What is Philosophy?[1]

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I'm forever being asked—especially at cocktail parties—what philosophy is. I have a ready escape, which consists in answering: "I don't know. Come to me on my deathbed; I may know by then." I suspect this answer-which-is-no-answer either makes the questioner angry, because he thinks I just don't want to be bothered, or else confirms his suspicion that philosophers don't know what they're doing. If he thinks I just don't want to be bothered by this question, he's wrong, because I am bothered by it—day and night—and I'd like nothing more than to be able to answer it. If, on the other hand, he thinks I don't know what I'm doing, then he's closer to the truth. How can it be that a respected institution pays me a salary to not know what I'm doing? It seems that the least I can do to repay the institution for its support is to treat the present occasion as an opportunity to work out once and for all an answer to the question, "What am I doing?"

Someone will say "For heaven's sake, if you don't know what philosophy is, go and ask your colleagues. After all, philosophy is 2600 years old and somebody must know by now what it's all about!" And if my cocktail-party interlocutor asks another philosopher what philosophy is, he may indeed get a perfectly definite answer. But he had best stop right there, because if he keeps on asking, he's likely to get a whole series of perfectly definite answers, many of which contradict each other. This will inevitably reinforce his growing conviction that philosophers indeed don't know what they're doing.

In case you think I'm overstating the problem, let me refer you to a volume edited by a respected philosopher, Henry Johnstone. The book is called What is Philosophy? and it consists of essays on the title theme by ten other respected philosophers. Here, no

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1 Class of 1956 Lecture, Bucknell University, September 23, 1970.

doubt, if anywhere, one will find the answer. One finds, alas, ten different answers. And all of these answers are by 20th C. philosophers, with 2600 years of so-called "progress" in philosophy behind them. One of them tells us that philosophies are the products of their times, while another tells us that philosophy presents us with the merely possible, with what has hitherto never been thought. One of them tells us that philosophers throughout history have been concerned with one and the same set of problems, while another tells us that the problems of each historical period are unique to that period. Two of them say that philosophy is a "science" with its own subject-matter, while a third argues that philosophy's only legitimate task is to comment on the logic used by the various sciences.

These flagrant contradictions offer us one of the best clues to what philosophy is. I'll explain why shortly. But first let me say a word about The Celebrated Man In The Street's conception of philosophy, for it may be more perceptive than the conception offered by many philosophers themselves.

Philosophers are generally thought of as "out of it." This view of philosophers gets its start at the very beginning of philosophy. Plato recounts that Thales, the first philosopher of record, fell into a well while he was gazing at the sky. A "witty and attractive" Thracian servant-girl mocked him for this, "declaring that he was eager to know the things in the sky, but that what was behind him and just by his feet escaped his notice." (Kirk & Raven, 78) (If you need confirmation that this remains a trait of philosophers to the present time, let me admit that last month, while gazing at the ceiling in our basement, I fell into the sump and broke our sump pump. Needless to add, perhaps, that I was mocked by my witty and attractive wife.) So philosophers are with some justice thought of as impractical and uncommonsensical. Some philosophers even wear their uncommonsensicality as a badge of honor. The Greek philosophers Heraclitus and Parmenides—who in other respects disagreed mightily—joined in the belief that common-sense was the way of ignorance and error. On the other hand,

some British philosophers have even espoused common-sense as a corrective to philosophical errors and chastised other philosophers for straying from it.

Another popular conception of philosophers sees them as aged wise men, contemplatively puffing on their pipes, occasionally breaking their silence long enough to utter pithy and trenchant maxims which mark them as repositories of the Wisdom of the Ages. On this view the philosopher is "out of it" enough to be really "with it," meaning that he sees through the vanities and inanities of the moment in such a way that the moment becomes just another illustration of Eternal Verities. Given this conception of the philosopher, and the fact that Eternal Verities are now out of fashion, it is possible to conclude that philosophers are worthless.

Still another common image of the philosopher sees him simply as the man who ignores facts in order to be able to speculate the more wildly. Some philosophers themselves are guilty of reinforcing this image of themselves. Thus a former teacher of mine writes in a recent book: "If the account has no basis of fact, surely then it must be philosophically significant." This suggests that the philosopher's main function is that of leading mankind down blind utopian alleys. And as we have nowadays little use either for speculation or for the utopias speculation spawns, it follows once again that philosophers are worthless.

The Celebrated Man In The Street tells us, then, that the philosopher is impractical, that he is in contemplative withdrawal from the appeals of the moment in order either to pursue timeless themes or to speculate.

It seems that the ordinary man's conception of the function of the philosopher is both more general and more consistent than the conceptions offered by philosophers themselves. Why? What kind of a "discipline" is it that can't even define itself? How can it be a discipline at all? 'Discipline' suggests a limited area of inquiry determined by a particular subject-matter. But we have seen that different philosophers define the subject-matter of philosophy both differently and contradictorily, some even maintaining that philosophy, having no subject-matter of its own, steals its subject-matter from the disciplines that are disciplines.

To save ourselves from this dilemma, we might want to say that the subject-matter of philosophy is defined by the traditional fields of philosophy: logic, ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics. But in the past century or so a number of thinkers who are generally called 'philosophers' have challenged the rule of logic in philosophy, or have cast doubt on the possibility of constructing a philosophical ethics, or have proclaimed the death of metaphysics. Because the traditional fields of philosophy have been challenged by philosophers themselves, some have drawn the conclusion that the only legitimate task of contemporary philosophy is that of composing its last will and testament. I am not ready to draw that conclusion.

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Most of the problems and contradictions that arise in defining philosophy stem from identifying it with a particular content or method. I shall try instead to identify it in terms of its conditions. Viewed in this way, philosophy is only what it has always been: the activity of holding oneself reflectively in a free space. I believe this is the only definition which will encompass what philosophy has been and is likely to be. As you can see, it is a definition which, if it embraces all philosophers, does so at the price of being extremely general. Is it so general as to be empty or trivial? We shall have to reflect on it, in order to decide whether it says anything significant at all.

Philosophy is the activity of holding oneself reflectively in a free space.

Philosophy is a movement of and towards reflection. Reflection is a state of separation or withdrawal. The movement of philosophy is a movement toward reflective separation or withdrawal or isolation. It is therefore no accident that philosophers are so frequently thought of as "out of it." That is a condition of philosophical activity. It is no accident that philosophers are so often regarded as impractical and uncommonsensical. Practicality and commonsensicality are disciplines—ways in which people discipline themselves to the laws of mechanics or to the habits and organization of society in order to operate within or to influence the region of nature or the region of society.

The philosopher, on the other hand—insofar as he is a philosopher—attempts to disengage himself from ordinary habits, usual presuppositions, inherited patterns of thought. In order to inhabit a "free space," the philosopher in a sense has to be un-ruly, un-disciplined, though in another sense he needs to be highly self-disciplined.

It is the fact that philosophers aspire to disengagement in a reflective free space, the fact that philosophy is un-ruly, which explains why there are many different philosophies in the history of philosophy. This is only to say that philosophy is bound up with speculation: that is, with an imaginative and hypothetical mode of thought. The philosopher is often characterized as "a dreamer" because his reflective withdrawal leaves him free for speculation or imaginative construction. It is, by the way, no accident that philosophy begins, in Ionia, in leisure. Leisure affords the possibility of reflective disengagement, withdrawal from immediate demands such that thought has the time and space to go its own way, to speculate, to "wonder." (A Marxist can therefore claim that philosophies are creations of economic privilege, which may be largely true, and that philosophies are therefore rationales for that privilege, which is probably false.) In any case, it is owing to the very nature of philosophy that philosophers are accused of "idle speculation" or "idle contemplation." It is my contention that philosophers ought to be proud of this, but many of them become ashamed of it. They are tempted to fall back into the common-sense world and be practical again. You can't be respectable without being practical. When philosophers become ashamed and defensive, they tend to start thinking that philosophy is a discipline in the same sense as "other" disciplines, and that it ought to do something like physics or biology or engineering do. It ought to give us a body of knowledge we can get our hands on, instead of just speculating. But if and when philosophy does give us a body of knowledge, it becomes one more science and seems to take its leave of philosophy.

One cannot "get one's hands on" philosophy. Philosophy is inherently open-ended. Inhabiting a "free space" means openness to alternatives; it's a place you can go and "just think." Of course in our society "just thinking" is something of an outrage.

One must at all costs be "productive" in some rather obvious and easily specifiable way. One must "make a responsible contribution to society." If the philosopher is "productive," if he does "make a responsible contribution to society," it tends to happen in subtle and long-range ways, and not in ways which are easily perceivable by a society in a rage for crash programs. Nevertheless, the philosopher can and should let his mind roam, because he is in a position to consider alternatives that seldom get considered by people who are already committed. There are all kinds of ways to get committed: tradition, family, church, fraternities, the state, etc. Society, one might argue, conspires to get us committed. But just because there are so many ways to get committed, there are very few ways to get un-committed. It may be that only in getting un-committed can one stand a chance of getting out of the trees and seeing the forest. The philosopher stands apart, he's "distant," and people sometimes hate him for that. Philosophers throughout history have had a reputation for being haughty, distant, isolated. This gets its start early in the history of philosophy, in the Greek thinker Heraclitus; he was a recluse, and a crank who thought most people didn't know what they were doing. It seems to me that skepticism is not simply one philosophical attitude among others but rather an inherent tendency of philosophy itself. By this I mean what's sometimes called "healthy skepticism"—keeping an open mind and judging reflectively for oneself—rather than that "unhealthy skepticism" which makes a fetish of believing nothing.

Some modes of social organization do not permit indulgence in philosophical skepticism. Philosophy can only flourish in an open society; its only political enemy is a state which decrees what is to be thought. It is an index of the difference between philosophy and the sciences that many sciences are pursued in Russia or China, while philosophy as such is not permitted. Or rather: the sciences can be freely pursued until or unless they contradict the official dogmas of the state; Soviet biology has not always been the biology of the rest of the world. One might say: the sciences can be freely practiced in closed societies up to the point where they suggest unpalatable philosophical implications.

But this train of thought suggests that philosophy and the sciences are not wholly distinct, not wholly isolated from one another: the sciences can have philosophical implications. It is of course common knowledge that there have been philosophers who were also scientists or, if you prefer, scientists who were also philosophers; they were called "natural philosophers." In fact the distinction between 'scientists' and 'philosophers' is of relatively recent origin. What then does that little word "also" mean when one speaks of "scientists who were 'also' philosophers"? The "also" suggests that the connection between the two is merely accidental: there have been scientists who happened in addition to be philosophers. But the conception of philosophy I'm presenting requires a different account of the relation between science and philosophy: insofar as scientific inquiry requires that the scientist disengage himself from received opinion in order reflectively and imaginatively to entertain alternatives, to that extent the scientist as scientist holds himself in a free space and may be said to be philosophical. (This can be construed as meaning that insofar as closed societies harbor the sciences, they harbor the hidden seeds of philosophy, a thinly-veiled philosophical tendency which may prove their undoing.) Let me put this differently: the pursuit of the sciences presupposes <u>the principle</u> of philosophy. With this notion of the principle of philosophy we come to the very heart of what I mean by "holding oneself reflectively in a free space." It requires further explanation.

To separate oneself reflectively in thought is to accord thinking itself a status and dignity of its own. It is to affirm thinking as a self-governing region. I want to argue that this is part of what is involved in the idea of holding oneself reflectively in a free space. Thought does not inhabit a free space unless thought is on its own. Thought which simply mirrors inherited opinion, or thought which reflectively utters beliefs to which one is long habituated, is thinking not in a free space but in a fettered space. Such thinking cannot account for itself on its own terms. That is; what accounts for such thinking is not the thinking <u>itself</u>, but rather habit, or lethargy, or a need for dogma, or some personal interest which controls

the outcome of the thought. So long as the conclusion of one's thought is dictated in advance by some personal interest, the conclusion of one's thought is not dictated by the thinking itself.

All this can be put in a simpler and more usual way: to hold oneself reflectively in a free space is to attempt disinterested thinking. But disinterested thinking must not be confused with uninterested thinking; motivationally, it seems to me very unlikely that there is such a thing as uninterested thinking. That one thinks about something at all is a sign that one has some interest in it, one has some stake in thinking it. The rise of a train of thought is no doubt always motivated by one's situation, by what one has just been thinking or experiencing, by some challenge one is about to face, and so on. So one has some stake or motive or interest in thinking what one is now thinking. Motivationally, I believe that all thinking is in one sense a function of desire. What I'm thinking and saying at this moment is motivated by my desire to be taken seriously by the academic community, for example, and by my desire to gain a sympathetic hearing for philosophy. But that does not mean that my thinking cannot be disinterested and cannot be evaluated on its own terms. Perhaps an example or two may help clarify the distinction I'm making.

There's an old saying to the effect that when the scientist enters his laboratory he must leave himself behind. This is in one sense true, in another sense not. He does not and cannot leave behind his desire to pursue his science for whatever personal reasons he may have: money, fame, self-esteem, love of scholarship and so forth. He does not and cannot escape the fact that certain idiosyncracies of his temperament and perhaps even certain accidents of his upbringing may account for the fact that he is a chemist rather than a geologist, or a biologist rather than a philosopher. He does not and cannot escape the fact that the experiment he is about to conduct is being done because the Buffalo Valley Pharmaceutical Company needs to know more about the properties of a certain compound than is presently known. But none of these personal interests taken singly, nor all of them taken together, will account for the result or conclusion reached by the

experiment. The experiment may not succeed in yielding new knowledge about the compound. Or the result of the experiment may be the uncovering of some anomaly which will require revising current thinking about the nature of that compound. One can only tell by conducting the experiment; one can in no case deduce the outcome of the experiment from the motives and circumstances which explain why the experiment is being done. In the course of the experiment, the chemist will perhaps imaginatively construct a hypothesis about the nature of the compound, but the truth or falsity of the hypothesis will not be determined by his desire that it be true or that it be false. What is happening is that the chemist is subjecting himself to disinterested conditions. That is, his inquiry presupposes a reflective free-space. Every inquiry which generates imaginative hypotheses and deduces consequences from them which ought to be true if the hypothesis is true—every inquiry which distinguishes, as inquiry must, between a reflectively entertained hypothesis and its verification—every such inquiry presupposes a free space in which it is operating. The very notion of entertaining a hypothesis as a hypothesis presupposes a free space in which that hypothesis can and must be thought of as pure unreality, as a pure product of thought itself, as a mere idea whose truth or falsity remains to be decided.

A second example may further clarify the notion of the disinterested. Carl Rogers writes as follows of an exchange he had with B. F. Skinner at a conference on "The Individual and the Design of Culture":

> A paper given by Dr. Skinner led me to direct these remarks to him. "From what I understood Dr. Skinner to say, it is his understanding that though he might have thought he chose to come to this meeting, might have thought he had a purpose in giving his speech, such thoughts are really illusory. He actually made certain marks on paper and emitted certain sounds here simply because his genetic make-up and his past environment had operantly conditioned his behavior in such a way that it was rewarding to make these sounds, and that he as a person doesn't enter into this."[2]

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2 Quoted in Rollo May's introduction to Jean-Paul Sartre, Existential Psychoanalysis (Chicago: Gateway Editions, 1962), p. 4.

Now from my present point of view the question which Rogers' challenge to Skinner raises is not the question whether Skinner's theory is motivated by his past and his temperament. It is rather the question: under what conditions can Skinner advance his theory as a theory? What does it mean to advance a theory as a theory? It means, first of all, that it is advanced as a theory, in competition with other theories; this generally means that it is advanced as a theory which is hoped or alleged to be superior to other theories. On what grounds can a theory be regarded as superior to other theories? It is not superior because of its origin, inasmuch as all theories are being held to be equally products of conditioning; thus conditioning is no guarantee or criterion of truth. Yet the theory is presented as 'true' where other theories are 'false.' It may be that Skinner finds it pleasing to utter the sounds which he utters, but he does more: he makes a truth-claim for these sounds: he argues. This implies a second meaning of advancing a theory as a theory: insofar as a theory is argued for or is itself an argument, it is presupposed that it has an internal meaning, a meaning of its own, that it is coherent, that it is internally consistent. A proof in symbolic logic provides a clear-cut case of such internal coherence. It lives in a world of its own. That is, it forms a structure outside of the empirical world. Each step of proof is designed to fit the proof as a whole. The acceptability of any step in the proof is a matter of validity and not a matter of its correspondence with some external state of affairs. Wherever one invokes validity, one invokes a reflective free space and its dispassionateness. One invokes a space or region which makes its own rules, which legislates to and for itself. One inhabits a region which lays down its own conditions. To the extent that such reflective thinking is simply the result of external conditions and conditioning, it is difficult to see how such phenomena as validity, or coherence, or consistency could exist. Insofar as Skinner claims to be a scientist, he invokes the notion of validity, and insofar as he invokes the notion of validity, he invokes a reflective free space with its disengagement and disinterestedness. Let us say that to the extent that reflective thinking invokes a region which sets and is subject to its own conditions, just to that extent it claims to override external conditioning.

I have been speaking of internal coherence as presupposed by anyone who advances a theory or hypothesis as a theory or hypothesis. One can add that anyone who presents a theory or hypothesis as a theory about some part of his environment is also committing himself to a reflective free space. What does it mean to say a theory is "a theory about" something? It means that one is presupposing a sharp distinction between the theory and what it is about. Merely to say that a theory may be 'right' or 'wrong,' 'true' or 'false,' is to assume that the theory is being held in a free space, held "in limbo" so to speak, pending its verification or disverification. Unless one can inhabit a region of alternatives which are entertained without one yet being committed to them, there can be no such thing as 'truth' and 'falsity,' verification and disverification. The free space is the region of alternatives, the region of pure possibility. To think in terms of alternatives, to think in terms of mere possibilities, is already to have committed oneself to a reflective free space. And it is not just the scientist who is committing himself to a free space; to take only one example, any time that anyone wonders whether Mr. X is in his office or not and opens the door of the office to find out, one has already implicitly committed oneself to a whole complex of notions—the notion of alternatives, the notion of pure possibility, the distinction between hypothesis and verification, the distinction between what occurs in the free space of thinking and what occurs in the bound space of perceptual experience.

I hope, as a result of the examples I've been talking about, that I've made clear what I mean by 'dispassionate.' It is just a question of maintaining the conditions under which argument and discourse with oneself and with others is possible. It is a question of being committed to non-commitment as a phase or moment in the process of becoming responsibly and defensibly committed. If reflection without commitment is empty, commitment without reflection is blind. Commitment without reflection is not only blind, it is likely to be arbitrary. Arbitrariness is a form of brute compulsion, a way of affecting or controlling others by force; reflective discourse or genuine argument is a way of controlling others insofar as they are in control of themselves. Thought has

a compulsion of its own for those who assent to inhabiting its free space, but it is not brute compulsion. It is rather a compulsion to which one is subject only insofar as one subjects oneself to it, only insofar as one assents to it or affirms it. In committing oneself to the region of reflective dispassionateness, one enters a community of equals in which one gains victories only with the assent of one's opponent, in which one renounces arbitrariness and assents to arbitration. It is a community of mutual respect. Insofar as one assents to join a reflective and dispassionate community, one agrees to respect another insofar as he has made the same commitment. (I might add that it seems to me that few have ever fought more vigorously against arbitrariness than many of the present generation of young people. Though they often think otherwise, I think they have an ally in philosophy. In fact I will go so far as to say that their crusade is based on philosophy; it was when the Hebrews and the Greeks became reflective enough to generate the abstract notion of a dispassionate principle of justice that the critique of arbitrariness and the crusade for equality got their start. And philosophy along with religion has continued to champion the idea of a dispassionate and non-arbitrary region or community. It is of course a notion which is both revolutionary and conservative. It is revolutionary insofar as it calls for a region of non-arbitrariness, respect and dispassionateness in a world which is often arbitrary, brutal, and blindly passionate. It is conservative insofar as it calls for continued maintenance of the old Western ideal of reflective dispassionateness.)

Note that I speak of reflective dispassionateness as an ideal. There is no automatic guarantee that a free space is attained, that dispassionateness is attained. But it is something we necessarily presuppose when we claim to be arguing.

I can perhaps summarize aphoristically what I've been saying by asserting that philosophy is the passionate pursuit of the dispassionate, or the passionate defense of the dispassionate. This passion is what the word "love" refers to in the root meaning of the term 'philosophy': philo-sophia, literally "love of wisdom." Philosophy is the maintenance of disinterested conditions as such. Other academic subjects are

philosophical insofar as they also do this. Philosophers have no corner on philosophy; the province of philosophy is not restricted to professional philosophers, though they often like to think so. Professional philosophers do, however, generally spend much more of thier time journeying in the free space than others do.

What then is anti-philosophical? Only what does not love wisdom, by which I mean that philosophy's only mortal enemy is the view which denies the possibility of holding oneself reflectively in a free space, a view which denies the possibility of dispassionnate disengagement. It is only insofar as a philosopher denies this possibility that I would refuse to call him a philosopher. But in another sense even he who denies the possibility of philosophy remains a philosopher. What I mean is that insofar as he argues for the impossibility of holding oneself dispassionately in a free space and seeks to gain our assent to his argument, he is tacitly presupposing two things: first, he is presupposing that his argument is both valid and correct, hence not arbitrarily arrived at but dispassionately arrived at; second, he is presupposing that his readers or listeners are capable of reflectively disengaging themselves from their habitual beliefs and prejudices long enough to judge his argument on its own terms. It can therefore be said that he affirms the philosophical principle in the very act of arguing against it. This is not a paradox so much as a failure to subscribe to the very condition under which argument and the evaluation of argument are possible.

We must now go back to my original definition of philosophy. We're going to find that it implies more than I have let on so far; we're going to find that there is another side to the philosophical coin.

Philosophy is the activity of holding oneself reflectively in a free space.

I have so far inspected only one side of the coin: that holding oneself reflectively in a free space is possible only at a price: reflective withdrawal or disengagement commits one to the disinterested. But I also said, in passing, that "It is the fact that philosophers aspire to disengagement in a reflective free space, the fact that philosophy is un-ruly, which explains why there are many <u>different</u> philosophies in the history of philosophy." In other words, to the extent that reflective thinking really does liberate itself from what has already been thought, to the extent that it disengages itself from customary and habitual views, to just that extent it is free to generate a plethora of speculative alternatives, a multiplicity of options or possibilities. These alternatives or options or possibilities are generally called "metaphysical systems" and it would not take much argument to show how they have successively refertilized Western culture. Yet they appear to fertilize Western culture no longer. What does this mean? What has happened to them, and to us?

In modern times, thinking has made dual use of speculation: on the one hand to generate testable hypotheses about the order of nature, on the other hand to generate very general and largely untestable hypotheses about the order and direction of the cosmos and man's place in it. There has been a very complex interaction between these two kinds of speculative hypotheses. At first, of course, they were not distinct:

the philosopher was a scientist, the scientist a philosopher. Subsequently, as the distinction between universal hypotheses and verifiable hypotheses became explicit, philosophy came to be associated largely with universal hypotheses, science being associated largely with verifiable hypotheses. In this situation, it became possible to regard philosophy as an aid to science, a mirror of science, a generalizer of the implications of science, a critic of science, and so forth. Philosophy came to be defined relative to science. At the same time, it seemed increasingly clear that science succeeded precisely to the extent that it renounced "philosophical" or general speculation altogether, hewing unwaveringly to the verifiable.

In consequence, philosophy seems to find itself today in roughly the same dilemma as cosmological speculation in 4th century Greece, only worse. In 4th c. Greece there was a crisis of confidence in cosmological speculation because its hypotheses were contradictory and unverifiable. In the 20th century there is a crisis of confidence in philosophical speculation not only because its hypotheses are contradictory and unverifiable, but also because philosophy has to suffer ignominious comparison with a science which in modern times has succeeded where philosophy seems to have failed. To be sure, philosophy's traditional passion for the dispassionate established the conditions under which science could occur, but this seems to entail no more than that textbooks in the history of science register a prefatory debt of gratitude to "all those without whose help our work today would have been impossible."

Philosophy today thus seems reduced to a stage in the development of science; hence Freud saw the development of civilization as a movement from religion through philosophy to science. What could be more obvious? Is there anything more to say? Everything remains to be said. For a start, one must say that the very nature of Freud's own inquiry committed him to what I have called the philosophic principle, which Freud himself did not clearly see. But there is a lot more to be said than that. We must still speak of the other side of the philosophical coin.

The two sides of a coin are different, yet they are two sides of one and the same coin. They are essentially related, so that you can't have one without also having the other. One side of the coin is the dispassionateness I have discussed; seen from this side, philosophy is a region of rigorous, though self-imposed, order. The other side may be more insidious.

Where order is genuinely self-imposed, there is always the possibility of disorder. Immanuel Kant saw that even dispassionate thought, if pushed far enough, can fall into contradiction with itself. Friedrich Nietzsche argued that "the inquirer, having pushed to the circumference, realizes how logic in that place curls about itself and bites its own tail...."[3] What is this "circumference"? It is really the free space itself, the empty space lying beyond the filled space of our ordinary experience. A free space isn't really free unless it's empty. If there is to be a space in which genuine alternatives or options can occur, that space must be open. In order to be free for a structure, it must be free of structure. An analogy with games may help: in order for there to be games, there must be a play-space in which one is free to invent a game and the rules of the game to which one then freely submits oneself; in play one governs oneself by a structure or order which is either of one's own invention or which one freely adopts. No doubt part of the appeal of play is that it represents self-limitation rather than the externally imposed limitation of brute compulsion. Why is it that some recent thinkers have regarded play as the most essential of human activities? Can it be because play is the controlled enjoyment of a free space which under other conditions is a source of anxiety?

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3 The Birth of Tragedy, Golffing trans. (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1956), p. 95.

My argument grows more complex. Why should a free space be a source of anxiety as well as of enjoyment? Does this have anything to do with the well-known fact that philosophers on the one hand enjoy playing speculative games, but on the other hand often fall into the blackest and bleakest anxiety? Is this what happens to someone who launches himself wholeheartedly into a free space? If so, why? The answer is that a free space is a kind of nothingness. The price of a free space is that nothing determines it. The price of genuine novelty or possibility is that nothing preordains the outcome. The price of having genuine alternatives is that nothing be decided in advance. Where there is play, then, there lurks the anxiety of openness, of indefiniteness, and of risk. (From this consideration one might draw interesting conclusions about why some people do not like to play.)

The price of a free space, then, is anxiety, potential or actual. Pure possibility—which is "nothing"—is a source of anxiety. The price of being able to theorize or hypothesize is deliverance over to the region of nothingness. All free inquiry presupposes it. If science is free inquiry, science presupposes nothingness. Science does not operate simply in the region of the factual; it operates in an essential way in the region of nothingness. I say "in an essential way" since scientific method is impossible without the region of nothingness. The notion that the only region is the region of the factual is therefore an impossible notion: the 'fact' is in its very essence what presents itself as fact rather than mere hypothesis, as the verification of what up to the point of verification was only a possibility. Without possibility there can be no reality or factuality.

All science thus presupposes the region of pure possibility, of nothing. As does all philosophy. But if science presupposes the free space of nothingness or possibility, science is nevertheless not preoccupied with this free space as such. Science has made use of the free space in order to gain specific knowledge; philosophy has made use of the free space largely in order to generate speculative hypotheses about the world as a whole. And philosophers have generally, I've suggested, made it their business in

addition to defend the very notion of a free space. But it is only fairly recently that a number of philosophers have made the free space itself their primary preoccupation. What is at stake in this preoccupation with a free space, which is often looked upon as a morbid preoccupation with nothingness? Does it forsake the dispassionateness I have spoken of? What does it have to do with our subject, what philosophy is?

I will give a direct, if at first rather dark, answer, and then try to explain it. The scientific attitude has become a world-view, in fact the world-view. It rules, largely unquestioned. But some philosophers have recently proposed that the scientific world-view is infected with nothingness, with possibility. Admittedly, this sounds like nonsense, not to say jargony gobbledygook. Is it?

Let me say right off that this view does not represent an attack on science or on technology; it represents an attack on the extension of science and its technological applications into the ruling world-view. The attitude of science is so much the ruling world-view that many philosophers think that philosophy itself must be or become a science if it is to have any dignity at all. Yet some philosophers have been concerned with the grounds and limits of the scientific attitude. The fact that it is possible for the scientific attitude to become a world-view is itself a sign of the limits of science. The scientific attitude raised to a world-view is one possible world-view among others. In a world where there are sciences, the scientific attitude is not necessarily or automatically raised to the ruling world-view. Yet it happens that the scientific attitude has become our world-view. No one knows this better than philosophers, who must themselves claim to be scientists if they hope to gain a hearing, if they hanker after status and dignity. Marx had to see himself as a scientist, even when he was not. Freud had to see himself as a scientist, even when he was not. Husserl had to see himself as a scientist, even when he was not. Nietzsche, at least most of the time, did not see himself as a scientist—but he is easily dismissed. Heidegger does not see himself as a scientist—and he is easily dismissed. If Nietzsche and Heidegger can be so easily dismissed, if Marx and Freud can be easily dismissed once it is shown that

they were not quite the scientists they thought they were, this is not simply because they were not scientists but rather because the scientific attitude has become the ruling world-view. Philosophers and other humanists know that they live on the margins of science. It often seems that the humanities are tolerated in university curricula as fringe benefits, something "every student should be exposed to," at least once in his life, lest he forget what man used to be like in the old days, or in order that the student learn how to make use of his idle hours when he's not doing something important. The humanities even come to seem a luxury; a letter to the Bucknellian a year and a half ago suggested that Bucknell could no longer afford the luxury of maintaining a major in philosophy. That opinion is itself the expression of a philosophy—of a world-view, and one which rules.

What is this ruling world-view? It is certainly not, as the term 'science' or scientia would lead one to expect, a concern for "knowledge for its own sake." The question put to humanists, and perhaps most especially to philosophers, is usually not "Does your subject bring knowledge, or wisdom?" The questions asked are: "What can I do with philosophy?" "Can I calculate with it?" "Will it help me make love to my girlfriend?" With incredible frequency I hear: "My parents don't want me to bother with philosophy because it doesn't do anything." Philosophy bakes no bread. The scientific attitude is not raised to a ruling world-view out of concern for the disinterested. The disinterested can go hang if it doesn't produce something, something tangible, if something doesn't "materialize" as we say.

The key indices of our world-view are not so much scientific, per se, as technological: terms like "product," "productive;" "packageable," "producible," "reproducible," "exploitable," "harnessible," "consignable," "designable," "designed for," "good for....", "useful for....", "marketable," "adaptable to....", "conformable to....", "do-able," "calculable," "skilled at....", "trained for....", "geared to...."; "proven results," "results guaranteed;" "quick benefits," "known benefits," "permanent benefits;" "analyzed," "computerized," "sanforized," "containerized," "mechanized," "synthesized,"

"mobilized;" "new," "novel,""up to date," "breakthrough;" "dispensable," "disposable," "discardable," "throw-away-able," "reusable." Our world is in part a world of words, and these are some of our most frequent words. Notice especially the almost mesmeric frequency of the suffixes "-ized" and "-izable," referring to what has been made and what can be made. It is a world of making and remaking, where making is raised to the nth power; in a world of making, what counts is the skillful transformation of raw material into product and the use of this product to produce another product. Its dominant temporal dimension is the dimension of the <u>future</u>, as the repetition of the prepositions "to...." and "for...." in my recitation of terms indicates. The present is primarily a passage and transition <u>to</u>..... and primarily a means <u>to</u>.... and when one tries to specify the ends toward which it all is directed, one thinks mainly of more means, except for the pitiful end of mere survival. Is our world-view one which is capable of specifying any end except further advancement towards...., further progress towards....?

The plight of the aged in our society, which we hear so much about, is in part a function of our world-view, because the aged are for us precisely those without a productive future. The protracted plight of the blacks or of the dispossessed Palestinian Arabs—i.e. the displace-ables—is in part a function of our world-view, because we find them near-unintelligible when they say "now!" Why is the "<u>now</u> generation" the new generation? Does their conditioning really explain it—that they were brought up wrong, somehow brought up completely differently than past generations? Or can it be a matter of thinking—that they are thinking about the rule of the dimension of the future in our society? That they are thinking about the danger of ends being swamped by means? That they are thinking about the implications of their being valued largely as "skilled at," "trained to," "producers of....," "a sacrifice for" and of their being regarded as "products of...." Why are there "flower people"? Is it that the flower symbolizes all that is precisely <u>not</u> raw material, precisely <u>not</u> a means to....?

We are being confronted by another world-view, and it will not pass away with the next generation, because it emerges from a deficiency in our ruling world-view itself. A free-space is the space of world-views, the space where world-views emerge and the space where they clash. We clash not where there is fact and verification but where no verification seems possible. Where there is fact, there are no alternatives. We clash where there is freedom to differ, in the free space. This is the insidious side of the coin, of the free space, which I spoke of. It is the space which always remains, no matter how much science expands. It is also the space in which the clash of world-views must be arbitrated, if the clash is to be arbitrated at all; this is the conservative side of philosophy. More and more raw material, more and more skill, more and more means is not the arbitration of the clash of world-views but the rule of the one that already rules. But have I really demonstrated that there is a clash of world-views?

Every world-view has its ontology as well as its attitude toward time. An ontology refers to what a thing is, its nature. And an ontology either implicitly or explicitly refers to what man is, by defining man relative to things, or by defining things relative to man, or both. What is our ruling ontology? The ontology of quanta which flourished in the 17th and 18th centuries saw the real thing as a quantum because when science began to regard the thing as measurable and calculable quantum it succeeded spectacularly. This ontology of quanta or data tends to reduce the thing to what science has the tools to deal with. For this ontology man is primarily a spectator and calculator of quanta and quantitative relations. This ontology has not been left behind but has evolved into an ontology of <u>usable</u> quanta. Our vocabulary suggests that quanta and data are "-ized" and "-izable." Things are "resources," "raw material," "energy sources," or "energizable," what is manipulable, harnessible, transformable. Things are in the service of man, where man is regarded not so much as spectator (master of the world in thought) but as manipulator, harnesser, transformer (master of the world in deed). Manipulating, harnessing, transforming are modes of changing, and

man is seen primarily as he who transforms the present into the future, that is, the "-izable" into the "-ized," the raw into the produced and productive. And "progress is our most important product." Man and thing are mutually harnessed to technical change, and the present is the "-izable" future, what waits to be "-ized." Our ruling ontology is thus shifting from thinking of the thing as present to thinking of it as an as-yet-unrealized future, as raw material for the future. The present is thus infected with negativity; it is primarily what is not-yet.... The present is for us essentially lack, imperfection, transition, promise, potential, means, and the improvable. The past, as unavailable and unmanipulable, doesn't interest us very much, unless it is in some way usable, e.g., usable in avoiding the mistakes of the past.

I submit that this is our world-view and that this therefore is one background and context against which the plight of the blacks, the unlanded Palestinian Arabs, the crusading ecologists, the now generation and the flower people and other revolutionaries world-wide must be seen. There is a clash of world-views: that is, these people mistrust the future the way most of us mistrust the present. In addition to the change in their view of time, has their view of the thing and its relation to man correlatively changed? Generally we doubt this. Generally we think that all a person who, unlike us, is "out of it," really wants is to be one of us, to think and act as we do. But to be "out of it" is to be put in a position which encourages looking at us from a different perspective than we look at ourselves. And philosophy has always encouraged the effort to look from a standpoint which is "out of it"; this is the insidious or revolutionary side of the philosophical coin. Is our present world-view either inevitable or desirable? Can it be that in an important sense our ruling world-view is potentially self-contradictory and self-destructive?

Under what conditions could our ruling world-view become self-contradictory and self-destructive? It could be self-destructive if it were to reduce both our environment and ourselves to means and instrumentalities. For example: If love were thought of simply as a means of releasing potentially dangerous psychophysiological tension.

If travelling were regarded simply as the use of the most efficient means of getting from one point to another. If learning were regarded simply as picking up skills, as a means to productivity, either scholarly or socio-political. If forests were regarded simply as a "national resource." If TV were primarily a way for us to be instantaneously everywhere except where we are. If adjusting the snapshot or movie camera as a means of re-producing the present in the future were to become more important than appreciating the scene now. If purifying our lakes and rivers and air were to be thought of simply as a means to survival. If integration were to be considered as simply a means of preventing violence. If violence were to be regarded as simply the most efficient means of putting an end to violence. If non-violence were to be regarded simply as the most skillful means of putting an end to violence. If "body-counts" were to be taken as signs of a moral victory. If sex-education manuals for our school-children were considered simply an antiseptic and clinically-neutral way to keep kids out of future trouble. If vacations were to be considered primarily as a way of "recharging the batteries." If present occupation and profession were to be regarded primarily as a means to both advancement and retirement. If reading were to be done mainly in order to "keep up." If giving up smoking were solely a matter of quantitative increase in life-span. If college were seen as simply a means to grad-school or a "preparation for life" rather than life itself. If human communication were seen primarily as the use of "media" for data-transmission.

What I'm asking is this: under what conditions are the past and present more or less systematically discounted in favor of the future? Our ruling mood is anxiety over a not-yet, the future. Our ruling world-view implies—perhaps rightly—that man is by nature restless, by nature a being who aspires, by nature a tool-maker who is capable of the systematic arrangement of present means for future goals. For our world-view that is perhaps the essence of man; hence we tend to think that the way to date the beginning of the specifically human is by ascertaining when he began to use tools. Is that the whole story—or is it rather a sign of a technological world-view?

Man is the harnesser; the thing is the raw material, the harnessible and harnessed. That is our ontology, our view of what things are. The time has come to ask whether there is not a more fundamental ontology. The time has come to ask whether our ontology doesn't presuppose a more fundamental ontology. There is a more fundamental ontology if one can ask the questions: who is it that harnesses? What is it that is harnessed? Who is the "-izer" and what is it that is "-ized" or "-izable?" Profound implications lurk in the fact that we can ask these questions at all.

As soon as we ask, "Who is the harnesser?" we imply that he is more than a harnesser. He has also been—in that neglected region, the past—a wonderer, a contemplator, the creation of god or gods, not the master of his fate but one mastered by fate, a lover of beauty, a son of the earth. He has been more and other than he now seems to be and, if we understand history at all, we shall be cautious about thinking that what we now take him to be is all that he is. He is a source of possibilities, and it is therefore a betrayal of what he essentially is to reduce him to one of his possibilities, namely harnessing or producing or mastering. He is a source of possibilities because he can inhabit the free-space, the space of alternatives, the space given him by language (language being, among other things, the region in which alternatives can be proposed). To understand man as a being of possibilities is to recognize that violence is done to his essential nature when he is defined by only one of his possible ways of being. Violence is done to him when he is taken as or treats himself as simply a means to some end, for he is a source of both means and ends. But while he owes the possibility of possibilities to language, language is also the danger of reducing him simply to what our current words define him as, what our current usages use him as. Put it this way: because of language man is always more than what his present language defines him as.

Let us turn, then, from man to thing. As soon as we ask, "What is the harnessed?" we imply that it is more than the harnessed. That which is harnessible is that which might or might not be harnessed. It has to be in order to be harnessed. A tree must

first be a tree in order subsequently to be timber. A forest must first be a forest in order to be a "national resource." It has possible uses only because it is there as something which might or might not be used. It essentially exceeds any particular use or definition of it. Even the artifact essentially exceeds what we now define it as; the table is a society of molecules in constant motion but it is also an unmoving stable surface on which one may write. Language makes it possible for us to understand it as a table or as a society of molecules, but language also tempts us to limit it to what we now say it is. Language opens up the tree's or the table's being to us, but its being exceeds our present language. Because the being of the thing exceeds and makes possible what we now define it as or what we now do to it, we do violence to the thing when we regard it as merely what it now is for us or what it will do for us in the immediate future. Formal definitions help us see what individuals are, but individuals are more than what we say of them, so that formal definitions run the risk of closing off in the very process of opening up. A definition, or a use, should be thought of as a perspective which the thing allows us to have of it. I'm not suggesting that we stop defining and delimiting things. I'm suggesting that we pay attention to the limits of our delimiting, the finiteness of our defining. What the thing requires of us is reverence for it as the inexhaustible source of what we can say of it and what we can do with it.

It is said that the departmental and curricular structure of the modern university is in crisis, that it has become unintelligible. The reason often given is that departments simply sit beside each other, unable to communicate with each other because they lack any sense of having a context in common. In this situation each department or discipline tends to see the world simply from its own perspective. That is, the sense of working in a common environment seems missing. In moving from a class in one subject to a class in another subject, the student perhaps gets the feeling of moving from one world into another, without any sense that each of these worlds is really a different perspective on a common world. He gets THE Truth about things in one department, then

gets THE Truth about the world in another department, only to find that these Truths differ. What is he to think? What he often thinks is that one must be right, the other wrong—that he must choose between them. After all, when a common context of discipline is missing, what is there to do but choose one of them? We need to encourage ourselves and the student to look for the common context.

I'm trying to suggest that a journey in the free-space provides a clue to the missing common context: the clue is possibility. Possibility not merely as the opposite of actuality or reality or factuality, but as openness to alternative perspectives on things which by nature flow beyond any one of these alternative perspectives. The common context is the world of things as inexhaustible source of all these perspectives, a source deserving reverence. To sense the common context requires a certain humility before the fertile inexhaustibility of things; humility before the partiality of our perspectives; humility before our having the gift of language—language which both makes it possible to name and know at all and at the same time says less of the thing than it essentially is. What is required is a sense of limit and of what lies beyond the limit.

It is sometimes said that we have no common language and that therefore we live in private worlds, unable to communicate with each other. The proof of this seems to be that on the one hand disciplines use different vocabularies and that on the other hand the connotations of words differ from person to person and from nation to nation, and that translation from one vocabulary or language into another misses as much as or more than it conveys. That is all quite true, and quite important. But a great deal hangs on one's attitude toward language. I have tried to point out that it makes a great deal of difference whether one regards what one now says of the thing (or of the person) as definitive or not. It makes a great deal of difference whether what one now asserts is taken as denoting what the thing or person is, or whether what one now asserts is taken as denoting, and deferring to, a thing which exceeds the perspective I now take on it. If what we mean is only what is in our heads, there is no common

meaning. If our words are taken as denoting things and persons which flow beyond what we now assert of them, then and only then can things and persons be regarded as the common source of all the perspectives and vocabularies in terms of which we interpret them. Then there is a common context, a common world.

But it's clear that a price has to be paid for having this common context. The price is the humble admission that our words and our knowledge are limited. As soon as we assume that our words and our knowledge are not perspectival, as soon as we assume that what we now say is simply what is, the common context vanishes from view. Things and persons then cease to be a source of other perspectives and other interpretations. Things and persons then lose their possibilities of revealing themselves in different and complementary ways to other people and other disciplines. Reverence for the independence of things as sources is quite a different attitude from two attitudes which have tended to govern us in modern times: the drive to achieve universal knowledge in a finite time, and the drive to master and control nature. Both attitudes are aspects of humanism—the view that man as knower and masterer is the center of all; that view makes deference to things, reverence for things, and humility before things impossible. There is a common world for us only if we let it be—only if we acknowledge and respect its independence. Humanism on the other hand sees a common world only in man's possession of total knowledge, only in a world completely mastered and assimilated, usable and used. As long as we are the center we cannot center ourselves on the World as the common center. To experience a common world we have to defer to it, to care for it. That is impossible so long as we merely care for ourselves. Really to care for ourselves is to care for our common World, to preserve it as inexhaustible source.

There is no true community where one perspective conquers all others. There is community only where each can in his own perspectival way sense himself as caring for a common context or world which others will help care for in their own perspectival ways. Where science is THE Truth, art becomes illusion or mere imagination. Where art is THE Truth, science becomes illusion. Where technology is THE Way, science as knowing for

its own sake and deference to things becomes an illusion or a waste of time, and art becomes idle by-play.

The role that ontology—the theory of Being—can play at the present critical juncture is that of calling attention to the near-forgotten meaning of Being: namely "to be...." where "to be...." conveys the notion that beyond and behind what we take to be the simple fact or the mere thing there is more, there are possibilities. Being is essentially continuing possibility rather than present fact or present utility. What lasts and will last, if we care for it, is the common World which both exceeds and makes possible all our present facts and all our prevailing usages.

We are mortals who live in a small region of light surrounded before and aft by darkness. We are given the divine gift of light, language, which illuminates Things for us as intelligible and knowable and which opens up fertile sources for our use. We easily take for granted the clarity and distinctness of this light and our own power to know and transform. We become as self-sufficient gods, forgetting that the light shines in darkness and that we owe something to what we name and use. Suddenly someone, without saying anything points to a thing: a flower. It grows in the light, but its roots are hidden in the dark and fertile earth. It comes out of the dark earth into the light and is present there only briefly before it returns to its source, but long enough to be named and cared for and appreciated as beauty by man.

Truth, Beauty, and Goodness sound a little old-fashioned to us who live within the scientific-technological world-view. Plato could consider Truth, Beauty, and Goodness as traits of the world itself. But for us they are just traditional human ideals, ideas in people's heads. I submit that Truth lies not primarily in mental verification but in the interplay of human utterance with a common and not-wholly-utterable source, a playground which is the ground of all our perspectival truths. I submit that Beauty is not in the eye of the beholder but in the transitory beings cared for and allowed to flourish by man. I submit that Goodness is not a brain-wave but reverence for the possibilities of things and persons beyond what we take them to be and use them for. I believe these

are not my own arbitrary conclusions about the nature of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness but conclusions which emerge from reflective consideration of the nature, limits, and possibilities of man and thing.

III

By way of concluding, let me very briefly recover the ground we have covered.

Consideration of philosophical and of popular opinions about philosophers led us to consider the free-space as the possibility of possibilities. Consideration of the possibilities of reflective and disinterested speculation led us to the view that the free-space is a common presupposition and source of both philosophy and science. But then our case for disciplined reflective inquiry seemed threatened by something not quite disinterested—by anxiety—because nothing seems to limit speculation if it is really a foray into an open-ended free-space. Speculation then seems a source not only of a measured evolution of thought but also of unruly and revolutionary thinking. Historically, as science and philosophy seemed to go their separate ways, philosophy seemed to have nothing left to do but generate outrageously general, contradictory, and unverifiably visionary hypotheses. The enormous success and prestige of modern science and its practical applications led to the formation of a technological world-view. Relying on our notion of a free-space, we suspected that this world-view might be a hypostatization of the scientific attitude, one alternative, a possibility, rather than something either true or necessary. This suspicion was heightened when we noted that at the present time there seem signs of a clash between this ruling world-view and an alternative one. This alternative view raised for us the possibility that there might be limits to the scientific-technological world-view, that its view of man, things, and time might not only be only one possible view, but might be a view which ignores its own source. Therefore we tried to uncover an alternative to the scientific-technological world-view which would be able to take account of its own source but without attacking either science or technology as such. We suspected that the all-consuming rage for means, for the novel, for the possibilities of the

future might be at least partially explained by the lack of a sense of any solid ground in the past or present. But we argued that the ground has been there all along, though a shift in attitude is required before one can sense it. This shift in attitude required seeing present truths and usages as not untrue but nevertheless as partial views of a common context which flows beyond them and makes them possible. The recognition of this common ground encourages respect for man and things not as means of mastery and control but as source.

Hence love of wisdom, to be true to itself, leads to respect for its source. That is, love of wisdom requires care for man and care for the thing <u>for themselves</u>—not for what we can at the moment make of them. It tempers the rage to the future with a certain piety toward the past and the present. The Earth, as the fertile ground, is the symbol of this permanent inexhaustible source which deserves our reverence and care as that which both bends to our inquiries and demands and at the same time surpasses and makes possible all our inquiries and demands.

Philosophy is love of wisdom. I have been trying to say that there is a dual condition for love of wisdom: respect for the <u>way</u>, which is reflective and dispassionate discourse, and respect for the <u>source</u>, which is the common context of all our reflection and discourse.

One of the most important functions of philosophy is that of encouraging a reflective disengagement in which we can discourse <u>about</u> our usual and habitual preoccupations and modes of thought. The free space is not only the space where speculative outlooks may be proposed but the space where outlooks may be criticized. Attention to the free space as such sensitizes us to the possibility that what we have taken as sheer actuality and necessity may instead be a possibility. Philosophy has always performed both speculative and critical functions, and the two functions have served as checks on each other. In treating what we now take to be actuality as one possibility, I've been trying to perform the critical function.

But philosophy has traditionally been interested in necessity and fate as well as in possibility. Reflective withdrawal can mean loss of context, loss of one's ground, the anxiety of floating in a sea of mere possibilities. Yet at the present time philosophy can serve the function of speculatively summoning up a near-forgotten possibility which may itself be a necessity and our fate: that is, the sense that we are rooted in languages and that languages are perspectival entries into a lasting and sustaining context to which all our languages and vocabularies are relative.

Thus the way of reflective withdrawal itself leads us, at the present time, back to the source. We have now considered both sides of the philosophical coin, its way and its source.

When you put the two halves of my speech together, you can see that what I've been talking about is the wedding of reason and love. At the present historical juncture, the love of wisdom leads to the wisdom of love.