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Notes on philosophy - Platypus

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[Herbert Marcuse](#)

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The following short article was originally published in the Brandeis University Yearbook for 1963. Marcuse taught at Brandeis as Professor of Politics and Philosophy from 1958 to 1965. During those years he wrote and published his most famous work, One-Dimensional Man (1964), which, though largely forgotten today, served as a major touchstone for the New Left. Marcuse, together with a handful of other professors, wrote his essay in response to a general solicitation by the yearbook committee. The Platypus Review wishes to thank a member of that yearbook committee, Michael Kaplan, Professor of Architecture Emeritus at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, for calling our attention to this short piece. It is republished here with the permission of the Literary Estate of Herbert Marcuse, Peter Marcuse, Executor, whose permission is required for any further publication.

THE ACADEMIC ESTABLISHMENT CAN BETRAY its trust in many ways; one of them is the teaching of irrelevant modes of thought not geared to understanding that which is really going on. The goal of teaching and learning has been set by the Western tradition: It is no longer (if it ever was) free choice; we have to work with the historical heritage which has shaped our thought and action, theory and practice. Our intellectual tradition, our historical situation demand that we learn how to think before we can recognize the facts and learn what to do with them. We think and learn in order to understand what is and what happens. The apparently harmless truism is in fact full of harm; it contains a host of presuppositions and prejudices. Here are some of them:

(1) Our world is such that it has to be *understood* so that we can live in it: It is not immediately liveable in accord with our needs; it is rather opposed to us, objectionable: object to a subject. In this basic experience originates:

(2) the distinction (and the conflict) between that which is (immediately given) and that which *can* be and *ought* to be if man is to protect and enjoy his life in the struggle with man and nature: distinction between essence and appearance, idea and reality, the potential and the actual.

(3) This distinction, and the "ought" implied in it, is not established by a command of any religion, metaphysics, etc.; it is rather a constant element in everyday experience which becomes articulated in thought. All thought originates in the

question: Is the life that I and the others live what it can be? Is it in accord with our real possibilities and those of nature? And this question implies that there is something wrong and false with our world: "wrong" and "false" not merely from a private, subjective, but from a general, objective position.

(4) However, this experience is normally repressed, and the critical judgments arising from it are being reduced to the inferior status of personal matter, preference, value judgments. Such repressive reduction operates most effectively in man's apprehension of his needs, aspirations in his society, and of their chances and limits. Transgression beyond the established social universe of discourse, behavior, and hope is discriminated against. The mind is rendered adjustable, realistic, "empirical" by purging it from transcending ideas and intentions; they are tolerated and even promoted in poetry, art, religion, but they are "unscientific": They do not correspond to the realities as defined by the established social universe.

(5) As against this purge of experience and mind, the university is faced with the task of restoring the repressed and reduced contents into their own right—of preserving the most vital function of thought, namely, to question the questionable without bending its concepts to the requirements of the given social universe (they are the requirements of the powers which have given us this universe).

(6) In the academic field, and in the research branches of government and business, the repressive reduction of thought

manifests itself in the almost undisputed dominance of empirical methods and concepts purged from all theory other than that which promises a more effective understanding and organization of the realities *within* the established social universe. But comprehending reality demands more than that, namely, comprehending, and judging (all thought is judgment) this universe itself; it demands the elaboration of methods and concepts capable of analyzing the whole which makes the given facts and conditions, which operates in all of them, and, in doing so, determines the real possibilities of man and nature.

(7) These concepts

(a) transcend the given facts and conditions toward the whole which gives all facts and conditions their place, function, and meaning; thus, they are *philosophical* concepts;

(b) recognize this whole as a concrete historical form of life with its historical limits and possibilities; thus, they are *historical* concepts;

(c) define this historical universe as the system of the social institutions which man has given himself; thus, they are *sociological* concepts.

(8) In the threefold unity of this approach, theory restores the dimensions of experience which were cut off or reduced by the purge of the mind, and reopens the dimension in which truth and falsehood, right and wrong of the established social universe become definable. It is a historical dimension, in

which truth and falsehood are defined in terms of the relation of this universe to its own possibilities and alternatives. They are not subjective but *objective* possibilities inasmuch as they pertain to everyone and everything in the established universe; they are real inasmuch as their realization is possible with the available material and intellectual resources of society.

(9) Not only possible but *imperative* (the historical "ought" in the "is"!) is the realization of those alternatives which may save life from destruction and degeneration, which may pacify the struggle for existence. Here, indeed, is the foundational "value judgment," which states that to be is preferable to not to be, and that to live without fear, toil, and misery is preferable to living in fear, toil and misery. However, this value judgment is the origin and justification of all thought, of thought itself; without it, the human mind would be superfluous, and the human body irrelevant. "Truth" (as Nietzsche saw) is itself a value: It involves the decision to save life in a yet undiscovered and unconquered world. The distinction between value judgments and statements of facts proceeds *within* the dimension circumscribed by the foundational value judgment.

(10) Definition and analysis of the given alternatives is the concern of all thought and teaching which want to be more than instruments for adjustment to established questionable forms of life. This mode of thought aims at a critical theory, guiding the empirical analysis, and, in its progress, guided by the latter. Without it, empirical analysis remains partial, abstract, prejudiced.

(11) Critical theory undoes the repressions and restrictions imposed upon experience by the Establishment, thus it achieves a concreteness from which conformist empirical thought shirks away. In concentrating entirely on the investigation of particular conditions in isolation from the historical whole that shapes all particular conditions, empirical analysis succumbs to the Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness.

(12) Overcoming this fallacy of spurious concreteness requires transgression beyond the given facts and their given situation. The transgression is not into a dimension of fantasy and illusion, but into the historical reality which reveals the full meaning and function of the given facts. In terms of the spurious concreteness of the Establishment, such transgression appears as abstract speculation, unscientific and perhaps even subversive occupation. But this ability to abstract from the given in order to arrive at the real, this refusal to submit to the totalitarian dictum of the established facts (which is the dictum and factum of those who establish the facts) is the prerequisite for liberation. **JP**