

CAN PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY BE A SCIENCE? AN EXAMINATION OF BIDNEY'S PHILOSOPHY OF CULTURE¹

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I.

. . . the basic conflict in modern thought is one between diverse metaphysical approaches on the one hand, and anti-metaphysical tendencies on the other. Classical ontological thought attempted to view the phenomena of nature and life *sub specie aeternitatis*, whereas modern ontological thought tends to view cosmic reality *sub specie temporis*. It should not be an impossible task to reconcile these opposite points of view, provided there is agreement on the *possibility* and *necessity* of a comprehensive, ontological theory based on verifiable scientific knowledge, which takes account of the element of structure as well as of process in the explanation of natural and cultural phenomena. But between the classical tradition of the possibility of "substantial" knowledge of reality and the "critical" idealistic position that ontological knowledge is impossible, there can be no logical reconciliation. We must choose decisively between these two contrary positions, if we are to resolve the philosophical crisis of our times. To deplore the intellectual crisis on the one hand, and yet to hold on to the very same anti-metaphysical approach which helped bring it about, as the neo-Kantians and positivists tend to do, is an irrational and hopeless procedure which only serves to make the confusion worse.²

It is this most recent claim of David Bidney that I should like, in the present paper, to attempt to refute; but first, to some definitions of terms.

II.

First, I should like to define what I mean by "science" in the question, "Can philosophical anthropology be a science?"

By "science," in this discussion, I want to mean essentially two things: (1) science stresses quantity, not quality; quantification, not qualification. In the words of Galileo, a scientist is one who measures that which is measurable, and makes measurable that which is not measurable. And, (2), science employs an empirical meaning criterion. Let me enlarge on this second characteristic of science.

The statements of science can be classified into two groups: (a) simple and complex factual statements in which all the terms are, directly or indirectly, operationally defined or definable and (b) methodological statements about rules of procedure which scientists must adopt if they are to adhere to an empiricist's criterion of meaning. Thus, I shall speak of the statements of science as being either operational or stipulative. An instance of the first, or operational kind of sentence, is, in physics, $s = \frac{1}{2}gt^2$; and an instance of the stipulative sort is the principle of induction, namely, that the future will resemble the past. Generally, then, this second characteristic of science refers to the much misused term, the scientific method, and to what it properly means. Specifically, I mean by the sciences the physical sciences, the biological sciences and the behavioral sciences. In this scheme, physical anthropology falls most nearly into the area of the

¹Read before Section K of the Ohio Academy of Science at Granville, Ohio, April 22, 1949, and before the Central States Branch of the American Anthropological Association at Bloomington, Indiana, May 13, 1949.

²Bidney, David. "On the philosophical anthropology of Ernst Cassirer and its relation to the history of anthropological thought." *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*. The Library of Living Philosophers, Inc., Evanston, Illinois, 1949, pp. 469-470.

biological sciences, whereas cultural anthropology, as I see it, falls into the area of the behavioral sciences.

Second, I should like to define, negatively, what I mean by philosophy in the present discussion. Philosophy is not science. Although, at times, philosophy makes use of what might loosely be called scientific method, the truth of genuine philosophic propositions is closer to logical validity than it is to factual truth. I am, in effect, distinguishing radically between two levels of analysis. As analytical distinctions, one can distinguish between what I want to call the *scientific level of analysis* and the *philosophic level of analysis*. Though I cannot in this place make clear precisely what I mean by these two levels, it is perhaps sufficient to suggest that they correspond roughly to the definitions of science and philosophy just given.

Finally, it may be noted already from the terms just defined that philosophical anthropology, as I use the term, can never be a science. It is, rather, a genuine philosophic inquiry, properly pursued at the philosophic level of analysis, in the fields of epistemology and metaphysics. To put it more strongly, a good case could be made for arguing that philosophical anthropology is, in a neo-Kantian sense, the whole of philosophy. But this point goes beyond the scope of the present paper.

III.

I now want to turn to an examination of Bidney's position concerning cultural anthropology. In brief, Bidney's position is that science can study the ontological nature of man. "Man has a substantive ontological nature which may be investigated by the methods of natural science as well as a cultural history which may be studied by the methods of social science and by logical analysis."³ Though already I tend to think that there is, here in Bidney's thought, confusion as to the sort of inquiry science is, since one cannot examine the ontological nature of any object by scientific methods, I should like to support my presentation of Bidney's position with further quotation. ". . . the postulate of an ontological human nature is a prerequisite of both individual and social psychology. The mechanisms involved in inter-individual relations may then be distinguished from the cultural forms in which they are expressed only if one makes this epistemic as well as ontological distinction."⁴ ". . . divergent views of culture [idealistic vs. realistic views] may be harmonized if we can conceive culture broadly enough."⁵

In sum, Bidney not only believes that science can investigate man's ontological human nature, but also that the present difficulties in anthropological literature result from a failure to integrate conflicting ontological positions as to that very human nature. Likewise, divergent ontological views of culture, Bidney maintains, may be "harmonized" if we conceive culture broadly enough.

IV.

The case which Bidney builds for his own view has recently been considerably enhanced by his contribution to *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer* in the Library of Living Philosophers series. There, he says:

Thus Kant, in fundamental agreement with Hume, denied the possibility of an ontological knowledge of nature and more than any one else was responsible for the antithesis of science and metaphysics. He did not, however, entirely exclude the notion of a metaphysical or noumenal reality, but maintained that "things-in-themselves" were not the object of scientific knowledge.

³"Human nature and the culture process," *American Anthropologist*, 49 (3): 375-399, 1947, p. 396.

⁴*Ibid*, p. 393, footnote 67.

⁵"On the philosophy of culture in the social sciences," *Journal of Philosophy*, 39: 449-457, 1942, p. 451.

In effect this meant that the classic assumption of Greek, medieval, and Renaissance philosophy of an empirically validated ontology was denied. Instead Kant affirmed that "The understanding does not derive its laws (*a priori*) from, but prescribes them to, nature." This meant in sum, that Kant reduced natural philosophy or theoretical science to anthropology.⁶

Later on in his argument, Bidney concludes:

Thus both the positivists and the neo-Kantian idealists tend to reduce the category of nature to that of culture, thereby turning ontology and epistemology into "culturology" or cultural anthropology.

If one were to adopt a polaristic conception of culture and recognize that the idea of culture is unintelligible apart from its reference to nature, then, it would follow that human nature is logically and genetically prior to culture, since we must postulate human agents with determinate psychobiological powers and impulses capable of initiating the cultural process. In other words, *the determinate nature of man is manifested functionally through cultures but is not reducible to culture.*⁷

Finally, I should like to quote Bidney on his notion of the *metacultural*. For example, at the conclusion of his "Human Nature and the Cultural Process," he says: ". . . my concern is with the *metacultural presuppositions of any system of culture whatsoever*. The problem, it seems to me, was soundly appraised by Dilthey, Ortega y, Gasset, and Cassirer; my disagreement is solely with their Neo-Kantian epistemology."⁸

Again, in the Cassirer contribution, Bidney suggests that ". . . since there is for Cassirer no reality other than cultural or symbolical reality, there can be no meta-cultural or precultural, ontological reality by which to evaluate conflicting standards of value. In the end, we are left with a plurality of empirical ethnocentric, symbolical worlds. . . ."⁹

But now let me turn to an examination of Bidney's points.

First, since Bidney speaks of harmonizing two conflicting ontologies, such as realism and idealism, I feel that another professional philosopher should speak his mind as to the possibilities of harmonizing metaphysical positions. As positivist, I stand accused of reducing the category of nature to that of culture, and thereby turning ontology and epistemology into "culturology" or cultural anthropology. Of this charge, I plead not guilty. Moreover, I should like to press charges against the plaintiff himself, suggesting that, far from having proved his own case, his innocence or guilt hangs upon his own interpretation of historical and contemporary intellectual problems and their methods of resolution.

Specifically, I want to indicate the lines along which one can refute Bidney's conception of philosophy and science, viz., the "classic assumption of Greek, medieval, and Renaissance philosophy of an empirically validated ontology." What does my method of levels do for those dissatisfied with scientists talking philosophy and with philosophers talking science? In the first place, the method suggests that science and the methodology of science are both scientific level enterprises. This means two important things: (1) that science neither presupposes nor implies any genuine metaphysic, and any scientist or philosopher who tries to ascribe a particular metaphysic to science forgets its testable, confirmable, operational character; and (2) that philosophy of science needs neither epistemology nor speculative philosophy to analyze the concepts and methods of science. If epistemological questions arise, philosophy of science retorts with a methodological, rather than an epistemological, answer. The methodological stipulations invoked, with regard (say) to causation, determinism, and the principle

⁶*Op. cit.*, pp. 485-486.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 494-495.

⁸"Human nature and the culture process," p. 396, footnote 75.

⁹*Op. cit.*, p. 543.

of induction, are justified only on pragmatic grounds. No appeal beyond testable experience, or beyond such methodological resolution is ever made.

Why, succinctly, cannot scientists investigate ontological questions? Because they are scientists. If idealism is the ontology actually characterizing this cosmos, this metaphysical fact makes no *scientific* difference. Likewise, if materialistic realism is the ontology of our universe, this metaphysical fact makes no *empirical* difference. Moreover, since idealism and realism are, in some sense, contradictory ontologies, they cannot both be true of one and the same cosmos. So how, possibly, could I, as Bidney tells me, "harmonize" these two genuine metaphysical positions? If I were foolish enough to attempt to keep them both in my philosophy, I would be like any one else who tries to hold on to both propositions of a contradictory pair, namely, I would be insisting upon maintaining a logically inconsistent position. But I cannot develop this point further here.

Second, a word or two more about science and *philosophical* anthropology. Science, as defined earlier, is never more than operational and stipulative in character. Hence, any statement intended as a statement about an ontological tenet will either be stipulative as to a way of proceeding in science, or it will not be among scientific statements. At most, therefore, can *physical* and *cultural* anthropology be sciences. As for philosophical anthropology, construed in Bidney's sense, it can no more be a science than can any other epistemological or metaphysical inquiry. If it is a matter of science *vs.* philosophy, as I suggested when defining my terms; and, if philosophical anthropology is philosophy, not science, then there is no empirical way of establishing any specific point concerning philosophical anthropology. Thus, such a study would be valueless for the sciences of cultural and physical anthropology. If, on the other hand, it is a matter of science *vs.* philosophical anthropology, still there is no way of making a genuine science out of philosophical anthropology.

Oil and water do not mix and cannot be mixed. Likewise, science does not mix and cannot, properly, mix with philosophy. It is only those who, like Bidney, try to put oil on the troubled waters of our age who overlook the fact that the oil neither penetrates the waters nor makes them less troubled. Moreover, the oil does not need the water to be oil, nor does the water need oil to be water. Again, the oil neither presupposes nor requires the water, nor does the water presuppose or require the oil. A certain chemist might try to "harmonize" oil with water, coming forth with a new polaristic theory of the elements. But no matter how hard he might try to argue that the divergent characteristics of oil and water may be harmonized if only we conceive of oil and water broadly enough, most of us would fail to be convinced.

Finally, a word or two about Bidney's meta-cultural or precultural reality concept. In so far as I understand Bidney in both his "Human Nature and the Cultural Process" and his essay on Cassirer, what he means by "meta-cultural or precultural reality" is foreshadowed in the following statement: "There is an important distinction to be made between the ontological conditions of the cultural process and the ontological presuppositions of given systems of culture. . . . *In this paper, my concern is with the meta-cultural presuppositions of any system of culture whatsoever.*"¹⁰ Again, compare his statement (already quoted earlier, but from a later work) that

There is no pre-cultural human nature from which the variety of cultural forms may be deduced *a priori*, since the cultural process is a spontaneous expression of human nature and is coeval with man's existence. Nevertheless, human nature is logically and genetically prior to culture since we must postulate human agents with psychobiological powers and impulses capable of initiating the cultural process as a means of adjusting to their environment and as a

¹⁰"Human nature and the culture process," p. 396.

form of symbolic expression. In other words, the determinate nature of man is manifested functionally through culture but is not reducible to culture.¹¹

Although a great deal could be said about Bidney's use of the much overworked prefix "meta," I choose here to overlook this point, since I have referred to it in another place.¹² However, what has been said about metaphysics or ontology in general, applies equally well to Bidney's conception of a meta-cultural or pre-cultural reality. If he is thinking of such reality as identifiable with the meta-cultural presuppositions of any system of culture whatsoever, he is either making a stipulation concerning a set of rules of procedure in empirical science, or he is concerned with a genuine philosophic problem. If the former is true, then he is not genuinely engaged in a scientific study of an ontological human nature. If the latter is true, he is functioning solely as philosopher, and it is hard for at least one other philosopher to see how this inquiry is directly relevant to the practicing, scientific anthropologist. With this exception in both cases: philosophy may be propaedeutic to science, or may be heuristically valuable to the scientist in his theorizing and discovery. Aside from this, however, the precision machine oil of modern science is in no way enhanced by small or large doses of salt water from the philosophic, mighty deep.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 395.

¹²Compare Hinshaw, V., and Spuhler, J. N., "On Some Fallacies derived in David Bidney's Philosophy of Culture," *Central States Bulletin* (American Anthropological Association), 2(2): 12-18, 1948, especially p. 16.

For a more systematic sketch of my conception of *levels of analysis*, compare also "Levels of Analysis," (to appear December, 1950), *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 11 (2).