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Review of “Philosophy in Crisis: The Need for Reconstruction”

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In March, 1955, Professor Bunge published a review of Max Jammer’s Concepts of Space: the History of Theories of Space in Physics. The review appeared in Imago Mundi, a journal that focused on the history of culture and was under the editorial supervision of a distinguished group of scholars from Argentina. In the review, Professor Bunge takes careful measure of Jammer’s work, finds it rather weak when dealing with issues prior to the Seventeenth Century but rather helpful in sifting through problems related to space as dealt with by scientists in more recent times.

Several issues related to this review are notable. The first is that even at the beginning of his career, Professor Bunge was already displaying very broad horizons in the range of his learning while at the same time recognizing the importance of system in the development of a perspective.

Another interesting coincidence is that a year later, in March, 1956 that same journal dedicated a double issue to addressing the crisis not only in philosophy but in Western culture as a whole. Perhaps Professor Bunge would find the articles in that 1956 venue somewhat lacking in rigor and not as sensitive to systematic dimensions as would be desirable. Indeed the sense of crisis to which the title of his book refers has a different focus than that used by the contributors to the March - June, 1956 issue of Imago Mundi.

For Professor Bunge, the crisis in philosophy results from factual or theoretical errors or improper formulation of issues, a certain lack of philosophy getting on with it. For philosophers to move out of this crisis, they need to make sure they write and discuss in a clear fashion, make appropriate use of formal tools and do their work based on the scientific knowledge that is available. Furthermore, it is very important for philosophers to take their work seriously because they are in an excellent position to address crucial, controverted issues in ways that can address problems fruitfully. For him, philosophy is a necessity.

To undergird these efforts, Professor Bunge places his work within the context of a world view defined by “a positive and broad” secular humanism (p.14). Several features of this humanism are worth noting in order to make clear some of Professor Bunge’s basic commitments. With respect to human beings: “The individual differences among people pale by comparison with the common features that make us all members of the same species”(p. 16). With respect to values: “Although different human groups may care for different values, there are many basic universal values, such as
well being, honesty, loyalty, solidarity, fairness, security, peace, and knowledge, that are worth working or even fighting for” (p.14). With respect to knowledge: “It is possible to find out the truth about the world and ourselves with the sole help of experience, reason, imagination, criticism and action” (p. 14-15).

To work toward achieving this “trademark of secular humanism” and its “concern for the lot of humankind,” (p.14) Professor Bunge insists that this be done by granting primacy of place to “systemism” and to “the unity of all fields of scientific, technological, and humanistic research beneath their obvious diversity” (p.43).

Embedded in these beginning points is philosophical materialism. To understand materialism properly, one must accept that matter is inherently non-static or changing and that the defining quality of the change is emergence. Thus, matter is not to be understood as something inert that is out there, but as a systematic and ongoing arrangement of objects. This systematic arrangement allows for the emergence of properties from a given set of objects such that those properties are not properties of the objects themselves. This is far from a simple process since one must take into consideration the composition, environment structure and mechanism operative in the system (p. 42).

From this base, everything that we want to consider from a philosophical perspective can be appropriately understood or worked with. In this book, Professor Bunge explores in particular issues related to human beings and human societies. These issues tend to be the most recalcitrant. They resist being absorbed into a comfortable scientific methodology. He acknowledges that this recalcitrance is justified in that the scientific procedures used to study these areas have been inadequate. He claims, however, that if we understand science as it should be understood and if we proceed on the assumption that everything that is real is a systematically structured emergent material, then progress is at hand.

Much is to be gained from the discussions in this book about studies of humans as individuals and as social beings. His emphasis on the need for clarity, even if every issue can’t be reduced to a statement in symbolic logic, is helpful. His insistence that the elements of reality cannot be understood apart from the context in which they occur is often overlooked. His affirmation about the crucial role science has had in giving access to knowledge about ourselves and the world in which we live needs underscoring.

However, Professor Bunge is more explicit and detailed than I have portrayed. Clarity for him means that in the end what needs to be said theoretically should be stated in logical symbols in order to make evident the logical relationships that hold between the theoretical statements. Basically, there can be no theoretical conundrums – anywhere, at least eventually. There can be no ambiguities inherent in reality.

Furthermore, his claim that every reality is a material reality accessible to experience or reason raises questions. As he states it “all the furniture of the real world is material. The ‘worlds’ of mathematics, philosophy, religion, and art are fictitious, and every fiction is a process in some living brain” (p. 70). Professor Bunge tries to make this claim palatable by insisting that emergence is an inherent dimension of matter. That is to say that something other than what is given may emerge. In other words, the new can appear. One would even have to grant the possibility that one
could create something new, as long as the something new was “a process in some living brain” (p.70). If one were to be consistent, however, one would need to claim that the same must be true of science, along with philosophy, religion, mathematics and art, since science, also, is basically “a process in some living brain.” The problem with this approach is that in the end everything is fictitious although one might want to hedge a bit and say some things are more fictitious than others.

The quandary created by Professor Bunge’s approach is as follows. On the one hand, matter is understood in a rather malleable way so as to include every new thing that emerges and should new dimensions emerge that do not fit our understanding of matter, so much the better, because “there is no reason to suppose that present day theories or matter are final” (p.64). This leaves one with a gloriously expansive understanding of reality that for all its denials even includes Plato’s ideas (while depriving them of external referents) and much more. On the other hand, all any of this amounts to is “a process in a living brain” (p. 70). Is one to take this to mean that all brain processes are the same? If so, there would seem to be little to discuss. If not, we are still at square one, needing criteria that would distinguish one process from another such that in the end it is not all fictitious.

Professor Bunge’s book has much to commend it: its generous humanism, its zeal for logical clarity, its insistence on the importance of science as a source of knowledge, its attempt to formulate an understanding of how we organize our facts and concepts. The only misgivings I have are those elaborated above, plus a certain lack of clarity about how any given human being could have a sense of identity that is more than a label.

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