



The Grand Panjandrum

PHILOSOPHY: THE CONTRADICTIONARY GUIDE

J. N. Hook

Norman Cousins (Saturday Review, January 11, 1975) wrote: “After several hundred thousand years of existence on this planet, the human species is still bedeviled by unanswered questions that make life less rewarding than it ought to be. The most important of these questions have to do less with technology than with behavior and philosophy.” He went on to say that conceivably creatures in other worlds have answered some of these questions and that we would be justified in spending large sums of money to try to ascertain by microwaves whether that is true: “... if there are

places in the universe where people make genuine sense of their existence as a species and where they comprehend the delicate connections between individual and collective existence, all the treasures on earth would be a small price to pay for the clues. “

In a few words, Cousins here defined the basic purpose of philosophy: to “make genuine sense of ... existence.” So far, though, earthbound philosophers have come out with highly divergent views, often complete contradictions. Perhaps someday, in a still-to-be-found homegrown philosophy or in one imported from another galaxy, we may find a guide that will serve us in understanding ourselves and others, in eschewing selfishness, in solving disagreements without recourse to battle. Perhaps someday. But not yet, for the philosophers do still disagree with one another as much as any other people do.

Consider, for example, the **determinists** and the **indeterminists**. In general, determinism holds that forces outside each person determine his/her actions and fate. **Indeterminism**, in contrast, says that little or nothing in human life is completely predetermined or outside man’s power to influence. The determinist sees a mechanistic universe consisting of and controlled by physical forces; the indeterminist sees a universe that any person may change a little through his/her own powers of decision and action.

Or consider the **deteriorist** and the **meliorist**. **Deteriorism**, a form of pessimism, is the belief that everything is going to the bad and that nothing can be done about it. **Meliorism**, a form of optimism, grants that this isn’t the best of all possible worlds but says that things are gradually getting better and that people can help in the process.

The **modernist**, too, believes that what exists today is superior to what existed in the past. In the arts, he/she applauds new modes and shapes of expression; in religion, he/she tries to dismiss beliefs that seem no longer valid, replacing them with others he/she considers more compatible with scientific findings; in government, he/she argues that modern democracy, despite its weaknesses, is superior to Roman monarchy or even to Athenian democracy, which served well only a small proportion of the people.

The **futurist** believes that the goal of existence is to create a better future. But the **survivalist** disagrees. Perhaps **survivalism** is a counsel of desperation, since its exponents argue that survival is or should be the chief goal of an individual, group, or nation, and thus in effect denies the likelihood of progress and the rights of anyone

else who stands in the way of one's own survival. A hungry survivalist will snatch bread from his/her own child, but a hungry futurist will steal bread from the elderly and give it to a child.

Even philosophers who wear the same general label differ markedly among themselves. Hedonists, for example, believe that happiness is the goal of life. But note how different the major varieties of hedonism are:

egoistic hedonism The goal is one's own happiness.

epicurism The goal is sensual gratification, especially as derived from food, drink, and easy living. (This is actually a misinterpretation of Epicurus, who stressed simple pleasures, friendship, and intellectual gratification.)

eudaemonism The goal is happiness and well-being attained through reason.

universalistic hedonism The goal is the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Also known as **multitudinism**, which says that the interests and well-being of the multitude are more important than those of the individual.

Energism, facing the question of whether one should seek pleasure as life's goal, answers "Not necessarily, and not directly."

Energists believe that the greatest good lies in using all one's physical and mental faculties efficiently. If one does that, they say, contentment will follow and one will make a satisfying (and incidentally happiness-producing) contribution to his/her little corner of the universe.

And so it goes, through uncounted schools and coteries of philosophers and the variations wrought by the progeny of each. Yet the search must continue until solutions—beliefs—are found that most human beings can accept and live with and if necessary die for.

That search is basically concerned with the questions that **eschatology** asks—such things as "Why is there a world? Why a universe? Why is man here? What is his role in the eternal scheme of things?" And the search is concerned with the values that **axiology** asks about: "What are the relative values of truth and deceit? of any two things? What is the beautiful and what is the ugly and what is the worth of each? What in general is worthwhile and what is worthless, to the individual and to mankind?"

Other Philosophical Terms

agathism *n*, **agathist** *n* Agathism is an extreme form of optimism which holds that all things tend finally toward good. Thus war and cancer, an agathist believes, are good things because they prevent overpopulation. But opposition to war and cancer is also good because it gives the individual what he/she considers a constructive cause.

chapter of accidents *n* This refers not to part of a book but to any series of unpredictable events such as greatly influences the life of each of us. E.g., part of the chapter of accidents in your own life may be that your teenage grandmother-to-be happened to visit a teenage girl friend, and your grandfather-to-be happened to come past on the near side of the street. If the visit hadn't occurred at that time, or if the boy had been on the other side of the street, you might not exist.

concause *n* It is a truism that nothing is as simple as it seems.

For instance, there is seldom a single cause for any effect, but rather a group of interrelated, perhaps inseparable causes. Each cause working with others in a group is a concause: (A concause of the Civil War was the difference of industrial development of North and South.)

dharma *n* In the ancestral Sanskrit this word meant that which is established; the various modern meanings in Oriental religions derive from this. In Hinduism, specifically, dharma is regarded as the body of universal laws from which no one can escape, and also what one needs to do to live in harmony with these laws—the social, caste, or religious customs it is one's duty to obey. (It is the dharma of water both to sustain and to drown.) (Our dharma forbids murder and theft.)

egocentric predicament *n* Some philosophers claim that all we can know is what is in our own minds. Therefore we cannot get beyond ourselves, beyond our own mentalities. This unhappy state of affairs, whether we believe in it or not, is the egocentric predicament.

elan vital *n* French philosopher Henri Bergson hypothesized that there is a source other than physical and chemical action that exists within each organism and causes its growth and development. This force he called elan vital.

ephectic *adj* From a Greek verb meaning to hold back, ephectic means reserving judgment. It is used primarily with reference to the group of ancient philosophers called skeptics. But the term deserves broader application to describe the attitude of deferring judgment or to describe people who defer judgment or decision: (He is a very ephectic corporation president: he waits for all available evidence before making a decision.)

geocentric *adj*, and related words. *-Centric* is a combining form that means “having as the center.” So *geocentric* means having the earth as the center. Most of us are necessarily geocentric in our thinking: anything in the universe we are forced to regard in relation to what we know of earth and earthly things. However, a solar system is **heliocentric** “having the sun as the center.” An **anthropocentric** person believes that man is the center of the universe, the measuring rod for everything. **Homocentric** may mean “man-centered,” too, but also “having the same center.” Polycentric means “having many centers”: (the polycentric culture of the United States). Many of the *-centric* words exist also as other parts of speech, such as **anthropocentrism** “the belief that man is the center of the universe.”

gymnosophist *n*, and related words. In Greek, *gymnos* means “naked” and *sophistes* “philosopher.” The name *gymnosophists* was once attached to a sect of Hindu philosophers who lived ascetic lives spent chiefly in meditating in the nude. Today some erudite nudists call themselves *gymnosophists* whether or not they are ascetic and meditative; their belief in nudism is dignified as **gymnosophy**, and they may learnedly discuss their **gymnosophical** ideas concerning themselves and their long-dead Hindu philosopher-friends.

homiletic *adj* Like a sermon, sermonizing: (his homiletic remarks). (Fathers are reputed to be more homiletic than mothers.)

instrumentalism *n* Pragmatists believe that ideas have value not in themselves but only as guides to action; an idea is valid if the action it generates is successful. This belief is called *instrumentalism*.

knowability *n* Although the sum total of human knowledge is said to double every ten years, many old or not-so-old questions remain unanswered and perhaps will never be answered. *Knowability* refers to capability of being known. We may speak with some certainty about the knowability of the precise

structure of the atom, but with less certainty about the knowability of the processes of original creation.

latitudinarian *adj, n* Edward Phillips in his dictionary of 1696 wrote: “*Latitudinarians* in Religion, are those who profess a Freedom, and as it were a greater Latitude than usual in their Principles and Doctrine. It is also vulgarly applied to such as take a more than ordinary Liberty in their Lives and Conversations.” Phillips’s explanation is still good, except that *vulgarly* would now be omitted. The term even yet is most often used to refer to tolerance concerning variations in religious belief. Latitudinarian standards of conduct tend now to be called *permissive*.

mystagogue *n*, **mystagogic** *adj* A mystagogue is one who teaches or otherwise publicizes mystical doctrines.

mythogenesis or **mythopoeia** *n* The act of *creating* myths. Myths are imaginative, usually narrative explanations of common events; e.g., explaining storms at sea in terms of the wrath of Neptune, explaining the apparent movement of the sun in terms of the driver of a sun chariot, or explaining an American business success in terms of Horatio Alger.

nada *n* A favorite word of Ernest Hemingway, *nada* is Spanish for “nothing,” and means nothingness, a state of nonexistence: (Why struggle? Everything is nada.)

negativism *n* One sort of negativism is illustrated by the child who refuses to do what he/she is asked or who tends to do exactly what he/she is told not to do. Another sort is illustrated by the skeptic who habitually expresses doubt or disbelief about what others are affirming.

overworld *n* The overworld, contrasted with the underworld, is the social level consisting of virtuous, respectable people. More rarely it is the world of the supernatural.

Panglossian *adj* In Voltaire’s satiric *Candide*, Dr. Pangloss stresses the view that everything is for the best in this best of all possible worlds—a view that Candide naively shares despite the parade of horrible incidents that befall him and his beloved. Such an excessively optimistic view is described as Panglossian.

progressionist *n* A progressionist is an optimist who believes that humanity is continuously making progress toward a better state. He/she is thus similar to the meliorist and the modernist.

pseudodoxy *n* Pseudodoxy may be either a false opinion or the holding of false opinions: (the pseudodoxy that one number is luckier than another) (Legislative progress is often hampered by pseudodoxies.)

selectionist *n* A person who believes that natural selection “the survival of the fittest” is a basic, essential part of the theory of evolution.

shu *n* Shu, in the teachings of Confucius, is the Chinese equivalent of the golden rule, recommending that in all actions there should be consideration of others.

tao *n* An important concept for about twenty-six hundred years in the Chinese philosophy called Taoism, tao is the first principle of the universe, the almost unimaginable source of all that is and is not. In Confucianism, though, it is the heart of a moral code, differentiating right from wrong and pointing the way to virtuous conduct.

tychism *n*, **uniformitarianism** *n* Tychism holds that chance operates in the universe, but uniformitarianism argues that everything is the result of universally applied principles. So tychism says, for instance, that some evolutionary variations happen only by accident, but uniformitarianism says that there are no accidents.

ultraism *n* Advocacy of extreme measures, or an example of extreme measures: (His ultraism alienated even his most radical friends.)

world soul *n* A believer in a personal soul may believe also in some spiritual being or force that is related to the world as the human soul supposedly is to the body.

wu wei *n* Wu wei is letting nature take its course, working in harmony with natural laws rather than at cross-purposes to them. Following this principle, believers in wu wei object to more than minimal regulation by government. They also favor non-violence and a minimum of argument.

MASTERY TEST

Complete each statement.

1. If I believe that everything in my life is determined by outside forces, I am a d - - - - - t.
2. If I believe that things are getting worse all the time, I am a d---
----t.
3. If I believe that my major purpose in life should be to make myself happy, I believe in e - - - - - c hedonism.
4. If I believe that the goal of life is happiness for as many people as possible, I believe in u - - - - - c hedonism.
5. If I believe that it is especially important to use my mental and physical powers as well as I can, I am an e - - - - - t.
6. If my philosophy is especially concerned with values, it may be called a - - - - - y.
7. If I try to follow the golden rule, a Confucianist would say that I believe in s - - .
8. If I believe that chance operates in the universe, I believe in t---
-m.
9. If I believe that many unforeseeable events influence people's lives, I might sometimes talk about the c - - - - - r of a-----s.
10. If I am a Hindu, I may believe in a body of universal laws called d ----a.
11. If I am highly permissive and acceptive of varied beliefs, I may be called l- - - - - n.
12. If I try to spread mystical doctrines, I am a m - - - - - e.
13. If I constantly express doubt and disbelief, my words reflect myn-----m.
14. If I agree with *Candide*, my philosophy is P - - - - - n.

15. If I believe that all things tend at last toward good, I am an a----
--t.
16. If I tend to defer judgment, I may be described as e-----c.
17. If I believe that human beings are central to the universe, I am
an a - - - - - c person.
18. If I hold a false opinion, it may also be called a p-----y.
19. If I believe in survival of the fittest, I am a s - - - - - t.
20. If I advocate extreme measures, I am illustrating u-----m.

Chapter 14 from J. N. Hook's book, *The Grand Panjandrum & 1,999 Other Rare, Useful and Delightful Words and Expressions*. Macmillan, NY (1980)

EDITOR'S NOTE

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