

The Need for Human Understanding

PAUL ARTHUR SCHILPP

If I venture to speak to you today, this is due to the fact that, as I have been growing older—and, more particularly, since that fateful day in August 1945, when a lightning flash over Hiroshima suddenly changed the entire complexion of our modern world—I have increasingly come to the conclusion that, if humanity is to save itself from self-destruction, we shall have to learn to do it together, whether we be from the East or from the West, from the North or from the South, whether we be men or women, in skin-colour, black, red, yellow, or white. And this conclusion has, obviously, had direct consequences upon my thinking as a philosopher and as a teacher.

Dr Arthur E. Morgan is right: the day of the isolated, hothouse philosopher, of the retiring scholar living in his ivory tower, is gone—if not forever, then at least for the duration of anyone's lifetime who has reached maturity towards the middle of the twentieth century.

Whatever purpose the isolated philosopher, thinking away by himself in his ivory tower, may have had in the past, today he must either find his way out into the marketplace of modern life, or else stand convicted of being morally irresponsible. For the question of the further existence of the human race on this planet is not to be solved by scholars in ivory towers, or by thinkers who consider the marketplace below their scholarly dignity, or by spiritual meditators who care not what happens to humanity anyway.

Two deficiencies

It may be platitudinous to put it this way, but it is none the less true that humanity is tottering today upon the brink of the precipice of self-annihilation for lack of only two things, namely, understanding and the method of uplift of the masses.

The second of these two great needs and requirements of this hour will have to be met very largely by pure and applied science. This is urgent, perhaps nowhere more so than in a great country where millions of human beings have been dying every decade since recorded history of famine and starvation. It will not do, therefore, to underestimate the importance of this problem: we shall either meet it—by collective and co-operative human action in the application of the latest developments of scientific progress to this human need—or else large parts of humanity will, if not annihilate each other by weapons of mass-destruction, at least eradicate the possibility of 'free men living on free soil' (to quote from Goethe's *Faust*), the possibility, that is, of living socially and economically free as human beings worthy of the name.

I shall discuss the first of the two problems mentioned earlier, namely, that of understanding. This falls all the more into my province because, as a philosopher, I have spent most of my life in dealing and wrestling with this problem, in one way or another. Moreover, as philosophers, I should say, we can have no more important task

than to aid human understanding. This would be true at any time; but certainly never more so than today.

It will, of course, be immediately obvious to any and all of us that even the limitation to this problem still leaves us an area so huge that it would be absurd to imagine that one could cover the subject either in one lecture or in whole series of lectures. The best I can do, therefore, is merely to call attention to some broad areas and to offer some equally broad suggestions.

First essential

Perhaps the very first task is to understand ourselves. This enjoinder is nothing new: Socrates's famous dictum, *gnowthy seauton* (know thyself!), said to be also 'the greatest teaching of the Upanishads', already recognized this fundamental need. Yes, a careful practices of this injunction is, perhaps, the most difficult of all human undertakings. Human beings are so easily deceived; and, perhaps, the easiest and most universal of all deceptions is self-deception. *The person who has the ability, as well as the courage, to be brutally frank and honest with himself is rare indeed.*

And yet recent scientific developments have given a very much greater possibility to 'know ourselves' than has ever been possessed by man. True enough, most of these sciences like physiology, psychology, social psychology, anthropology, and sociology are still in their relative infancy: they have only just begun their work and are, at many points, still in the purely exploratory stage. Nevertheless, it is still true that, as a result of their work, we can know very much more about ourselves than man has ever known before, provided, of course, that we are willing to learn. This willingness to learn about ourselves should be self-apparent. But

this, unfortunately, is not so. In fact, the sciences relating to man have had to fight for their very right to exist, to work, and to make their findings known, let alone accepted. By and large, man does not seem anxious to take a scientific look at himself. Of course, in this attitude he is possibly more cagey than one might be led to believe, because he may be suspicious about what he might discover about himself, if he followed the path of a scientific analysis of his (human) nature. *Therefore, he prefers to keep on bluffing himself that he is something he actually is not!*

And yet, the Upanishads, Socrates, and David Hume were, in essence at least, quite right when they insisted that, 'Human nature is the only science of man, and yet has been hitherto the most neglected'. I am very much afraid that this Humean complaint is as true in 1950 as it was in 1737. Does that neglect make sense, however? Is it reasonable for us to think that we can solve the tremendous problems of human living-together on this planet, so long as we do not even know our own basic human nature and are not even willing to learn from those who are giving a lifetime of study, research, and scientific investigation to this purpose?

Man's animal nature

I know perfectly well that it has been the general habit, among philosophers, more or less to look down upon the 'measly, groping efforts' of physiologists, psychologists, and other social scientists, who, in their attempts to understand human nature and its behaviour, have so often left out of their analyses and calculations man's intellect, mind, and spirit, and have, therefore, given us—too often—only the physiological shell of man rather than an analysis of this multi-natured being. Far be it from me to deny that there is some justification for this attitude.

But it behoves philosophers least of all among scholars to be so absurd. We may justly chide many of these social scientists for what we may correctly call their sins of omission, but we should recognize their accomplishments. Of course, man is not merely a physiological organic animal; but this admission cannot change the fact, that all men have, among other aspects, an organic animal body with scientifically analyzable physiological needs and functions. It may, therefore, be stated as an axiomatic proposition that an understanding of man's animal nature is essential and for this purpose, physiology, psychology, and other social sciences have made a big contribution.

Should someone ask me: 'Would you have us philosophers thus become one-sided physiological scientists too and thereby add confusion more confounded to the already over-done one-sidedness of purely physical science in the understanding of man?', I would reply: 'Even the philosopher—who, in being a lover of wisdom, certainly cannot dispense with the search for truth—cannot overlook or even slight any truths about man (and man's behaviour) which science can offer. In other words, it would seem to me to be another case of not leaving something important undone just because there are some other things, which seem even more important to us, which we shall continue to need to do.'

It would be absurd to assume that we understand ourselves after we have finished the scientific physiological analysis of human nature and human action. Most philosophers will, I am certain, always dig deeper than that. Man is a physiological animal, and to understand him and his actions, we simply must learn to understand him as scientifically as possible. *But such admission is by no means the same as saying*

that man is an animal only. Man is also mind and spirit. And it is probably, not too much to assert that his unique humanity is to be sought in these realms of mind and spirit rather than in the realm of physiological animality.

Mental and spiritual aspects

But, fortunately for us, although philosophers may have to learn a lot from physiologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and other social scientists, when we have learned all we can from these scholars, we shall by no means be done with our task. We shall then need to probe into those aspects of human nature with which those other disciplines do not and cannot deal: the mental and the spiritual. And here we shall find not merely our own more unique tasks, but by far the more difficult ones. But difficulty is no reason for shrinking from the undertaking. No one knows better than do Oriental scholars and philosophers that such enjoinder is much more easily suggested than acted upon. Because, for thousands of years already, some of your greatest sages have attempted to dig deeply into these areas of human behaviour.

After we have done all we can to understand ourselves, the next requirement is equally obvious. We need to learn to understand each other. This also is no mean undertaking. Particularly when the *alter* seems, as is so often the case, to be so radically different from ourselves: when he is different not merely in personal outlook (or even appearance), but in background, culture, and almost everything else, with the one exception of the fact that he too belongs to the human family.

After all, it is in this area of understanding each other that most of humanity's failures today must be recorded.

When we proceed from the level of ordinary human relationships between people of the same cultural level and economic milieu to that of great social and economic differences, even though still within the same general culture, we find that the difficulties of mutual understanding begin to increase by leaps and bounds. Employer-employee relations, even in the middle of this so-called 'enlightened century', are still far from being truly enlightened, far from being peaceful, or from giving very much indication that there is real understanding between these partners in work.

The capital-labour problems are very far from having been resolved, especially in those countries which are not living under a dictatorship. A wage-war can be as disastrous upon the lives of individuals and whole families as any other kind of war. Yet we are here still in the area of the same general culture.

When it comes to international relationship, it is perhaps hardly necessary to say much: the facts in this area still scream to high heaven that men have not yet even begun to learn to understand each other. And that also within the same general racial background, such, for example, as the relations between Germany and France, both of which are Occidental peoples, both belonging to the essentially same European tradition, and yet both—despite their geographical proximity to each other—having utterly failed to comprehend each other's character, attitude, or point of view. Each of these neighbouring European nations is living in almost constant suspicion, not to say fear and hatred, of the other.

Religious intolerance

Yet all of these differences are still relatively small when compared to those

differences which are basically cultural, religious, or racial in nature. It is at these levels of human relationship that we reach the acme of misunderstanding, and therefore of initial antipathy and strife. One might at least admit that this is understandable when the differences are cultural or racial, or both. But, for me at least, it becomes exceedingly difficult even to understand the violence engendered all through human history by differences in religion.

Religion should elevate man to heights of better character, of greater understanding, of truer insight, and of humanity-encircling love. But, unfortunately, historically this has not been the case. In fact, it is relatively easy to show that religious frenzy and religious wars have been as brutal as anything in recorded history. And this not merely as between completely opposed religions, but even within the same general religious tradition; such as those between Catholics and Protestants; or within the cultures of the Hebraic-Christian tradition, as those between Christians and Jews.

It is easy for someone to remark: But all of these are actually excrescences; such attitudes and behaviour are not really part and parcel of the religion(s) which these people professed. Perhaps. But such an admission can change little on the historical fact that many such wars were waged as 'holy wars', which is a contradiction in terms. So that, in actual historical fact, the rejoinder really will not hold water, except, perhaps, in the sense that even the religious leaders themselves all too often proved themselves to be foreign to the spirit of their own religion. This is certainly true of so-called Christian leaders, who have had no difficulty in supporting one war right after the other, without ever seeing the slightest inconsistency between their professed religion and

their actual actions and behaviour.

If we consider differences between totally different cultures and races, it is easy enough to see how greatly exaggerated the problems of understanding each other become. Will the Occident ever be able really to understand the Orient, and vice versa? Is there the slightest hope that even philosophers of the mystical Orient could ever really comprehend the attitudes of mind and so-called mind-set of the realistic—not to say, materialistic—Occident?

Philosophers disagree

These are not trumped-up questions; they are very real, indeed. And they come fairly close to the heart of our problem in this area of understanding each other. Let me illustrate: Consider the East-West Philosophers' Congress in Hawaii last summer! As one participant reported the Congress to some of his philosophical colleagues in a large Mid-Western American university. 'When we got down to brasstacks in trying to discuss philosophical problems and issues, we soon discovered that we were, in actuality, so far apart in our basic underlying assumptions and points of view, as between East and West, that it became next to impossible to have any really fruitful discussion of major philosophic issues at all. We of the West were not willing to take for granted basic and far-reaching assumptions being made by our philosophic colleagues from the East; and they in turn were equally as unwilling to grant us our own basic Western assumptions. Consequently, by and large, much of the time the two groups were actually talking past each other, without ever really meeting on a truly fruitful discussion of the same philosophical problem or issue.'

If this is true among philosophers—that is to say, among scholars who are not merely engaged in trying to teach others how to

think and to think critically, comprehensively, and systematically, but who also, I suppose, would lay some claim to doing a little of such thinking themselves—what can we expect from anyone else?

In fact, this problem becomes still more aggravated and troublesome, when I give another illustration. When, in the late thirties, under the impact of a remark from the late Professor F. C. S. Schil, of Oxford University, to the effect that he greatly disliked 'this curious etiquette' among philosophers by which, after their death, they became 'desiccated lecture-fodder, providing innocuous sustenance for ruminant professors', who go on to 'speculate safely, endlessly, and fruitlessly, about what a philosopher must have meant', I devised a method which would enable great living philosophers to talk back—during their lifetime—both to their most vociferous critics as well as to their—often well-meaning, but nonetheless misinformed—friend. I did so with the express purpose and intention of attempting to bring those fruitless and interminable controversies over what a philosopher meant, 'nay, must have meant', to an end at least for great philosophers now living.

In this purpose and intention I was, obviously, counting on the ability of philosophers to understand each other and to speak each others' language. That—as has already been demonstrated by most of the seven volumes which have already been published—was, apparently, my mistake. I suppose, I should have known better; but I am afraid I did not. It just somehow had not occurred to me that philosophers within the same culture-pattern were so far apart from each other in basic assumptions, approach, and point of view that it was, as a matter of historical demonstrated fact, impossible for

them to understand each other.

If you will take the trouble to look into the formal ‘replies’ of the various great living philosophers, in the above mentioned volumes, to their contemporaries and critics, you will see what I mean: you will discover that, time after time, the respective philosopher complains of the fact that not only has he himself been sadly misunderstood by his contemporaries and critics, but that he does not in fact, know or comprehend what this, that, or the other critic is even talking about. This experience is teaching me a tremendous lesson: it is, apparently, impossible to achieve the primary and ultimate aim of *The Library of Living Philosophers*; and this for the simple reason that it seems to be too much to expect that philosophers could employ language in such a way that it is possible for them to understand each other. I can assure you, it was not easy to come to this conclusion.

Again I repeat: what right have we to expect basic understanding—from man to man, from culture to culture, from race to race—on the part of the so-called ‘average man in the street’, when even scholars, thinkers, the ‘lovers of wisdom’ which philosophers are supposed to be, find it impossible to understand each other?

The problem of semantics

Our last illustration has already led us over into another field, where the problem of mutual understanding is the basic problem. I refer, obviously, to semantics. To me it is clear that the study of semantics is one of the most important and most needed researches in our contemporary world. Because without an accurate understanding of the precise meaning and usage of the words we employ, it is as good as hopeless for as ever to be able to understand each other. So long as one and the same word is used by one

person with one connotation and used by another person with a totally different connotation, it is, obviously, impossible for any common understanding. Yet the study of semantics is a relative newcomer among serious subjects of study, whether in the academic world or elsewhere. This fact might possibly be a reason for some small hope. We may perhaps hope that by the time semantics will have been universally and seriously studied by vast multitudes all over the world, this fact might make possible a mutual understanding. To this extent, the study of semantics needs to be encouraged. It constitutes an important step in the right direction. Yet, even here, I question whether the study of semantics, by itself, can cure humanity of its basic ills of human misunderstandings. Something even more than that seems to be needed.

This something more is, probably, as much a matter of feeling as it is one of ideational apprehension; it is, perhaps, more intuitive than anything else. It is what the Germans call *Einfühlung*, which is not too accurately translated by the English empathy. Here we are concerned with an understanding which is as from the inside, not merely an external comprehension. You really know what the other fellow is about when you feel with him, when you are, so to speak, one with him and intuitively are sensing as you imagine he does himself. This is the process popularly referred to as ‘putting yourself into the other fellow’s shoes’.

It may be granted at once that, in any final, absolute, or ultimate sense, this is never possible; since it is, probably, never possible for anyone actually to stick himself into anyone else’s skin or really share his feelings. This latter fact is, perhaps, best illustrated by the impossibility of actually feeling and sensing the toothache of one’s

neighbour, if one has never oneself experienced a toothache. At the same time, we also know an exceedingly high degree of sharing, of entering into the experience of another, is possible. Nor do I believe that everything Henri Bergson said on this subject is just so much trash. However, inasmuch as he has said it far better and more pointedly than I could possibly say it, I shall leave this point also with this mere brief reference.

Some negative implications

I wish I would dare to leave out my next point, if for no other reason but the fact that I should like to omit negative emphases. But I fear that, in justice to my claims for the need of understanding, I simply dare not evade this issue.

For, the idea of human understanding does, also, have negative implications. All of us need to pay the considerable price of learning to understand our traditions, conventions, and habits for what they are. If among them there are, perhaps, many which can stand the light of clear analysis and careful scrutiny and may, therefore, even emerge stronger after this process, this will be all to the good. But if, among them, we may find many others which turn out to be not much more than fables, foibles, myths, and downright superstitions, then it certainly becomes one of the philosopher's exceedingly important tasks to dare to 'call a spade a spade'. Socrates did not drink the hemlock just for the fun of it; nor was Spinoza excommunicated for no reason.

There, probably, never will be an age when people will enjoy having their myths exploded and their superstitions laid bare as just what they are. Yet, how can the philosopher be true to himself or to his calling if—merely for the sake of saving his own neck—he fails in this area to pursue the

truth, as he sees it, to the bitter end, if need be? It is precisely this sort of thing that Dr Morgan had in mind, when he talked about the world being 'full of obsolete moralities, held on absolute authority'. 'Ethical standards', he insisted, 'must grow or disaster may follow, as is threatened now by absolute standards of national sovereignty, which means . . . national irresponsibility'. I doubt if truer words have been spoken with reference to the world's present crisis. And I am as certain as can be that, unless we can overcome these outmoded standards of 'absolute national sovereignty' and do it pretty fast at that, we shall all be dead day after tomorrow, just because these standards in our kind of a shrunken world, which has become a small neighbourhood—those standards are a terrible case of inter-'national irresponsibility'.

But the concept of absolute national sovereignty is merely one case in point, though be it one of the most obvious and most flagrant, as the present world-situation all too clearly demonstrates. In each of our cultures there are plenty of useless myths and positively harmful superstitions, which need to be exposed. I am sure, each of us in our own backyard, will find it easy to think of many such 'skeletons in the closets' of our culture, of which we shall need to rid ourselves as quickly and as smoothly as possible. These negative implications of understanding are, therefore, just as important as are the more positive aspects. And no man who would stand in the succession of Socrates and Spinoza—to mention merely two of the more illustrious examples once more—can afford to fail humanity at this point. It will not be easy; but to my knowledge no real philosopher has been promised a bed of roses in any case.

As everyone knows, the philosopher is supposed to be a thinker, a teacher, and a

lover of wisdom. Although, with Socrates, I must admit that I do not quite know what it means to be wise, I am sure at least of this much: no man can really be a lover or wisdom—not a claim to be wise, but only to love wisdom!—who is unable to think logically, comprehensively, and systematically. Thinking thus characterized is essential for any possible love of wisdom.

And this fact is already sufficient to set the philosopher apart from most of his fellow-men. For, such thinking is neither easy nor does it come of itself: it requires years of hard work and continuous mental discipline. How unnatural it is for the untrained and undisciplined mind to think is, perhaps, best brought to the fore in a famous American witticism, which runs as follows: ‘One per cent of the people think; nine per cent of the people think they think; and ninety per cent of the people would rather be dead than think!’

I cannot vouch for the statistical or factual accuracy of this saying; although I am inclined to surmise that the one per cent is still too high!

However, some of our contemporaries would come back at us at once and urge that mere ‘thinking’ is hardly good enough. Thinking, they would insist, might also be carried on in a vacuum. It is not thinking as such that matters, but rather what the thinking is about, and how logically, comprehensively, and systematically it is done that really counts.

After all, thinking upon nothing in particular and upon everything in general may, perhaps, be called day-dreaming or even meditation; and such occupation of the mind may, under certain circumstances, have its place but by no stretch of the imagination could such vague reveries be called logical, comprehensive, or systematic thinking. In fact, in order to be the kind of

thinking which may be dignified by the adjective ‘philosophical’, thinking must have both content and purpose. All of this is so obvious that I apologize for mentioning these platitudinous bromides. Yet there are times when it is highly important that we should remind ourselves of these, platitudes though they may be. And I have a strong conviction that today is one of those times.

What shall we, as philosophers, today think about?

I would say: Let us think about man and about his place and purpose in this world of ours! Which, reinterpreted, is only another way of saying: Let us think about ourselves and about our relations with our fellow-men.

Real crisis of age

Here, you can see, we find ourselves right back again where we were in the earlier part of this article. To that material, however, I shall want to add the fact that we cannot possibly get very far today in thinking about ourselves and our relationships towards our fellow-men without running smack into ‘the real crisis of our age’. It would be absurd to undertake a description of today’s crisis in detail. Each of us is all too familiar with it. That great philosopher and leader, Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, has unceasingly called our and the world’s attention to it. It concerns the question of the very existence of the human race on this planet. And this, in turn, has today, for the first time in human history, become problematic, precisely because human beings have not yet learned to get on with each other, let alone to respect and to love each other. Not having learned as yet even to understand ourselves, we have quite obviously failed miserably to understand each other.

Can the philosophers help to bring

salvation to such a world as this? I trust that what I tried to say in the earlier parts of this article has already provided at least a partial answer to this question.

Philosopher's role

At this point I wish to add one more suggestion, although I consider it almost self-evident that, in the long run, man will not really come to understand himself and his fellows, until he learns to see and respect in every man his brother. For this reason I think it important that philosophers should ever be at work in living in the light of this truth themselves and of teaching it to others by precept and example. Of course, if we have to wait for the establishment of actual human brotherhood on this earth, then our doom is sealed. For the forces that daily tear the world more apart and arraign humanity in two hostile camps against each other will not wait. Within a relatively few years, these forces will not merely destroy each other but all of us with them. We cannot now wait till we build the brotherhood of man under the acknowledged fatherhood of God—good, noble, and true as this ideal is, of which we never dare lose sight.

However, together with a great many other leaders, I share the sincere conviction that there is another road, a short cut, if you will, to the end of at least abolishing war as a method of settling disputes among men and nations, and thereby of saving mankind from the now impending doom.

That road is the road to world-government. I am not saying that world-government is the open sesame to every good or to paradise; it will never, in and of itself, lead to world brotherhood, for example. It can, therefore, never be a substitute for that more moral and spiritual

state of affairs, which we all so greatly desire and for the achievement of which we shall never cease working. But, just as city government is, by and large, able to keep order, security, and peace within the province, and national government within the nation, so world-government can establish, maintain, and secure order and peace among the nations of the world, if it can be established.

Here, then, is a very immediate and a very practical task for the philosopher—unless, indeed, it would be found that he cares no more for the survival of the human race than most military leaders seem to care.

If the philosopher is really a leader among men, he dare not fail mankind in this tragic hour. If he is a thinker, let him think—really think—the problem through and see if he can produce a better, a saner, or a surer idea to save mankind from destroying itself. If he understands himself and human nature—also man's social nature—let him prove it by making use of mankind's experience with governing and thus help to commit us to achieve that government on a world-wide scale.

True enough, this means that the philosopher will have to go into the marketplace, into the highways and by-ways of life, and help to persuade his fellow human beings of the necessity of the step to world-government and of its necessity now. For this I refuse to apologize. The Buddha went into the marketplace. Confucius did. Socrates and Plato did. Jesus did. Gandhi did. I can think of no good reason why we should not do the same.

If enough of us could gain the understanding, spread the word, and keep on working, it is yet possible that we might change the tide of history. ■

* This lecture was given at the Institute in 1950, when Professor Paul A. Schilpp visited India as a delegate to the Indian Philosophical Congress. He was Professor of Philosophy at the Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, U.S.A., and Editor of *The Library of Living Philosophers*.