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Modernization As A Philosophical Problem

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Abstract

Philosophy is here to be understood as an intellectual expression of conflicts in culture. Its function is to locate these conflicts, and its objective is to provide general solutions to them. To be modern is to be guided by the positive law that is used by the legally authorized judges in their setting of disputes and that has as its basis elemental concepts of science and philosophy. To be traditional is to be guided by the living law that has as its substantive normative content spontaneously held beliefs and habits and customs by which most of the people live and act even if there were little or no positive law.

Modernization is a passage from what is traditional to what is modern. To go through this passage there are three possible ways:

1. To copy what is modern in toto, even at the expense of traditional values;

2. To accept modern science and technology, but to reject the mode of thinking that makes them possible;

3. To adopt modern science and technology as well as the scientific mode of thinking only after carefully integrating them into one's tradition.

I reject [1] on the ground that this way will bring with it the weakening of national identity. I reject [2] on the ground that science and technology will be broken without its underlying mode of thinking. I accept [3] on the ground that this way alone will preserve the essential of national identity and keep the underlying spirit of modern science and technology alive.

The main theme of this paper is to show that the effective and smooth way of building a new modern society in the East is the synthesizing of the Western way of scientific and analytic thinking with the Eastern way of living.

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The Objective of this paper is not to provide a practical guide to modernization but to consider modernization as a philosophical problem.

Philosophy is one of the oldest human disciplines in the history of mankind. However, it is in a paradoxical situation in that though it has helped other disciplines in their defining of their respective subject-matters, it itself has no definition of its own that is universally acceptable. The main reason is that philosophy, unlike other subjects, does not have its own specific field of study but borrows the materials from other disciplines for its study. In fact, Philosophy deals primarily not with facts but with the evaluation of facts. The confusion between the factual study of a subject and the philosophical study of it can lead to misunderstanding of that subject.

Modernization is popularly understood as a process of change in which the old form of a society is transformed into a new one, with the intention of making that society keep step with other countries that are taken to be well advanced in terms of both material wealth and of the mode of institutional organization during a period of time. So generally speaking, “modernization” is a passage from what is old, or traditional, to what is new, or modern.

Modernization is a product of modern science, and it has two general aspects: one is socio-economic and the other is socio-cultural.

The socio-economic aspect of modernization consists of such things as building of new roads, the construction of new dams and bridges, the setting up of up-to-date industries etc., together with the social impact they have on the lives of the people. The results in this aspect of modernization are observable and their progress can be measured. This aspect of modernization more or less deals with the material and practical side of modernization.
The socio-cultural aspect is the second aspect of modernization. It is different from the socio-economic in that whereas the socio-economic aspect deals mainly with observable phenomena that are partly the results of modernization, the socio-cultural aspect deals with the normative presuppositions that are very often only implicitly expressed and not explicitly shown.

Roughly speaking, we can also say that the socio-economic aspect concerns itself with the dimension of what is true or false, and the socio-cultural aspect, with the dimension of what is good or bad. Whereas what is true or false is determined by direct experience, what is good or bad is determined not by direct experience alone. Whether or not an economic program is right is determined by observable phenomena. If there is economic progress as a result of a programmed, then that program is a correct economic program. If there is no economic progress as a result of a program, then that program is not right. However, whether or not a moral code is good cannot be determined by direct experience alone. For example, stealing does not become good even though there may be a great amount of stealing in practical experience.

Then what does the term modern stand for in a socio-cultural sense? What are the presuppositions in the socio-cultural field? According to F.S.C Northrop “To be a modern means to be guided in one’s moral, legal, political and other decisions by the elemental concepts and propositions of either modern science and philosophy or Stoic Roman legal science when its substantive content is made consistent with its most basic, i.e., elementary proposition.” (Northrop, F.S.C.1960, p.209)

Then what is that which is traditional? What are its presuppositions? As what is a "modern" is “to be guided in one’s moral, legal, political and other decisions by the elemental concepts and propositions of either modern science and philosophy…” what is
traditional is to be guided by the living law of the time in a society in question.

"By the living law [is] meant the substantive normative content of the spontaneously held beliefs and social habits and behavior of the people, or what most of them would do normatively even if there were little or no positive law.” (Northrop, F.S.C., 1960, P.4)

So the living law is to be distinguished from the positive law, in that whereas the positive law is “the substantive normative content of the written constitution and the successive statutes . . . as applied by the legally authorized judges to the settling of disputes . . .”, the living law is “the substantive normative content of the spontaneously held beliefs and habits and behaviors of the people, or what most of them would do normatively even if there were little or no positive law”.

So as far as modernization in general as a passage of change from an old society to a new one, it is also in the socio-cultural field a passage of change from the practice of the old living law based on one’s traditional values to the practice of the new positive law based on, as Professor F.S.C Northrop says, “the elemental concepts and propositions of modern science or philosophy or Stoic Roman Legal science.”

To go through such a passage, there are three possible ways:

[1] To copy what is a modern in toto, even at the expense of one’s living law and one’s traditional values;

[2] To accept only modern science and technology, as well as the material benefits they have brought with them, but reject the mode of thinking which makes them possible;
[3] To synthesize modern science and technology, as well as its underlying way of thinking, with the living laws of the society in question.

In this paper, the problem I would like to present and discuss is to choose one of the above three ways and give a sound argument in support of it as the correct way to modernization in my view.

The first way of modernization suggests the total acceptance of what is modern, giving no consideration whatsoever to the existing traditional values of the society concerned. The danger that can arise out of the adoption of such a way is that it may be unacceptable to the majority of the people of a traditional society who are so deeply rooted in their traditions that their traditional values have become an integral part of their way of life. These people are so deeply rooted in the customs and traditions that they will not readily give up their way of life for a more modern one. Hence we will not get their support in an attempt to modernize our country. So I would like to reject the first on the ground that this way will bring with it the weakening of national identity and its social values.

The second way suggests that we accept Western science and technology but reject it underlines mode of thinking and values. Such an action is like cutting off a plant from its roots. It is clear that the cut plant cannot grow and will eventually die. This would surely be the case if we cut away of the underlying mode of thinking of science and technology. Science and technology, like the cut plant, will then cease to grow and eventually become static. So I reject the second on the ground that science and technology cannot thrive without the underlying mode of thinking.

The third way is to prepare the ground thoroughly in order that the plant will be well rooted on our soil and enjoy natural growth. So I accept
the third for the reason that this way alone will preserve the essential of national identity and still keep up with the progress of modern science and technology.

The Philosophical Background of the Possible Solution to the Problem

As Professor E.A. Burt, in his "In Search of Philosophic Understanding", says,

"Since the beginning of Neolithic times, at least, human evolution has in general consisted in a gigantic process of cultural differentiation... Today, however, a turning point has come in this vast movement. Cultural differentiation, to be sure, is still going on and will doubtless never cease. Nevertheless a reversal has appeared in the course of evolution as a whole. Humanity is no longer an aggregate of separate cultures; it has become a single organism, moving either toward more abundant life as a viable world community or toward early death." (Burtt, E.A. 1967, p. 273)

Therefore, at this great turning point in human history, in which the process of cultural differentiation is being transformed into the process of cultural integration, to choose the third way of modernization should be the choice of the age. I will not give further reason to support this choice. Suffice it to say that modernization, like other human activities, has to go along with the tide of the age.

But how are we to integrate what is new with what is old is the prime question. What is new, or what is modern, consists of two aspects as well as of two dimensions. The first of these two aspects is the physical aspect, consisting of all forms of physical benefits brought about by modern science, and the second aspect is the mental aspect, consisting of
socio-cultural values together with the mode of thinking that underlies these values. This paper will deal with the second aspect.

The Probable Solution

Philosophy is a very difficult subject to study because its meaning is elusive. Different philosophers, adopting different standpoints, define philosophy in different ways. In this paper, "philosophy" is to be understood as an intellectual expression of conflicts in cultures; its main function is to locate and define these conflicts; and its aim is to find out appropriate broad and general solutions to these conflicts.

In my paper I shall leave aside whatever is physical and factual and concentrate my attention on what is socio-cultural and general. That is to say, for our discussion I shall bring in the general mode of thinking, which is called scientific thinking that underlies what is Western as well as what is modern, and the general mental outlook of the old and traditional way of life.

Such a consideration leads us to the major differences between the West and the East because of the fact that what is modern has its basis the more materialistic Western way of thinking and what is traditional has its basis in the more spiritual way of thinking especially in the East. In Myanmar, for instance, the Buddhist way of life plays an important role. To be more specific, the purpose of this paper is to integrate what is modern and what is traditional; or in other words, to integrate the Western way of thinking that has modern science as its product and the Theravada Buddhist mental outlook that has as its product the way of living for more than eighty percent of the people in Myanmar society.

Unlike other religious philosophies, including that of Mahayana Buddhism, Theravada Buddhist philosophy accepts both the existence of mind and the independent existence of the external physical world, which
is changing constantly and which obeys its own objective physical laws. So the external world, according to Theravada Buddhism, is not a creation of the Creator or of other living beings. This constitutes the point of meeting for the scientific way of thinking of the West and Theravada Buddhist outlook, which is the foundation of Myanmar Culture. However, there are also differences between the two. One of them is that whereas Western science focuses its total attention on the external world, Theravada Buddhism concentrates its attention on the mental activity of the individual, which is referred to as “mindfulness” which puts aside the external world. Another difference between them arises out of their respective objectives. The objective of Western science is to control the external world with the intention of making it a place pleasant for all human beings to live in, while the objective of Theravada Buddhism is to place mind under control with the intention of transforming man into a being who is at peace with himself in the world he lives in. It is true that science cannot be fully explained by Theravada Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism cannot be reduced to science. Nevertheless the two are not contradictory but supplementary.

Another point that is essential to the construction of the meeting ground for Theravada Buddhism and Western science consists in the testing of truth through experience. Theravada Buddhism calls it “practice” and Western science calls it “experiment.” In His Kalama Sutra the Buddha clearly says that no ideas either found in great books or taught by great teachers should be conclusively accepted merely through the feeling of certitude but only after testing them through practice. Modern science also does not accept anything on mere authority; whatever it accepts, it accepts only after testing it through experiment.

Why do we need to test ideas through practice or experiment? The answer to this question has direct bearing on our problem of the
modernization of a traditional society. Both modern science and Theravada Buddhism believe in the objective nature of truth. Whereas modern science talks about the objectivity of physical laws, Theravada Buddhism talks about the objectivity of both natural laws and particularly of the objectivity of the law of mental life. [Here "objectivity" must be distinguished from "externality". "Objectivity" is opposed to "subjectivity" but not opposed to "internality". "Objectivity" can be a characteristic of mental life. In other words, the inner life of a living being can be objectively described in the form of laws.]

Knowledge acquired through theoretical study of the teachings of the Buddha can still be subjective until it has been tested by practice. Only what has been tested by practice is an instance of a law, and only an instance of a law is objective. In Buddhism, what we call "self," existing as an entity by itself is an illusion; what we call "self" exists only as an instance of physical and mental laws. So the idea of a contractual legal person, as against a biological status person, and the root of the concept of supremacy of law are there to be found in Theravada Buddhism as they are there in modern science and philosophy. Therefore, the general principle that underlies the right way to modernize a traditional society located in the East presupposes the construction of the meeting of East and West. Again to quote F. S. C Northrop

"East and West can meet, not because they are saying the same thing, but because they are expressing different yet complementary things, both of which are required for an adequate and true conception of man's self and his universe. Each can move into the new comprehensive world of the future, proud of its past and preserving its self-respect. Each also needs the other." (Northrop, F.S.C. 1946. pp. 454-455)
This general principle also has the support from one of the greatest scientists and philosophers, A N. Whitehead. He says,

"Modern science was born in Europe, but its home is the whole world. In the last two centuries there has been a long and confused impact of Western modes upon the civilization of Asia. The wise men of the East have been puzzling, and are puzzling, as to what may be the regulative secret of life which can be passed from West to East without the wanton destruction of their own inheritance which they so rightly prize. More and more it is becoming evident that what the West can most readily give to the East is its science and its scientific outlook. This is transferable from society to country to country, and from race to race, wherever is a rational society." (Whitehead, A.N., 1954, p. 3)

Therefore, the effective and smooth way to modernize a Theravada Buddhist society is to synthesize the Western scientific way of thinking, or analytic thinking, with the Theravada Buddhist attitude towards life in order that the people in the society concerned will be both materially prosperous and spiritually be at peace with themselves.
Reference


