

THE MONK AS PHILOSOPHER

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In the broad sense of the word, every person who has the use of reason is a philosopher--especially one given to witty observations--as, for example, Will Rogers or Eric Hoffer. Even a person who disavows philosophy has that as his philosophy. In a strict sense, however, the term "philosopher" denotes a more precise and specialized function. This function we will examine in detail. But first there is need to define some terms so that we can come to terms.

"Philosophy" literally means love of wisdom. It comes from two Greek words: *philos*, which is love; and *sofia*, which is wisdom. The term was coined by the pre-Socratic sage Pythagoras (571-497?BC) who is reported to have said: "One only is wise, and that is God. Call me not wise (*sofos*) but a lover or friend (*philos*) of wisdom."

Since his time, the word "philosopher" came to mean a thinker who could explain the ultimate reasons or principles behind phenomena.

The term "monk" seems to derive from the two Greek words *monos* and *ahos*. *Monos* means one, and *ahos* means ache, drive, or purpose. Thus the word *monahos* (monk) means one who lives in seclusion from the world, seeking one thing alone: union with god. I may point out that the fathers of the fourth century are not agreed as to the root derivation of *monahos*. But pagan and Christian contemporaries of the first monks understood well the fundamental meaning of the term which involved solitude, separation, isolation.

The professed monk and the professional philosopher both seek wisdom. Wisdom is a form of knowledge. It is a certain knowledge of primary and most universal causes of being. There is a hierarchical gradation of knowledge. Thus there is a sensitive knowledge of singulars such as animals have. There is experiential knowledge which all humans have of particular cases. And there is the knowledge of the general rules of art which artisans possess. Master artisans know the underlying principles of physical being which may be called scientific knowledge. Philosophers push reason to its ultimate limits in order to arrive at the first principles of reality, the knowledge of which

is wisdom. The philosopher and the monk seek wisdom in order to be fulfilled and happy. By his own efforts (with the Light of grace not excluded), the philosopher strives for that happiness which is called *eudemonia* in Greek; the monk strives for that happiness which is called *makaristes*, which is a happiness granted from above and which is usually translated as "blessedness."

The philosopher seeks wisdom through personal effort. He turns to others as guides, helpers, and friends who may help him to know. But he does not accept their propositions unless he is himself rationally convinced that something is or is not the case. His tools for knowing are the experience and instruction (the opinions of others). But he does not confuse opinions with certitude. By means of reasoning and verification he arrives at the truth or falsity of a position. If he cannot do so immediately, he suspends judgment. In other words, he affirms or negates a position and knows the reason why. Experience and logic are his criteria.

The monk seeks wisdom as a divine gift. He is ever cognizant of the Scriptural passage that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. Wisdom is a divine gift perfecting charity by giving it the divine modality to operate. He employs prayer and asceticism; and he also gives himself up to study and instruction. All of his ascetic practices and studious efforts have but one purpose: to put the monk in real, intimate, mystical union with God. How vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience are all ordained to this one purpose. As a Christian, a monk renounces the world and Satan, and pledges to follow Christ. In order to follow Christ more exclusively, he leaves behind the cares of family and world and devotes himself entirely to the one work of faith. This one work of faith is not only ascetical but also mystical; it is a dialogue and intimacy with God in which God takes the initiative and the monk responds with faith, hope and charity. The perfect monk is he who makes God, the fullness of Wisdom, the sole object of his aspirations.

There are different meanings of wisdom. In Hellenic thought, wisdom is a certain and evident knowledge of things through their ultimate causes, including God as Efficient and Final Cause (and for Platonists, the Exemplary Cause also). Hellenic philosophers maintain that he who contemplates a thing without knowing its causes has only a superficial knowledge of that thing. He who contemplates a thing and knows its immediate or proximate causes has scientific knowledge. He who can further his knowledge to the ultimate principles of natural being possesses philosophic wisdom. This wisdom is sometimes called first philosophy (because it attains the first cause of all being), metaphysics (because it transcends the merely physical), or natural theology (because it culminates in God as the Cause of all).

The Hebraic notion of wisdom was visibly influenced by Hellenic and Near Eastern collections of wisdom literature. In the Near East (Egypt and Mesopotamia), wisdom was often presented as a knowledge of how to act. Originating in a class of professional scribes, it was basically the following of a list of maxims on how to conduct oneself properly in order to secure success and live free of anxiety. Hebraic wisdom also included maxims of conduct (e.g. Wisdom Books of the Old Testament), but it added the practical wisdom of a skill in action. In other words, it involved knowledge of how to make or do things as well as knowledge of proper moral conduct. There was the skill of the craftsman, skill in administration, skill in war, and skill in making right judgments. Solomon was the model of the wise man.

Although influenced by Hellenic and Near Eastern notions of wisdom, Hebraic thought was modified by its relation to the one God (YHWH) which gave it a character of its own. God alone is all-wise. His wisdom is exhibited in creation. He knows how to do or make things, and the knowledge which lies behind the greatest of all His works, creation, is the highest of all wisdom. Divine Wisdom is mysterious. At times in the Old Testament, Divine Wisdom is personified. Yet is not identified with YHWH, nor is it a distinct created being. It is extant from eternity. While learned from traditions, wisdom is ultimately a gift from God. Filial fear of God is, after all, merely the beginning of wisdom.

Later Hebraic thought identified wisdom with the law. The law was considered to be celestial wisdom which had descended to dwell in Israel. True wisdom, then, is knowledge and observance of the law, which is a means of revelation and salvation. Wisdom, therefore, is confirmed as a practical form of life. In Hellenic wisdom, ethics was subordinated to metaphysics; while in Hebraic wisdom, observance of the law was subordinated to the will of the Lawgiver.

The New Testament use of "wisdom" is affected by Old Testament and Hellenic usage. Like the Old Testament sages, the Christian acknowledges that wisdom is a gift from God. God alone has true wisdom in its fulness. More precisely, God is Wisdom. St. Paul defines true Christian wisdom as Christ, and Christ crucified. He is God's plan of salvation. All the treasures of the Wisdom of God are in Christ. The mind of Christ was to do fully with will of the Father, even if it meant going to the cross. Such a state of mind, however, is wisdom. The Old Testament writers insisted that the beginning of wisdom (the art of living successfully and happily) is the fear of the Lord. By "fear of the Lord" they surely meant obedience to the will of God. Thus the obedient man is the wise man (and not the "mere knower" in a gnostic sense). By accepting the cross, Christ *did* the will of the Father perfectly; in *this* way man was saved-rather than