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Mechanistic Explanations in Philosophy

Nobushige Sawada

- 1) **Problems.** The reputation of mechanisms has in no sense been favourable in the course of the history of philosophy, because of its vital deficiencies in the explanations of such *prima facie sui generis* philosophic problems as consciousness, moral conscience, volition (from some subjectivistic philosophies) and mysteriously complicated mechanism of the course of history (from various dialectic schools).
- 2) **Ambiguity of the word "mechanism".** The meaning of the word "mechanism" is by no means clear: its ambiguities originating from any vulgar conception of machine. In our time, techniques of new machinery have developed considerably, so that the meaning of the word "mechanism" too has to be altered according to the new models of actual machines.
- 3) **Mechanism of logic and logic of machinery.** The axiomatic system of logic, where it is formalized, has its corresponding structure in some inferential parts of an automaton, so that we might say that a part of mechanism of machinery corresponds to a part of the structures of logic. It might, therefore, not be so fantastic to imagine or to expect a logical model which expresses as its mechanical counterparts, the whole mechanical structures of an actual machine.
- 4) **New scope of machine concept.** The key-conception of the new idea of machinery will be the "feedback", "control", "homeostasis" etc. Though their numerical designs as well as their applications are electro-engineers' specialities, there are possibilities that these concepts will lay a foundation of a new conception of mechanistic explanation in philosophy newly armed for solving philosophic problems.
- 5) **Oscillation and dialectic.** The phenomenon of oscillation is characteristic of mechanisms which are equipped with feedback-control systems. The object of Hegelian as well as Marxist dialectic method was to offer an adequate explanation of the historical changes and developments of cosmic Geist as well as human societies

considered as organisms, traditional mechanisms having been unable to explain these phenomena because of its inadequate conception of machine.

6) Formal logic and dialectic. But these dialectic schools misunderstand the nature and function of formal logic. It is obvious that they had confused the functions of words (concepts) with that of statements (judgements) to the effect that the concept, in order to reflect the reality of the world which goes through zig-zag ways, must itself go through contradictories in order to maintain its organic self-identity. The misinterpretation of "the law of Identity" etc. is obvious from the analysis of contemporary logic.

7) Mechanistic explanations and problems of subjectivity and praxis. Critics against mechanistic explanations are twofold. They complain that the mechanism is unable to explain the subjective characteristics of our mental activities like consciousness, recognition, feelings etc. Two different answers will be given to the criticism. Either we expect future developments of the new conception of machinery in order to verify that there are no specific philosophical problems to which the new mechanistic explanation can not give adequate answers. Or we give a new wider meaning to the existing terminologies like consciousness, recognition etc. This procedure is not at all uncommon, since we are actually doing the same when we talk about other people's experiences. Another criticism against mechanistic explanations claims that, even if mechanistic explanations are perfect, they do not include, among them, the experiences of the explanation itself. To explain is one thing and to experience or to feel is another, so that the real philosophic problems of our subjectivity as well as of our practical behaviour do escape from the grip of the explanation. This criticism will be right if it means that the behaviour of explaining things is different from the explanation itself—the outcome of the explanatory activities. In the domain of objects, however, different kinds of human activities have an organic interrelations and unity which the perfect mechanistic explanation will reflect at the theoretical level, so that, in these two senses, there is no absolute break between subjectivity and objective explanations.