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E.F. Schumacher's Critique of Modern Philosophy

by

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One might find it necessary to utilize a map when in need of direction, and we will most likely associate the word ‘map’ with geography. This association comes naturally to most people, but what about the utilization of a philosophical map? Ernst Friedrich Schumacher, a German born philosopher most renowned for his work as an economic thinker, is highly recognized for his criticisms of modern philosophy and his post-modern turn to pre-modern philosophy. Schumacher uses the metaphor of mapmaking to define his method of philosophy. The modern approach to philosophy is that science is able to show us all that can be proven. Schumacher rejects this view, considering the modern project lopsided, in that it restricts our abilities as human beings, and limits us from acquiring knowledge we are capable of attaining. Initially, this paper will briefly review Schumacher’s criticism of the modern project. After discussing Schumacher’s various criticisms, evidence will be provided for why Schumacher’s method of mapmaking should be the preferred alternative to modern philosophy. Following the explication of Schumacher’s method, this paper will defend E.F. Schumacher’s return to pre-modern philosophy against any objections that a modern philosopher like David Hume would offer.

E.F. Schumacher’s critique of the modern project argues against the idea that the only things that are provable, science can show. The modern project should be considered one-sided, as it does not allow us to think to our full potential. Schumacher notes that, “We have seen that the modern sciences, in a determined effort to attain objectivity and precision, have indeed restricted the use of the human instruments of cognition in a somewhat extreme way...”¹ Here Schumacher is acknowledging his disapproval of the limitations that modern science has labeled us with, he also adds that, “...according to some scientific interpreters, to observations by

¹ Ernst Friedrich Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1977), 74-75.

colour-blind, non-stereoscopic vision against quantitative scales.’² We have been using science for centuries, but how do we know we have been using science the right way? Science creates things that may seem to be helping us, but are in fact hurting us more than we are aware. To use global warming as an example, one could make the claim that the modern criterion is at fault. It is among popular belief among scientists and climatologists that the primary cause of global warming is the burning of fossil fuels. Though fossil fuels power most of our cars in the modern world, the downside is that we are slowly damaging the environment and possibly heading towards catastrophic consequences. That is just one of many examples that could be given as to why science may be hurting us as much as it is helping us. It would not be wise to continue with this modern method, as its foundation is built upon weak principles. Science is not to be blamed, as it is useful in many instances, but rather the modern criterion of proof that has established itself in science.

E.F. Schumacher identifies various consequences for epistemology, but does admit that science is still good wherever it works. When using modernist epistemology, we need to note where and why it works best, and where and why it does not work. Schumacher breaks man’s knowledge down so it matches the structure of reality. There are two types of knowledge that he refers to: ‘knowledge for understanding’ and ‘knowledge for manipulation.’³ Schumacher considers ‘knowledge for understanding’ to be the highest form of knowledge, and ‘knowledge for manipulation’ to be the lowest; to have understanding is to have knowledge of what to do, and this is aided by manipulation, which is required for us to act effectively and know how to do something in the material world.⁴ The modern view does not give a good definition of when we

² Ibid., 74-75.

³ Ibid., 69.

⁴ Ibid., 69.

should choose to manipulate, which leads Schumacher to reject scientism. The scientific method actually blinds us to the significance of the world. The significance of the world can be found in our ability to reason well and manipulate our understanding so that we can navigate through the world. For this reason we should also reject materialism and reductionism, as they both hold that everything is just equal to the sum of its parts. For the same reasons, Schumacher also rejects the “Doctrine of Evolutionism” as a complete account of the origin and meaning of life on Earth, not to be confused with evolution, which is just concerned with the biological evolution of a species.

Schumacher’s critique of materialistic scientism leads him to disagree with Descartes and his rationalistic principles. Materialistic scientism does not allow us to achieve knowledge about the person. It is in the original writings of Descartes that this problem began. Schumacher states “Descartes broke with tradition, made a clean sweep and undertook to start afresh, finding out everything by himself. This kind of arrogance became the ‘style’ of European philosophy.”⁵

Descartes is brought up numerous times throughout the text, as Schumacher likes to use him as an example of a materialistic scientism. It may seem that the quote of Descartes is in support of him, but it is actually there to point out where this weakness in modern philosophy began.

Another materialistic scientist that comes up is David Hume. Though Schumacher and Hume offer two completely different perspectives, they both disagree with René Descartes’ rationalistic point of view.

David Hume is a British philosopher renowned for his contributions to empiricist philosophy, and his philosophy is also considered to be a form of materialistic scientism. Hume believed knowledge could be gained only from experience, as his criterion is based on the

⁵ Ibid., 18.

relation of ideas and impressions.⁶ Hume defines impressions as reliable perceptions of what we directly experience from the world.⁷ Our thoughts and ideas are different, as they have more to do with our imagination; thoughts and ideas are not possible without our impressions of sensation.⁸ An idea without a sense of impression to back it up should not be accepted, as it could be easily contradicted.⁹ If someone claims that it is raining outside, he would have to back it up with a sense of impression. Opening a window would allow a person to see to rain outside and without contradiction. This modern view works only in select instances though, as this perspective misses some parts of reality.

Schumacher does not completely reject the modern project, as he believes we can use this method wherever it works. The problem is using it where it does not work. There are many examples of this that one can come up with. When it comes to describing a person, David Hume and E.F. Schumacher each have a different perspective. Hume would be limited to using strictly his impressions of sensation to describe a person, while Schumacher would deny that you could give an adequate description of a person by utilizing impressions of sensation only. As human beings, we are capable of thinking at a much higher level than by just using our sense impressions. Schumacher states, “Our five bodily senses make us *adequate* to the lowest Level of Being-inanimate matter. But they can supply nothing more than masses of sense data, to “make sense” of which we require abilities or capabilities of a different order.”¹⁰ He goes on to say that, without these “abilities or capabilities of a different order” we would not be capable of recognizing form, pattern, regularity, harmony, rhythm, meaning, consciousness, self-awareness,

⁶ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Charlottesville: InteLex Corporation, 2000), 14.

⁷ Ibid., 14.

⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁹ Ibid., 14.

¹⁰ Schumacher, “A Guide,” 40.

and life.¹¹ To draw from the example of describing a person, David Hume would be able to characterize a person's physical appearance, but are his impressions of sensation enough to answer the question of whether or not that person is alive? What about if that person is in love? All human beings are different in the capabilities of their minds, so it should be considered unfair to limit us all to sense impression, thus labeling us all equal. We are all capable of thinking at a different level, and must have some sense beyond the five that Hume defines as our only impressions of the world.

Schumacher agrees with the traditional philosophical and religious views that the world is a hierarchy.¹² He thinks it should be broken into four distinct levels of being: mineral, plant, animal, and human. He recognizes modern science's rejection of this perspective as one of its largest mistakes, as he believes there are critical characteristics that differentiate each Level of Being. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the lowest level of being is the mineral, which is characterized as inanimate matter. The second Level of Being, plants or vegetation, is easily differentiated from mineral as it carries the quality of life. Humans have the natural ability to distinguish between life and death, yet science disregards this ability because "no such force has ever been found to exist."¹³ Animals are the next Level of Being; like plants they have life, but what differentiates them from plants and minerals is their consciousness. We are able to recognize consciousness in animals simply because we can knock them unconscious and observe that the 'life' aspect of them continues.¹⁴ The next jump in the Levels of Being is from animal to human, which is the highest Level of Being we are capable of recognizing. We are considered of higher intelligence than animals, but what is it that allows us to recognize this? Humans have the

¹¹ Ibid., 40.

¹² Ibid., 40.

¹³ Ibid., 16.

¹⁴ Ibid., 16.

power to be aware of his thinking, unlike any of the other four Levels of Being. We could label this power ‘self-awareness’ but Schumacher cautions us to remember this is just a label and not a definition. By viewing the world with the four Levels of Being in mind we can more effectively gain an understanding of what makes us human than we would if we viewed the world through modern science’s eyes.

Modern science tries to make sense of things through fields such as physics and chemistry. Physics and chemistry are limited in that they only deal with minerals, the lowest Level of Being. Schumacher denounces modern science by stating, “At this level, x, y, and z- life, consciousness, and self-awareness- do not exist (or, in any case, are total inoperative and therefore cannot be noticed).”¹⁵ Therefore, science can tell us nothing about the characteristics of life. Schumacher goes on to say, “Physics and chemistry tell us nothing, *absolutely nothing*, about [life, consciousness, and self-awareness].”¹⁶ From Schumacher’s perspective, it can be speculated that modern science implies that the concept of life is beyond our limits of understanding. The one-sided approach to science can be avoided though, as Schumacher offers what should be the preferred alternative to the modern project.

Ernst Friedrich Schumacher highly favored the metaphor of mapmaking and applied it to philosophy. Schumacher refers to philosophical maps as our personal guide for how we choose to interpret the world. We should reject the current philosophical and scientific maps that the modern project offers because they are lopsided and narrow-minded. The main problem Schumacher finds with modern science and philosophy is the weak style in which these maps are produced. Schumacher recognizes, “the first principle of the philosophical mapmakers seemed

¹⁵ Ibid., 19.

¹⁶ Ibid., 19.

to be ‘If in doubt, leave it out,’ or put it into a museum.”¹⁷ This narrow approach is originally coined by René Descartes and should be disregarded, as it would be very difficult to reach new grounds with this mind-set. Schumacher offers an alternative to this thinking: “Would it not be wiser to turn the principle into its opposite and say: ‘If in doubt, show it prominently’? After all, matters that are beyond doubt are, in a sense, dead; they constitute no challenge to the living.”¹⁸ We must deviate from the guidelines the modern project sets for map-making and use the tools Schumacher gives us.

We are not given a map at birth. We must create our own; but what exactly should we put on the map? Certainly we should not just throw everything onto the map, as that will lead to error. Only the most important and obvious things deserve a place on the map. One would have to distinguish what is important and obvious in order to avoid mistakes. Schumacher agrees with the pre-modern view that we should accept the common and undeniable aspects of human experience, along with those things observed by especially perceptive people.¹⁹ In other words, we should heed the opinions of the many and the wise.²⁰ Schumacher’s post-modern turn to pre-modern philosophy is the re-appropriating of the method set by pre-modern philosophy. We must have some form of faith in the many and the wise, as faith can be defined as good reasoning.²¹ If we simply disregard our ability to reason well as higher conscious and self-aware beings, we think at a level far under our human potential. Schumacher believes it is arbitrary to ignore our own experience or to deny what the wise have to say. We should be confident when the opinions of the many and the wise agree, and we must carefully consider how to proceed when they are in

¹⁷ Ibid., 3.

¹⁸ Ibid., 3.

¹⁹ Ibid., 40-41.

²⁰ Ibid., 41.

²¹ Ibid., 41.

conflict.

A modern philosopher such as David Hume would surely disagree with E.F. Schumacher's return to the pre-modern project. David Hume may try to defend the modern project by pointing out that if we start to use faith and reason to acquire knowledge, we are going to get lost all over again. Hume's criticism of Schumacher's method is that, by turning back to pre-modern philosophy, we are essentially sending an open invitation to weak ideas. For one to accept something as indubitably true, she must also be aware that she is welcoming the risk of error. If we are to limit ourselves to only accepting things that we consider beyond doubt, we are of course minimizing the risk of error, but by the same token we are maximizing the risk of missing out on useful and important information. Schumacher quotes Saint Thomas Aquinas, saying he taught, "The slenderest knowledge that may be obtained of the highest things is more desirable than the most certain knowledge obtained of lesser things."²² Schumacher defines 'slender knowledge' as uncertain knowledge. He also indicates that, "Maybe it is necessarily so that the *higher* things cannot be known with the same degree of certainty as can the *lesser* things, in which case it would be a very great loss indeed if knowledge were limited to things beyond the possibility of doubt."²³ If people decide to apply the modern perspective, they are in danger of missing out on the most important things in life. As human beings we have the capability to not only reason, but to reason well, and should we choose not to use that ability we are not acting at our full potential. Hume's attempt to ensure that we never get lost limits us to only saying the most trivial things, whereas Schumacher challenges us to go beyond that, so that we do not risk missing out on "what may be the subtlest, most important, and rewarding things in life."²⁴

²² Thomas Aquinas, "Summa theologiæ," (1274): I,1,5 ad 1. Found in "A Guide."

²³ Schumacher, "A Guide," 3.

²⁴ Ibid., 3.

Ernst Friedrich Schumacher's post-modern turn to pre-modern philosophy should be the preferred alternative to modern science and philosophy. After reviewing Schumacher's criticism of the modern project and explaining his preferred alternative, acknowledgement was given to objections that a modern philosopher like David Hume would offer. The response to the possible objections of David Hume defended Schumacher's method, and offered reasons as to why it should still be the preferred alternative. In conclusion, E.F. Schumacher offers a perspective that is superior to that of David Hume and the modern project.

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