

THE PHILOSOPHY OF FORM

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The philosophy of form by Paul Carus

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PAUL CARUS

**THE PHILOSOPHY
OF FORM**

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Preface.

THIS pamphlet is a condensed synopsis of the author's life work. The most important part of it consists of his literary labors during the last quarter of a century in his capacity as editor of *The Open Court* and *The Monist*. The different problems have been treated in detail in a series of books and articles, and their solutions are here presented in a terse systematic form.

Special attention should be called to those solutions which the author deems to be helpful for the further progress of science and a scientific philosophy. They are: The far-reaching significance of form and formal thought; the foundation of the formal sciences, especially mathematics and logic; the importance of unity and the nature of quality; the thing in itself as form in itself; the difference between cause and reason; the origin of feeling from unfeeling subjectivity; the origin of meaning which is the characteristic of mind; the origin of consciousness and of self-consciousness.

Further, the philosophy of form applied to psychic phenomena shows memory as the soul-builder; it offers a more satisfactory theory of pleasure and pain, demonstrates the objectivity of truth, sets forth the idea of a free will which is rigidly determined, and teaches a new conception of God as super-personality.

Finally we may add that with all recognition of the paramount significance of science attention is called to the fact that non-scientific views, which naturally appear superscientific, such as exhibited in religious systems and institutions or presented by artists or by ethicists, are as much entitled to exist as the world-conception of the scientist.

Labors not directly connected with the author's philosophical views, especially in comparative philosophy, comparative religion, the history of Christianity, Chinese topics, German literature, etc., have not received much attention in this synopsis, because it is intended mainly to serve the purpose of laying a foundation for the philosophy of the future.

May this pamphlet be welcome to the philosophical public, and also to those lay readers who wish to be posted on what has been done in this large and important field of human thought.

P. C.

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Philosophy an Objective Science.

THE aim of all my writings centers in the endeavor to build up a sound and tenable philosophy, one that would be as objective as any branch of the natural sciences. I do not want to propound a new system of my own but to help in working out philosophy itself, viz., philosophy as a science; and after many years of labor in this field I have come to the conclusion, not only that it is possible, but also that such a conception of the world is actually preparing itself in the minds of men.

The old philosophies are constructions of purely subjective significance, while agnosticism, tired of these vain efforts and lacking strength to furnish a better solution of the problem, claims that the main tasks of philosophy cannot be accomplished; but if science exists, there ought to be also a philosophy of science, for there must be a reason for the reliability of knowledge.

Every success of scientific inquiry, every progress of research in the several fields of knowledge, every new invention based upon methodical experiment, is a refutation of agnosticism—the philosophy of nescience—in so far as these several advances corroborate the reliability of science.

Mankind has become more and more convinced of the efficiency of science, and in this sense the philosophy of science prevails even now as a still latent but nevertheless potent factor in the life of mankind, manifesting itself in innumerable subconscious tendencies of the age. We may confidently hope that the future

which the present generation is preparing will be the age of science.

Science and Scientific Method.

IT might seem redundant to ask the question: "What is science?" but we will, nevertheless, answer it briefly.

Science is not the monopoly of the naturalist or the scholar, nor is it anything mysterious or esoteric. Science is the search for truth, and truth is the adequacy of a description of facts.

Science differs from so-called common sense only in this that its work is done with scrupulous care according to well-considered methods and under the constant supervision of a reexamination.

Science is based upon observation and experience. It starts with describing the facts of our experience, and complements experience with experiment. It singles out the essential features of facts, and generalizes the result in formulas for application to future experience; partly, in order to predict coming events; partly, to bring about desirable results. Generalized statements of facts are called truths, and our stock of truths, knowledge.

There are always two factors needed for establishing scientific truth, indeed, for establishing any kind of knowledge: they are, first, sense experience, and second, method. By method we mean the function of handling the material furnished by sense activity. This is done by measuring and counting, by determining propositions; by identifying samenesses and pointing out differences; by tracing the succession of cause and effect; by classifying phenomena; by describing formations or functions, and observing changes; finally by arranging the statements thus gained into a unitary system of knowledge.

By abstraction we learn to distinguish between form

and substance. An evaluation of pure form will yield on the one hand the formal sciences, arithmetic, geometry with all other branches of mathematics, pure mechanics, logic, and all that is kin to it; and, on the other hand, we have the sciences that investigate concrete things as well as definite occurrences—physics, chemistry, astronomy, physiology, psychology, history, etc.

The philosophy of science uses the formal sciences as the organ of thought, which supplies to the sciences of concrete phenomena the method of establishing truth by describing facts of the same kind according to their characteristic and significant features in general formulas, and to systematize these formulas in a unitary world-conception, commonly called "Monism."

A Unitary System.

THE several sciences are traveling on this path; they have instinctively found the right methods which alone can be justified before the tribunal of the philosophy of science, and there is nothing in the entire scope of experience that cannot become an object of scientific investigation.

Experience verifies our conviction that the assured results of the various sciences, the so-called scientific truths, never conflict with each other; they may form contrasts but they never contradict one another. This indicates that the world in which we live is a cosmos, not a chaos.

The statement that the world is a cosmos means that its constitution is consistent in all its details. The world presents itself to us as a unitary system; and a genuine *truth* (i. e., a formula describing the general features of a definite set of facts), if once proved to be true, will remain true forever. Theories may change but the nature of facts remains the same. As soon as a formula has become a mere description of facts it is

a permanent possession of the race. We may see old truths in a new light, we may better and ever better learn to understand their significance and also the relation between several truths; but facts will still be facts and the truth will always remain true. In other words, the consistency of the world is both universal and eternal. At the same time what is true here is true everywhere, and what is true now is true forever.

The Philosophy of Form.

ERNST MACH defines the character of science as "economy of thought," and he is right; but we go one step further in showing why an economy of thought is possible, nay, why it is necessary. Science or the economy of thought is conditioned by the systematic character of the formal sciences which provide us with the scientific method.

The distinction between form and substance is of such paramount importance that I do not hesitate to characterize my conception of philosophy as "the philosophy of form."

All science consists in describing forms and tracing their changes. Matter and energy are mere names; they are empty words, denoting nothing but the objectivity of both things and events. The objectivity of things is called "reality" (i. e., thingishness), the objectivity of events, "actuality," which means that something is doing, something is going on, there are changes taking place. All differences that we can scientifically comprehend are ultimately differences of the forms of reality or matter and of actuality or energy, and all that we do or try to do, be it in art, in invention, or in morality, is by molding and remolding things as well as ourselves so as to be most serviceable and valuable.

The distinction between form and the contents of form dates back to classical antiquity, to Aristotle and

his school, but the contrast has been much misunderstood through a dualistic interpretation.

The modern period in the history of philosophy begins with Kant, and rightly so. The reason of his great preeminence is exactly due to the fact that he saw the significance of the contrast between form and substance, which, however, led him to the wrong conclusion of his "critical idealism."

We may look upon Schiller and Goethe as prophets of the philosophy of form. In fact, the classical period of German civilization as characterized by the names of these two poets, together with Lessing, Herder, Beethoven, Mozart, etc., is to a great extent due to the clearness with which these men appreciated the significance of form.

The Science of the Sciences.

SCIENCE is originally one and undivided and serves the practical purpose of guidance in life. When by a division of labor the several sciences originated, there remained a field which was common to all of them; and this field is the domain of the science of the sciences, i. e., of philosophy.

The scope of philosophy is threefold:

First, it investigates the methods of science, it explains their origin and justifies their efficiency. We may call this branch of philosophy *methodology*, which necessarily includes a theory of cognition, a description of the nature of abstract thought and of logic, and a definition of truth.

Secondly, philosophy summarizes the assured results of the several sciences which would be characteristic of existence. This may be called *ontology*. In other words, philosophy attempts to offer a description of the nature of being, i. e., a world-conception, the essential part of which must be a characterization of the soul, of our own being, in its relation to the entirety