NICHOLAS GEORGESCU-ROEGEN

Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen about Himself

Eminent Economists: Their Life Philosophies

~~The Life Philosophies of Eminent Economists~~

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Two things fill one's conscience with increasing wonder and awe, the stars in heaven and the moral law in oneself.

Immanuel Kant

PROEM

It would be superfluous to tell the reader how high my spirits were lifted by Michael Szenberg's invitation to write an account of my life philosophy. But as I started to think about the task, a fear came to me, the fear that my acceptance would be taken as an implicit presumption that I am a philosopher like Plato or John Dewey, for example. Even though I have not been a professional philosopher, I certainly "have done philosophy." One does philosophy, I think, not when one reasons about the

practical problems of a community or the mathematical structure of quantum mechanics, but only if one treats in a thoroughly free inquiry issues that cannot be tested at a workbench. It is in this sense that I claim to have done philosophy, probably more often than I have exercised any other intellectual expertise. However, although like all who have done philosophy I have asked questions about things, their nature, and their relations among themselves and with the human mind, I have gone further: I have also asked questions about questions.

Everyone's way of thinking is influenced by the events of his or her life. As some have maintained, it was Einstein's experience at the Berne Patent Office that developed his interest in how to test our ideas about things. Not ignoring the considerable difference of proportions, the observation has been especially true to my shattered life. In the country in which I was born and spent the most informative part of my life, Romania, I lived under four dictatorships and three wars, all in my backyard. That history instilled me with a kind of Paretoan view of human societies. Romania was at that time a struggling, overpopulated, peasant-dominated culture and economy. And as I came to learn the economics professed in the capitalist world, I was struck by the claims of that discipline that it was a representative guide not only for capitalism but for absolutely all economic conditions. It was evident to me that standard economics could not represent an agrarian economy, and hence could not be a guide for it. I thus acquired a special eye for issues ignored by the standard economic persuasion or by ordinary economic analysis. I learned "philosophy" from many consecrated philosophers, but my own philosophy sprouted from two great teachers of mine: Karl Pearson and Joseph A. Schumpeter. From Karl Pearson's splendid *Grammar of Science* and from my listening to him for more than one year, I reached two philosophical tenets. First, contrary to the old epistemology, the stochastic form is not the peripheral but our only possible representation of natural laws. By implication I came to hold further that randomness, not just haphazardness, is an essential ingredient of phenomena. Second, given the human cosmological condition, I construed that for us nature consists of just what we can perceive. Beyond, there are only hypothesized abstractions about which a metaphysician may say anything with complete certitude, since nothing is controllable. Our laws of nature aim not at explaining phenomena, but at saving them, as Pierre Duhem calligraphed the philosophy initiated by Ernest Mach and embraced by Wilhem Ostwald and Karl Pearson. Even Albert Einstein's philosophy was largely Machian: in 1936 he explicitly stated that "physics consists of a logical system of thought [that] can only be arrived at by free inventions." Not one word about "reality." My philosophy is in spirit Machian: it is