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Perspectives On The Mind

PHILOSOPHY, PSYCHIATRY, AND NEUROSCIENCE: THREE APPROACHES TO
THE MIND

Edward M. Hundert

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S. Nassir Ghaemi, M.D.

There is a Sufi (1) tradition that forty wise men once were blindfolded, and then presented with an elephant. One man only touched the trunk and described a long cylindrical object. Another touched the tail, another a leg, another the tusk—they each described only a part of the elephant. Only by consulting together could they describe the whole elephant. In a sense, Hundert undertakes a similar project alone in his attempt to describe the interfaces among Philosophy, Psychiatry and Neuroscience.

He opens with a quote from Lord Brain: “The brain and the mind constitute a unity, and we may leave to the philosophers, who have separated them in thought, the task of putting them together again (2).” The rest of the book represents Hundert’s attempt to take up Brain’s challenge. As a psychiatrist with philosophical training, Hundert demonstrates familiarity with the philosophies of Descartes, Kant, and Hegel, as well as a comprehensive understanding of clinical psychiatry and the problems of neuroscience. This is a tall order for the average reader, but if anyone can follow him through this discourse, I think it would be the humanistically-educated psychiatrist. Thankfully, with his familiar and unpretentious writing style, Hundert avoids making an already difficult subject more obscure.

Hundert begins with a description of the philosophical analysis of the mind from Descartes to Hegel. With his “Cogito, ergo Sum” (“I think, therefore I am”), Descartes divided the world into physical objects and thoughts. Kant next made the jump “from subjectivity to objectivity” by insisting that human thought is inconceivable without something to think about, i.e., an experience of external objects. Kant then makes his unique discovery, the categories of thought. He hypothesized that our cognition of external objects is the result of our interpretation of those objects by means of faculties of the mind, such as the perception of space, time and sensations. These categories of thought produce human knowledge, which requires thoughts and objects. In Kant’s own words: “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind” (2). Kant created his own dilemma, however; the passive distortion of objects by thought still does not guarantee that we comprehend the

world as it really is "in itself." Enter Hegel. His key contribution is that the mind is not simply a passive interpreter of objects, but also an active agent in the creation of the human world. The human mind, Hegel's "Geist," helps create the objects encountered in human experience. Hence human knowledge is true, not because subjective ideas correspond to external objects, but because subjective ideas and external objects together belong to a coherent whole, created in the course of human history by mankind itself. Philosophy becomes historical, and, claims Hegel, thereby becomes scientific.

Kant's definition of philosophy had been the search for *a priori* knowledge, i.e., knowledge independent of particular facts. In contrast, Hegel inaugurated the scientific notion that knowledge was characteristically *a posteriori*—it depended on experience for confirmation or refutation. In Hundert's terms, Hegel proceeded "from objectivity to ontology," "a science of the existence of man," opening the way for the end of metaphysics and the beginning of phenomenology, the study of living experience. We live, said Hegel. That is the first truth, not "we think," as Descartes asserted, and not "we interpret," as Kant implied. Knowledge is not a straight line from man to the world, or from the world to man. It is a circle, embracing humanity and the world.

Using Hegel's concept of "knowing as living," Hundert proceeds to examine Piaget's studies on how children construct their ability to know the world as part and parcel of their role as developing young members of the human race. He then addresses Freud's discovery that our thoughts are not merely objective and purely intellectual as the philosophers had imagined, but rather, they are permeated with emotions and, in many ways, controlled by our instincts and emotional lives. Feeling and thinking are not totally different and for that matter, neither are "feelings and things." And, if "all objects are simultaneously cognitive and affective," does not Hundert make his point about the need to unite philosophy and psychology in some way?

Perhaps the most fascinating psychiatric chapter involves Hundert's interpretation of psychosis. He rejects the traditional description of psychosis as defective reality testing, and instead, based on phenomenological analysis, suggests that if the mind's categories fail to organize reality, then the psychotic delusion may be an attempt to recreate some sort of reality. Although distorted, perhaps psychotic delusions too serve a function. As Elvin Semrad once remarked, the only other alternative may be suicide or murder. Hundert then summons up the ghost of the idealist within us, Don Quixote, whose creator, Cervantes, once remarked that at times "facts get in the way of truth."

"Sanity must mean something," writes Hundert (2), a proposition we psychiatrists often take for granted when we concentrate only on understanding insanity. Hundert seems to imply that the mistake of philosophy was that it tried to define truth by contrasting it with error in order to give meaning to human existence. Philosophy has traditionally examined the theory of knowledge as a means to understanding the meaning of life. Perhaps we need to connect that philosophical

tradition with psychological perspectives on sanity in the light of madness in order to better find the path to the meaning of life.

Hundert concludes his book by trying to link truth to biology. Human knowledge is true for all humans, he argues, because it is derived from humanity's biological and social history, as a result of the evolution of the species and of civilization. The brain provides the key to this conclusion, for it has two functions: it is a "mechanism for experiencing" and as such, is a passive receptacle, as in Kant's model. But Kant's mistake was to equate this psychological property of brain function with philosophical truth. The brain is also a "tool for knowing" as Hegel noted; as such, it is an active creator of knowledge, and yet it is created by that which it creates—Nature. Hence it possesses an internal validity: created by nature, it comprehends and shapes nature in return. That is the basis of the validity of human knowledge, a validity that is universal for humans but contingent on who we have become through the evolution of nature and human civilization.

"In reuniting subject and object, thoughts and things . . . we also put an end to the existence of any 'objective necessary' truth superior to actual lived experience" (2). The shadow of giant minds can get quite damp and dark. Hundert has taken an arduous journey through the chilly regions of abstract thought and has returned with a modern, unpretentious way of integrating current biological and psychological knowledge with that core of philosophical issues which, whether we recognize it or not, constantly vexes us as human beings. We would do well to recognize the significance of this grand project the next time we wonder whether some idea is true or not.

NOTES

1. Sufism refers to the Islamic mystical tradition.
2. Hundert, EM: *Philosophy, Psychiatry and Neuroscience*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989