Philosophy Today, vol. 9, no 4, hiver 1965

the status and role of philosophy in contemporary society

by bertrand rioux

THE IMPORTANCE OF the philosopher in society has always been recognized under one form or another. When Athens, for example, condemned Socrates to drink the hemlock, her judges wanted to put the social body on guard against the effects of the critical spirit of the philosopher. Rousseau and Hegel are proclaimed fathers of the modern world; Saint Augustine, of mediaeval Christian civilization. Who would deny that philosophers like Kierkegaard, Marx and Nietzsche have profoundly marked our century? And a Unesco study made recently (1951) emphasizes in the following terms the importance which this international body attaches to the teaching of philosophy:

> The special place given to the teaching of philosophy in this study is explained by the role that philosophical ideas play in the behavior of men. . . . The development of philosophical ideas has had in history and still has today a major importance — directly or indirectly — for the institution of democracy, for the strengthening of the rights of men and for safeguarding the peace.[1]

This importance is growing today in proportion to the major crisis in which the world is struggling. Never has the philosopher's reflection been more necessary than in our age when all the values established by our traditional humanism have been called into question and when we are finding it necessary to discover a new world for man. Yet never has philosophy appeared more ill equipped to answer the challenge issuing from our historical exist-

ence. Never has it appeared so useless before the urgency of the tasks demanding our attention. And never has its moral prestige been so debated. The failure of systems and ideologies of every kind has rendered contemporary man helpless and mistrustful toward all forms of salvation. In the climate of general feeling against all messianism, philosophy does not escape a challege which jeopardizes its very existence. However, this is the very law of its consitution and development. What remains to be seen is in what measure and how it is contested.

To the person who reflects on the the history of philosophy, one conclusion imposes itself forcefully: philosophy is essentially the contesting of experience as well as of itself. "Metaphysics," writes Pierre Thévenaz, "is challenged. It has always been — by the sophist, by the 'philodoxes' or the 'misologues' of which Plato spoke, by the sceptics and the relativists, by the empiricists and the positivists by scientists, theologians, artists and *l'honnête homme.*"[2] Today it is called into question more than ever. The radical dispute begun by Descartes and above all by Kant, taken up again by Kierkegaard, Marx, Husserl and Heidegger, has led to the affirmation of the end of that philosophy which until now took as its function to know the ultimate reasons for the universe and man. Descartes, questioning sense experience and salvaging from the shipwreck the single truth of an empty cogito, dissociates thinking and being. Kant changes from the viewpoint of transcendence, which Descartes had retained, to the viewpoint of the irremediable finiteness of man incapable of reaching the very being of things. With Marx, philosophy scuttles itself as wisdom and disinterested knowledge to become a praxis. Contemplative philosophy belongs to capitalist prehistory. It dreamed the world into being; now it must transform it. Nietzsche, too, denies all absolute foundation to the values of European humanism, and Heidegger, in establishing the flight of the gods, confirms the end of the traditional philosophy on the basis of a Thought of Being neighboring on mysticism. Finally, among the representatives of analytic philosophy, the constructions of metaphysics are explained by incapacity of language, while the sociologists of knowledge talk of "views of the world" relative to one moment of a given culture. Thus philosophy seems to be dying at its own hands. In his well-known *Cartesian Meditations,* Husserl said of the present situation of philosophy:

> The state of derision in which philosophy finds itself, the disordered activity it is displaying cause us to reflect. In terms of scientific unity, philosophy has been, since the middle of the last century, in a state of evident decadence by comparison to the preceding ages. Unity has disappeared everywhere, in the determination of the end as much as in the posing of problems and method. . . . Aren't there almost as many philosophies as philosophers? There are still philosophy conventions; philosophers come together there, but not philosophies.[3]

If this permanent crisis of philosophy has for the philosopher a significance other than that attributed from without, in that it manifests the radical nature of philosophy, the original nature of the research, the richness of reality reducible only with difficulty to primary and original significant data, and the limitation of a human mind in quest of a truth always transcendent to what he says of it, it is no less true that this state of crisis in philosophy engenders a crisis of confidence in the capacity of reason to reach an absolute truth.

Today this crisis of philosophy takes the form of a crisis of reason affecting all the elements of our culture. We have entered the era of historical consciousness. We are conscious of the historicity of the immediately present and of cultural, economic, political and social conditioning of all thought. We know that we rest on a tradition which inserts itself into other traditions. "Modern consciousness, as historic consciousness, takes a reflective position toward all that is given it by tradition. Historic consciousness no longer listens complacently to the voice coming from the past but, reflecting on it, replaces it in its original context to see the meaning and relative value appropriate to it."[4] Our knowing is an historic knowing whose rule and form of government is different according to civilizations and moments of culture. Every definition of man includes a relation to his existence. We might say that he is essentially interpretation of himself and things in each of his ways of behavior, essentially the process of temporalization of himself and things. His characteristic understanding of himself and opening to the universe can be realized only according to an historical mode. This means that the aim of becoming one with himself and with the world always remains to be fulfilled; he is never completely transparent to himself and present to the totality of being. This dialectic relationship of absolute goal and essentially relative and temporal mode of realization is the substructure of the historicity of man. The problem for the philosopher, then, is this: Can philosophy lay claim to the possibility of elaborating in the absolute a synthesis of intemporal truths? Must we conclude from the historicity of man and of his reason to the impossibility of attaining absolute certitudes concerning man and the universe? It is clear that the climate of relativism and historicity into which the accession of history is interpreted reflectively favors a consideration of philosophy and religion, for example, only as a synthesis of knowledge and ideals proper to a given period and valid only in this totally relative way. Here, too, philosophy is in a state of crisis.

Finally, we may point out two other events which have profoundly influenced the situation of philosophy: the continued development of the sciences and the coming of modern technology. We shall try to show briefly how these two aspects of our civilization, of major importance, threaten the existence of philosophy.

We know what unlimited credibility is granted men of science. Humanity seems to have handed over its destiny to science, to which is transferred confidence formerly placed in religion and in philosophy to clarify and establish the basis of our existence. "Historic optimism," writes Raymond Aron, "is linked to faith in science, or rather in the civilizing virtue of science. Knowledge ought to radiate into wisdom. Man, master and possessor of nature, ought by the same token to acquire mastery of himself. After victory over things, peace between men would be established of itself."[5] It is not exaggeration to speak of a "scientific superstition" characteristic not of the scientist himself but of contemporary man in search of a myth to deliver him from his anguish and to fill the void left by general disbelief. We ask of science that which it cannot give: the construction of a new world, fully rational, the establishment of ends with relation to the human adventure on our planet, and asymptotic knowledge of all reality. The activity proper to the speculative intelligence is identified with scientific undertaking. Philosophy, formerly considered the supreme and absolute knowing, now sees

itself refusing the title of "science." Formerly exercising domain over all reality, it now sees itself driven further and further into a sort of reserve, as science conquers new domains. First, knowledge acquired by the natural sciences took from the domain of philosophy the material world. Then the appearance of the social sciences marked further the retreat of philosophy. Under these conditions, what remains to the philosopher who has not fallen into the net of science? Can frontiers be established to indicate the halting point of the conquering march of science? That seems to be problematic if one considers the daring and ingenuity of the latter. And what argument could philosophy oppose to the harvest of observation, of laws and hypotheses which bring home to us the cogency of science and reveal to us the complexity of nature and of cultures? Philosophy, then, seems more and more arbitrary in the face of the patient and exciting discoveries of science.

What still more reinforces the prestige of science and increases its power of attraction is the technical efficiency coming from it and more and more inseparable from it. We need not point out that this means real conquests beneficial to man. Technology is linked to the very incarnation of man. "To have a body is to have a hand and a tool," Paul Ricoeur remarks very aptly. Technology thus conditions profoundly the development of spiritual values by inviting man to a great liberty and to a considerable part in his own destiny, thanks to the prediction of nature and the planning of its immense forces. To know for the sake of power and to have power in order to transform the conditions of man's life is a human ideal wholly worthy of pursuit. So there is no question of resenting the sciences and technology. What interests us as philosopher and from a certain viewpoint of reflection is the technocratic mentality which tends to take as model of all our human behavior the technological model. There are spiritual aspects of the total behavior of man which invite our attention. What strikes the imagination is the incomparable efficiency of technology as opposed to the ineffectiveness of philosophy at this level. To man who seeks a practical outcome which will mark his world, philosophy seems without justification because wholly empty. What is more, technology corresponds to a certain tendency of knowledge to penetrate the object in the measure in which it constructs the object. One knows well only that which one has made; this is the ideal of a certain technological intelligence. The basic "project" of our being-in-the-world risks being one of will to power. Our relationship to reality becomes one of domination, on the level of having. Doing, then, robs being; the mastery of reality replaces the invocation to being. In the dialectic of possession, having devours being. The world is no more than an immense reservoir of forces to be harnessed; man, on condition that he remain master of it, and thanks to superior values, ends up by crushing it under the wheel of progress. Ontological exigency as the mainspring of metaphysics thus remains an atrophied sense in this functionalized universe.

These are some of the principal reasons which explain why philosophy is so contested. We could add others which concern certain representatives of philosophy in certain milieux: lack of interest in other forms of culture, as if philosophy were not reflection on the varied experiences of man; the transmission of a tradition not vivified by history and consequently outside the movement of ideas; lack of curiosity about other forms of knowledge apt to stimu-

late philosophical research and renew its problematic aspect; lack of collaboration with the representatives of other disciplines. By its withdrawal from the living culture of its time, philosophy can become an empty temple which no longer shelters any but a few faithful and whose influence does not go beyond the circle of the initiated.

We have just shown that philosophy is challenged from within as well as from without. But it does not follow that philosophy is not living. It would suffice to cite the great names of contemporary philosophy to give eloquent testimony to the contrary. The renascence of metaphysics, the development of philosophies of existence with their admirable analyses of the body, of others, and of the ontology of sentiment, and the birth of the phenomenological method all demonstrate the vitality of contemporary philosophy. And the need for philosophy has been felt from the beginning of a crisis which has not spared even science. The principles which were part of the traditional heritage of reason have been questioned; the evidential value of mathematical postulates has been dissociated from their logical function; theoretical conceptions in physics have been renewed. Besides this shaking up of accepted certitudes of science, two things, the threat of destruction pressing on man from the utilization of science for utilitarian ends and the pressures toward political ends exerted on science from outside, remind us that another order of consideration must be introduced to situate all these problems in the context of the whole man. Philosophy alone is fit to solve the basic problems of knowledge and values. What, then, is the role of philosophy in contemporary society?

First of all, this role is the one which philosophy has filled through all time, that of radical formulation of the questions we ask about ourselves and the universe. "Metaphysics itself is born of a confrontation of daily and primary experience of the world, experience which it invites us precisely to surpass. . . ."[6] It began by calling into question theogonies and cosmogonies which came from tradition; it continues by critical reflection on all human experiences. It is born of the need of substructures for the acquisitions of tradition and of common sense. In the presence of any phenomenon, it always begins by a certain wonderment so as to give rise to doubt which will be the beginning of a search and conversion to what is not given immediately in experience. Socrates thus practices irony; Descartes, methodical doubt; Kant, transcendental criticism; and Husserl, parentheses. Philosophical search initiates a return to the very sources of experience. Even if the confrontation of experience is practiced by science and art, that initiated by philosophy is more radical. While with science and art it is a process of relativisation, with philosophy it is one of reducing to nothingness, *néantisation*).[7] Philosophy asks, for example: "Why is there being and not rather nothing?" and: "What is man that there can be history and values?" In this essential interrogation, man experiences his fundamental liberty and fully measures his vision of total reality. If philosophy seems to be "the dissolution of all acquired knowledge and established power," it is so in order better to recover its full openness to being and its radical availability with reference to all choices situated in the universe.

Thanks to this essential *élan* of philosophy, man can situate himself better with relation to his knowledge. He can arrive at reflective mastery of knowledge in relating it to the whole man, at speculative mastery in reflecting on the

ultimate conditions of all experience, and, finally, at practical mastery in determining the ends of existence to which the means are subordinated.

In our contemporary society, the philosopher must be rooted in the living culture of his times, considering all human experience, the variety of cultures and products of man. In this sense, collaboration with representatives of the scientific disciplines is essential to his work. To avoid empty philosophic speculation on the one hand, and, on the other, anarchy in the fields of knowledge, the philosopher and the scientist must evidently influence each other reciprocally. In such exchange of knowledge, the role of the philosopher is to proceed in such a way that man escapes complete objectivation. He must aid in the recovery of man over man's products. Be it in scientific knowledge or in work within a functionalized society, man runs the danger of being identified with that which one observes of him. Now it is to be noted that if man can be objectified in a field of knowledge, he is not for all that a product of nature and of history. Science encounters the human subject as object while the philosopher reflects on the subject as subject. It is man who makes science and who behaves in a certain way in work. It is to this source of consciousness that one must go to discover the transcendence of man's being, over and above his objectivation. Sometimes consciousness as such is overlaid by the aims to which it is directed or the products which it fashions. Science is one of these products. It is only one of the possible behaviors of man, beside the religious, artistic or pragmatic behavior. All these behaviors are the achievement of a single being capable of temporalizing himself in multiple modes of being, of taking a position in relation to himself in multiple ways. The philosopher poses the problem of the being of man making possible these varied modes of his existence. He reflects on the act of consciousness at the heart of all man's representations in so far as he escapes objectivation. Beyond the products of our thought which science analyzes, there is the very act of thought contained in all the behaviors of man. This living presence of self to self in a presence in the universe characterizes the being of man. This is why man can criticize himself, rise above his individual and cultural situation to compare it to other situations, take in hand again the objects he envisions to relate them to consciousness of self. The structures of the fundamental situation of man as presence to himself, to the universe and to others are the bases of all other situations. Without this all-encompassing unity of man present to himself and that of a radical common direction in all the products of culture, communication between cultures within a same historical becoming of humanity would not be possible. "Who is the man who questions?" asks the philosopher. This "who" of man is a unity transcendent to all that he is as physical, psychological and social data. Thereby are reserved, first, the liberty of man who surpasses all determinisms and, secondly, the possibility of a significance to his being-in-the-world other than that of domination and calling into play the whole of his being in an historical relationship to the totality of being. This is how the philosopher, nourishing his reflection with scientific knowledge of man, will never lose sight of the existential unity of man in his total presence to himself and to being.

But the task of philosophy is not limited to this effort to restore man (*désaliénation*) in relation to his own production which he reifies and in which he risks losing himself. It consists

also in a theoretic mastery of knowledge. Scientific knowledge must be situated not only vis-à-vis man who makes science but also in confrontation with the ultimate ends implied in all our behavior. We are concerned, then, not only with the subject of science but with going to the roots of the very content of science. Here again, man must maintain a certain distance relative to his knowledge if he wishes to discover the breadth of his vision of reality. The role of wisdom which philosophy must fill with regard to all knowledge presupposes a certain co-existence of philosophy and science. Each of the two disciplines must agree on the right to existence and desire reciprocal collaboration. To this end it is essential to understand that the role of philosophy is neither to substitute itself for science in search of the laws of phenomena nor to unify the sciences into a system which would make of philosophy the *ancilla scientiae,* as Auguste Comte would have had it. Philosophy is neither a science in the contemporary sense of the word nor a classification of sciences, nor a hyper-physics which would unify the conclusions of various sciences. If philosophy presupposes science, this is not in order to perfect it in the line of science but simply today a foundation in as much as even the exercise of science supposes ontological and transcendental conditions which make it possible. Let us consider these simple facts that justify the philosophic impulse (*projet*). Science as such is not an object of science. The physicist, for example, does not, in his experimentation and hypotheses, encounter physics as object of physical research. Biology and mathematics are not objects of biology and mathematics.[8] All of which means, as Heidegger says, that the essence of science is not scientific. The same holds for even the possibility of science, which cannot be established by the particular methods of each science. As for the knowledge implied in each science, science does not encounter in its own structure the object of science, knowledge as such. The scientific attitude presupposes, then, an ensemble of positions remaining at a state of naïvete and not criticized in the exercise of science itself. The delimitation of an object of science supposes a horizon from which emerges a domain of object. Opposition of the particular point of view of each science to other points of view is possible only by the establishment of a horizon which first comprises the ensemble of possible objects. Thus the philosophers causes to emerge from all our behaviors the horizon of being as something encompassing which precontains the two poles of knowledge, subjective and objective. It is a matter of recovering the dimension of being not as an *au delà* of the objects of science or of ordinary or poetic parlance, but as an *en deça* which situates science and language in what they make known of reality. Only in this way can the peculiar character of science — the fragmenting and abstraction it practices on the real, the intelligibility proper to its domain of object — be surmounted, thanks to the unitive end of being.

The unity that philosophy seeks is not a unity added on to the sciences or to all other behaviors. It is the unity which precedes and makes possible all other unity. This is saying that ontological data penetrate in a masked state every human behavior and every constitution of object. These are the ultimate sense and *most significant signification* operating in all our knowledge and desires. They are not opposed to our particular goals because they motivate these on another plane. They are data immanent to other data but heterogeneous to them. This is why the prob-

lem of distinction between philosophy and sciences is not one of frontiers but of reciprocal implication. Ontological data are incarnate only in particular data but inserting in them a sense of transcendence which opens them to the infinite. Dialectic of the finite and the infinite tasks its source in the presence of the multiple and the particular and in the vision of the one and of the universal. Metaphysics, then, is a return to the world of experience (*monde vécu*) on which science is built, in order to make explicit the most significant data. Thus the philosopher marks the limits of science, art and religion in the ensemble of human knowledge. He situates all these activities in relation to the ultimate end of knowledge and sentiment. In addition, within each domain of object, the philosopher institutes a radicalisation of problems in specific ontologies. What is man, nature, history, the universe, life, the mind, the body? A certain response implicit in these questions is at work in science, in the choice and interpretation of facts. The work of the philosopher is to be informed of scientific work, to bring to light uncriticized philosophic concepts which analysis implies, and to elucidate the question for itself in complete clarity.

This reflective and theoretic mastery of science of which we speak does not exhaust the role of the philosopher. There is also a practical mastery of knowledge which corresponds to his social responsibility. More than any other, the philosopher must be the conscience of the city. Following the example of Socrates, he must, without allowing himself to be stopped by appearances, sound out (*ausculter*) his time. He must try to grasp the profound signification of events, their impact on the life of man and their repercussion on culture. With full liberty, and concerned uniquely with the truth for itself, the philosopher must question ideas received in a given milieu and thus prepare the way for an evolution of situations. His role is not to effect this evolution but to make it possible by enlightening minds, situating problems, placing solutions in relative order to prevent their being made equivalent to the eternal. The man of action ends up by identifying himself with the ideas he defends, the party he serves. Therein lies the danger of fanaticism lying in wait for him and leading him to "exalt reality" to the advantage of any kind of power.

In order that the philosopher fulfill his mission without being blinded by the passions which are part of action, he must bring a certain detachment which must never be an alibi for indifference or scepticism toward the problems of the state. The situation of the philosopher is uncomfortable; holding himself withdrawn from action, he displeases the partisans; reflecting on action, he calls for a change in the situation, which renders him suspect to the established power. On the one hand, he is legitimizing by anticipation and on a on the other, in order to preserve his independence, he does not adhere to any party. To the social body (*collectivité*) he always remains suspect because he knows well that truth is not the exclusive property of any one camp. Merleau-Ponty writes these meaningful lines on Socrates:

> He teaches that religion is true, and he has been seen offering sacrifices to the gods. He teaches that one must obey the City, and he obeys it to the end. What one reproaches in him is not so much what he does but the way, the motive . . . He gives reasons for obeying the Laws, but it is already going too far to have reasons for obeying; other reasons are opposed to these, and respect vanishes. What

> one expects from him is just what he cannot give: assent to the thing itself, and without preamble.[9]

The first commitment of the philosopher must be to philosophy and truth. It is in serving both that he best serves the city. It is in keeping himself not at the level of efficacy at any price but at the level of truth alone that the philosopher prepares the dialog between generations and between peoples. What he purposes to develop is a critical spirit capable of grasping the relativity of points of view on history and of practicing a certain detachment from the present situation. In this way, he prepares the way for a greater comprehension and greater tolerance between individuals and peoples because he knows that free reflection is a necessary condition for arriving at truth. Bringing to a situation a certain detachment with regard to cultural particularities, he can help effect a *prise de conscience* of the common end which draws men together through history and different political regimes.

Before closing, I should like to emphasize two other points concerning the philosopher in contemporary society: a judgment of technology and fundamental attitudes of man facing the universe.

Our contemporaries have been alerted for a long time to the problem of the moral use of technology. Even before the tragedy for man represented in the industrialization of our societies abandoned to the laws of technology and progress alone and, in our day, the pursuit of the absolute, we understood that technology was not succeeding by itself in creating a happy humanity and assuring our collective salvation. What has been called into question "is certainly not the technological power of man but the power of man over his technology."[10] We have learned that "technology before being beneficial or evil is first and above all enigmatic." Technology can stifle as well as promote liberty. It accommodates itself to fundamentally different philosophies and political regimes. There is, therefore, a superior regulation of technology in relation to the higher ends of human life which must be based on reason. Technology in as much as it is in the order of means must be subordinated to a reflection on the ends to be pursued by its use. It is the function of philosophy, then, to get at the root of the problem of ends and values in themselves. In fact, by their very essence, science and technology disregard value judgments on the destiny of man and the ideals he pursues. The world of science, wrote Mounier, is an impersonal world (*devant personne*).

It is none the less true that the determination and application of formal rules to the moving reality of history is not an easy thing. Politicians, engineers, sociologists and philosophers must collaborate toward the realization of a human city where all aspects of life condition each other reciprocally. Raymond Aron brings out the difficulty of the philosopher in intervening in the affairs of the city by an example drawn from economics:

> If (the philosopher) is indifferent to economic growth, he is likewise indifferent to the indispensable means of accomplishing the tasks whose urgency he proclaims. How can society rise above classes if the forces of production are not sufficiently developed? Either the philosopher ignores economics entirely and in this case limits himself to establishing ends without even knowing if they are accessible. Or, imitating Marx, he studies economics but does he know himself when he is speaking as a technologist and when as a philosopher?[11]

Since the intention of absolute values is realized in the contingent matter of

history, a certain "relativisation" of values follows. But one would not know how to affirm in an absolute way the relativity of these same values. The philosopher must work to distinguish between the socio-historic origin of values and their trans-historic meaning. He must also remember that if man is finitude he is at the same time consciousness of finitude. This is why he remains theoretically open "to all the values of all men across all cultures." Man is capable of all virtues and vices; "there is no sign of radically incomprehensible man, no tongue radically untranslatable, no work of art to which my taste cannot extend."[12]

Finally, there is another important aspect that the philosopher must consider: a phenomenology of fundamental attitudes of contemporary man in his relationship to the universe. In fact, our attitude toward the universe is profoundly transformed. The universe has emptied itself of its religious meaning. It is no longer the well ordered cosmos which inspired in Kant this sublime meditation:

> Two things fill the heart and soul with an admiration and a veneration always new and always growing: the starry sky above my head and the moral law at the bottom of my heart.

We know better today that the moral law like the universe participates in the becoming (*devenir*) of all things. Nature is easily reduced for us to a vast field of experimentation, human life to an immense adventure whose meaning we have lost. Busy constructing the world of tomorrow and planning a rational society, we base our relation to the universe on mathematics, mastery and prediction. We forget that reason which makes and calculates is itself rooted in existence, that its function of measure supposes a welcoming of being, a letting being be itself. Man cannot base his relation to the universe on a reason which is technological. While the latter is necessary, it presupposes reason as the opening to being. And man's historical being must be founded on this radical opening of his being to the totality of being. The philosopher's role is to restore the ontological sense of the real "at the level of sentiments and attitudes which make thought take root simultaneously in existence and in being, in the flesh and in the Spirit."[13] He must work at restoring to contemporary man all the dimensions of his experience and the "ontological weight" of the fundamental values of confidence, hope, fidelity, announcement, waiting. He must dissociate these values from their caricatures; waiting cannot be reduced to prediction; hope to an optimism rooted in moods; liberty to a claim of autonomy. He must rest his action on being itself as a power of "creativity diffused in the universe." The new world we are fashioning will be truly human only if it knows how to combine the rationalization of our destiny with the restoration of value to the vital profound attitudes which anchor man in the totality of being.

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Source: DIALOGUE: Vol. III, September 1964, No. 2, pp. 126-41. "Le Statut et le rôle de la philosophie dans la société contemporaine." **Complete Translation.**

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Some Reflections on Classification

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TO CONCLUDE THIS SERIES OF conferences dealing with the use of classification by the various scientific disciplines we will attempt to make some sort of synthesis. We will attempt to show that the tendencies that are at play in the idea of classification itself are at work in the various sciences, whatever their object. For the way in which a question is asked is quite similar to the manner in which it is solved.

The act of classifying, *i.e.*, the act of putting objects in some order for purposes of identification and reference,

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