finally, the end to which I advocate the balance between knowledge and virtue is the restoration of a forgotten ideal—nobility of the spirit. Knowledge makes us better-informed and more educated. But it is only through virtue that we become nobler. This ancient ideal has been in our time suppressed by the myth of the machine and the obsession with efficiency.

This was precisely the ideal of the luminaries of the past ages, an ideal which was perhaps never attained but to which men consciously sought to subject their behaviour. And whenever it was abandoned the results were dire. For the mind which has breakfasted on one's heart shall desire a human head for dinner.