

Laudatio: Mario Bunge (U Vienna, emcsr2014, 22nd April 2014)

Ladies & Gentlemen, colleagues & friends, dear Marta Bunge, dear Mario Bunge,

I would like to oncemore welcome this year's recipient of the Ludwig von Bertalanffy award in complexity thinking. This time we have the honour to have Mario Bunge here, from Montreal in Canada. And probably, it is hardly necessary to introduce him to you at all. Nevertheless, I will not abstain from one or the other remark as to his activities.

As is the custom for recipients of this award, the Bertalanffy Centre honours with it Mario Bunge's outstanding achievements in the field of complex systems, not only in terms of his philosophical results, but especially with a view to his extremely relevant input for a political as well as social interpretation of these results and the perspective of practical and highly relevant consequences derived from it.

In fact, the precise description of his activities would easily fill a two-hour lecture course, if not more. So what I will do here is to give a very compact view of the most significant aspects of his works.

Probably, you know that Mario Bunge began his studies in the early nineteen-fifties in a beautiful place called La Plata which is situated near to Buenos Aires in Argentina. For a couple of years, La Plata was actually renamed after Eva Perón (you might dimly remember: the lady who looks like Madonna: *No llores por mí Argentina*). Indeed, this happened (if I am informed correctly) in the very year, Mario Bunge did his PhD in what was called physical and mathematical sciences at the time. (1952) Subsequently, he became a professor of theoretical physics and philosophy (a very good combination, I can tell you), first in La Plata, then in Buenos Aires proper. In 1966 he went to McGill University, Montreal, where he became Frothingham professor of logic and metaphysics.

Of his many written works, and I cannot mention all of them here, the "Treatise on Basic Philosophy" is most famous, comprising of eight volumes in nine parts published between 1974 and 1989. I think this is really what we can call the "nucleus" of his works - following various sources that have introduced this sort of terminology -, insofar as four essential fields are made topical which are: semantics (concerning theories of meaning and truth), ontology, epistemology, and ethics. Two points are particularly important here: First of all, there is the explicit relationship laid open in the very choice of the fields I just mentioned: In this sense, Mario Bunge continues a line of thinking which goes back as

far as to the ancient Greek Stóa via later developments put forward by Spinoza, Schelling, Bloch and others. In fact, Ernst Bloch would have said that Mario Bunge belongs to the “Aristotelian Left”. It is interesting to note that in the contemporary secondary literature, Bloch and Bunge are very often mentioned in unison, although they have – at least as far as I know – neither met nor explicitly received each other’s works.

On the other hand, we recognize that what Mario Bunge offers is nothing but a *system of philosophy*. For many years by now, the project to develop such a system has become considerably out of fashion, particularly in the view of all those who deal with the history of philosophy rather than philosophy proper or of those who mix up philosophy and theology all the time or different from that, make their retreat into the recesses of analytical agnosticism.

So for us, Mario Bunge belongs to those few who consequently continue the systematic approach to the world without neglecting the unity within all the variety of observable multitudes. By doing so, he rehabilitates the close relationship between *conceptual systems* in the philosophical sense and *evolutionary systems* in the phenomenological sense on the one hand, and he establishes his approach in terms of a strict materialism with all its interdisciplinary implications on the other hand.

There is still another aspect to this which can be clearly recognized in the very first volume of the treatise published as early as in 1974: namely in that it starts with the *problem of interpretation* in the first place. (To be more precise, the first part is on the concepts of reference, representation, sense, and truth, while the second part is on interpretation proper.) In other words, we deal here with a worldly *hermeneutic* on which the whole system is based conceptually, i.e. in ontological as well as epistemological terms – although these latter are discussed in later volumes in more detail, and the bridge is provided by the third volume which is on the relations of logic to semantics and ontology. In principle, this visualizes the ancient problem of conceptualizing and eventually formalizing the principle of “*thaumazein*” visualized as the onset for any systematic approach to the world at all, and it stresses the hermeneutic activity of human beings from the beginning on – such that despite all the scientific approaches inherent in the cumulating architecture of the system put forward, there is nevertheless a ground to all of that which in itself is nothing but an *unground* as Schelling would have said. Hence, philosophy can never be the same as the sciences, although it has to deal with them in detail. But as a “science of totality” (H. H. Holz) it is also a science of the latter’s grounding, and thus as such it is itself ungrounded. What we find here is something very common to us (with *us* I mean many of those assembled here at this very congress): namely that it is

already the grounding itself, i.e. the very foundations of reflexion that determine the ethical outcome which may be a later result of the approach actually undertaken.

However, as we can see, this philosophical attitude is not one that would be well-received all the time. In a very interesting recent youtube interview (or rather in a series of such interviews), Mario Bunge is characterized by someone who shows up as *borlinsky* in the following way:

Those who have studied some of his work either consider him an intellectual terrorist to be feared or a philosophical freedom fighter who sheds bright light on the fundamental questions of scientific knowledge. He takes no prisoners.

Indeed, this is something which has become unfashionable as well by now: to risk being polarizing. Different from this, today, one usually follows the main-stream lines of thought (otherwise one has difficulties to find an academic position) or one is satisfied with telling all the time what other people are saying, never giving away one's own standpoint. It is refreshing to meet a philosopher then who still knows how to properly dispute.

And it is instructive to note from these interviews that despite his wide range of his many publications, Mario Bunge often had difficulties with the editors under various circumstances displaying quite clearly the inability to understand his intentions and conceptions or at least to grant that a text would be worth being published. In fact, we live in an age of heavy-minded editors and referees as to that. On the other hand, Mario Bunge who is criticizing Marx for the deficiencies of his theory, is at the same time he who teaches the first course on Marx at McGill in 1980. Hence, the ability to compose a critical discourse and the virtue of sober tolerance and interest do not exclude each other. (There are many universities where you would not believe this.)

Mario Bunge is also known for his practical and political *engagement*. Coming out of a family context in an Argentina which has been charged intellectually and politically, he dealt among other things with the explicit design of a healthcare system which later influenced the legislation in Canada. He founded very early (when still being a student) a worker's school to grant education to the under-privileged which was actually encumbered and interfered with by government institutions that did not like the idea. Hence, political aspects, especially in terms of political philosophy, were always an important point of his works - with a view to problems of political participation and inequality among people as well as with models of cooperative businesses managed by the

workers themselves (in fact, by doing so, establishing a clear critique of mainstream historical approaches to this topic from Hobbes and Locke up to Rousseau and others).

So, it has become the quite modernistic custom to announce contributions to congresses and conferences (also to this very emcsr2014 by the way) by motivating the paper's social relevance, then in the case of Mario Bunge, it is more than obvious why – as far as philosophy is being concerned – this is quite a redundant exercise indeed: There is no doubt about the political and social relevance of Bunge's results. This is something we cannot value highly enough.

Thank you very much.