

FIRST PRINCIPLES FIRST

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HERE may seem to be little reason for bringing the more common things of life—pigs and ice cream cones and ponds unexpectedly into print. But Mr. Stuart Chase in his work "The Tyranny of Words" raised some very philosophic questions about these things. He had asked, for example, is a pig a pig—and is an ice cream cone really that? Worse, Mr. Chase has answered these questions in the negative. The pig is not a pig and the pond is not a pond. In other words, the first principles are all objectively invalid.

The principle of identity is the first to go by the board. That principle, which states that being is being, is interpreted by Mr. Chase to mean that pigs are pigs. This is all right for thought, says the author, but it is meaningless in reality. That actual thing outside is not a pig—it is a process, sometimes characterized by a grunt, sometimes not. More specifically, but still in the order of pig, the sow Aphrodite is now a suckling, later a mother; but at every second during the interval she has manifested different characteristics and so cannot be said to be identical with herself.

We next encounter not a grunt, but an odor. There is a rose, mature, beautiful; but a week from now it will be withered, ugly. Surely, it is nothing but a process, not a rose at all.

More tragic still is Mr. Chase's treatment of food. The ice cream, which we all enjoy, is—and you have Mr. Chase's word for it—not truly ice cream. To verify this is, he says, quite easy. Just let it stand for a while in a warm place. You will then be compensated by the knowledge that ice cream is not ice cream, so you will not have missed much after all.

Again, says Mr. Chase, consider the pond of water at freezing temperature and getting colder. It cannot really be said to be anything determined, because whereas you can drown in that water tonight, you can safely walk on it in the morning. Clearly then, it is not one thing in all that time.

Attention is next directed to the principle of the excluded middle—between being and not-being there is no medium; or everything is either pigs or not pigs. Mr. Chase has yet another statement of this principle, namely, every living thing in either plant or animal. But—and this is his trump card—behold *euglena*. Scholastics stand aghast,

for *euglena* is both plant and animal. *Euglena* is a tiny one-celled water organism which in abundant sunlight is green in color and behaves like a plant—that is, it synthesizes food. Remove the light, the green color disappears, and elusive *euglena* proceeds to digest food like an animal. A clear case in which A is both A and not -A; hence, the principles of excluded middle and contradiction are invalid.

For Mr. Chase then, first principles are worthless because there is nothing in reality to correspond to the concepts on which they are based. They are, as William James once said of philosophy, “Just words words, words words.” To quote Mr. Chase: “For symbols in our heads the laws are incontrovertible. But the instant we turn to the world outside . . . the laws collapse.” Again, “We have no knowledge of anything in the real world which is not a process and so continually changing its characteristics, slowly or rapidly as men measure intervals.” In other words, a thing cannot be said to be anything; the best we can do is to describe its operations, admitting meanwhile a constant change. Properly this cannot be said to be a change of things, for “thingness” implies a permanent distinction from nothing which our author rejects; change then is the only reality. Verbally, Mr. Chase rejects the philosophy of becoming, but, in fact, it is clear that he has fallen into that error. It is for this reason that his views are of some importance. They seem to be of a pattern with those of a whole modern school of considerable influence.

To the general question, how can one reject first principles, Aristotle gave the answer some two thousand years ago. The answer is that a man may say that he does not accept first principles but that he cannot mean what he says. In combating such views as these it must be borne in mind that one cannot demonstrate the principles in question; were that possible they would not be first principles, but rather conclusions. Their evidence, far from being shadowy, in truth far exceeds the evidence of conclusions, since they compel our assent by themselves, without the aid of any mediating or middle term. We may, indeed, attempt to doubt them, but are frustrated in the very attempt. We must, therefore, accept what is immediately evident to every intellect, namely, that these principles are objectively valid, laws of reality as well as of thought.

The position that first principles are objectively invalid is also easily challenged by a direct refutation. In the first place, either words mean something or they do not. Evidently for Mr. Chase they do mean something, for he has written a book on the subject. Since this is so, the position that the principles of identity and contradiction are invalid is false, because at least words have a deter-

mined significance, distinct from their contradictories. If, on the other hand, words are meaningless, then Mr. Chase argues in vain; his words may mean their contradictories and hence, in denying our principles, he may be affirming them. In any case, by the mere fact of communicating his opinions, Mr. Chase stands condemned.

Again, if principles mean nothing and a thing is not itself, then there is neither truth nor falsehood, good nor evil. It follows then that whether one holds for or denies first principles makes no difference, for either position can be true or false at the same time. So both Mr. Chase and we are equally right and wrong, for there is no distinction between them. Moreover, since good is not distinguished from evil, it is not evil (nor yet good) for one to be in error, if, indeed, there could be error. So why does Mr. Chase endeavour to uproot an error which is not error and which, if it were, would not be evil?

The truth is that everyone who propounds such views as these implicitly at least affirms the principles he attempts to deny. Thus, our author constantly has recourse to the principle of causality, for in all the examples which he proposes, it is at least implied. Consider the disappointing ice cream already mentioned. Note that it is always, in some way, becoming something other than it is; but there is a cause assigned, namely heat. Since it takes this agent to transform ice cream into not-ice-cream;—hence, the law of contradiction is valid.

Further, the position that there is no reality but change has been thoroughly discredited by Aristotle. For a thing which is changing, while it is changing, and under the aspect in which it is changing, is not that from which it is changed; nor is it that to which it is changed. The very nature of change demands this. Let us return, however, to Mr. Chase's pig. Now Aphrodite, says Mr. Chase, is changing every second and so is never one determined thing. Granting that some change is always occurring in her and apart from her substantial stability, must we not say that Aphrodite, even with regard to her changeable characteristics, is precisely what she is at this instant? If she is not what she is, how can she ever become what she is not—for on the assumption it would be equally true to say that she is what she is not and so can never become it. Therefore, something may truly be said of that which is in the process of change, namely, that it is what it is as distinct from that which it was and that which it will be. Clearly then, first principles hold with regard to it. Otherwise, change is utterly impossible. For it would be equally true to say that a quality at one stage of evolution is the next quality above into which it is evolving, or that it is the quality below whence it evolved,

as to say that it is neither. Therefore, the whole process might be finished before it has begun; or again, it could never take place. Thus, Mr. Chase's ice cream has already become not-ice-cream before he has ever bought it: his rose has withered and died before it even bloomed. Such opinions, then, make impossible their own starting point, and ultimately they lead to denial of the one reality originally affirmed.

There is yet another interesting point. It follows from this view that all things are one. If that which a thing is, may not be predicated of it: then that which it is not, may not be predicated of it; a thing is not everything else. But on Mr. Chase's assumption that contradictions are equally true, any given thing is all things. Necessarily, then, all things are one. Thus, there can be no motion but only rest, for a thing cannot become what it already is, and every given thing is every other thing. Mr. Chase, then, who started with the amazing antics of *euglena* must deny those very antics. *Euglena* the plant does not become *euglena* the animal, because, as plant, *euglena* is already animal, and as animal, plant. It is the same with the pond we mentioned. Mr. Chase should not fear to walk upon it, before it is frozen, because even then it is frozen and can never become more frozen.

The hopeless position of those who deny first principles must accordingly with a little reflection be evident to all. That stand was thoroughly refuted by Aristotle hundreds of generations ago. Heraclitus and his philosophy of becoming was put to rest, one would have thought forever, by the physics and metaphysics of Aristotle. But our day has seen the rebirth of that error as of many others. What is to assigned as the fundamental cause of so unreal an explanation of things? Why do men attempt to account for the ordinary things of experience in so extraordinary a way, which is contrary to all experience?

The answer is that all who hold these views have failed to understand three underlying principles of Aristotelian philosophy—the metaphysical doctrine of potency and act, its physical counterpart, the doctrine of matter and form, together with the psychological thesis of the reality of a knowledge distinct from and far superior to mere sensory cognition. More specifically, the philosophers of becoming, faced with the reality of change, account for it by admitting only the change, and denying the thing which changes. The conclusions to which their position leads may seem humorous. Actually there is no humor in the situation, for such a philosophy completely destroys reality.