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## THE PHILOSOPHER

MORTIMER J. ADLER

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### IV. THE TECHNIQUE OF PHILOSOPHY

Let me begin negatively by stating what intellectual operations the philosopher does not perform.

He does not do research or carry on investigations which require the collection of data, the assembling of evidence, the examination of documents, or the transportation of his body from place to place in order to make observations. Such activities belong to the historian or his kith and kin, the social scientist, the humanist, and the naturalist.

The philosopher does not supplement the power of his senses by the use of apparatus; he does not employ machines of any sort to register the goings-on of nature or use instruments to explore the unknown; and, of course, he does not construct experiments to create ideal situations in which the essential is artificially isolated from the irrelevant. Such activities belong to the experimental scientist, to the biologist and the chemist, the physicist, and even the astronomer who, though he may perform no experiments, wields complicated machinery.

What this comes to so far is that the philosopher does not exercise his senses in special acts of observation and does no physical work—unless it be in the motions of oral or written speech. So far, then, he does not differ from the mathematician who is also an armchair thinker. What a commentary on our civilization that this phrase has become a derogatory epithet! The fact that the mathematician and the philosopher can perform their tasks sitting in an armchair is the clearest proof that theirs is the highest form of intellectual work—most purely intellectual, least dependent on the senses or the contributions of the manual arts.

How, then, does the philosopher differ from the mathematician? Still proceeding negatively, he does not make postulates; he does not develop deductively and by systematic elaboration the consequences of a small set of initial assumptions; he does not hypothesize ideal entities which are acceptable on the sole criterion of consistency. These are activities peculiar to the mathematician in which the philosopher does not share. Beyond this, they have much in common—precision of definition, exhaustiveness of analysis, and rigor of demonstration.

Before I come to these three intellectual acts which comprise the whole of philosophical work, I would like to develop the consequences of both the negative and the positive analogy between mathematics and philosophy.

Unlike mathematics, especially modern mathematics, philosophy is not advanced by the construction of elaborate theoretic systems. In modern times philosophers have been seduced by mathematics into system-building; they have sold their intellectual birthright for a mess of postulates. Mathematics can be deductive in the simple linear style of deriving one theorem after another. But linear deduction is a small and relatively unimportant part of philosophical thought. No system of deductions could ever be large or flexible enough to contain the concatenation of reasonings which make up philosophical discourse. Furthermore, inductive proof—the proof

of existence, totally unlike mathematical induction—is indispensable in philosophy. Most important of all, philosophical thought is argumentative; it is as much concerned with refutations as with proofs; it is always involved in weighing opposites, balancing contraries, even in establishing polarities. Oppositions, which are the death of systems, are the very life of philosophy, because it is at all moments essentially dialectical, even when it has demonstrated a conclusion.

Like mathematics, philosophy must always try to transcend the limits of the imagination, to go beyond the merely imaginable to the abstractly conceivable. Granted that no human thought can ever wholly escape its bondage to the senses or totally uproot itself from imagery, nevertheless, the philosopher, like the mathematician, must safeguard the integrity of his processes by avoiding poetry as if it were the very plague. I do not mean that the philosopher should shun the work of the poet. I mean only that he must not himself have recourse to poetizing, as a weak substitute for the work of definition, analysis, and demonstration. When it is hard to be precise, or exhaustive, or rigorous, great and terrible is the temptation to convey insights by imagery and meanings by metaphor. He must struggle against this; he must use examples, real or imaginary, and draw diagrams or pictures, only as auxiliary devices. They must not be his main stock in trade. The *Weltanschauung* is as much an enemy of philosophy as it is the system; poetic expression as much a sign of philosophical weakness as deductive simplicity.

Definition, analysis, and demonstration, may I repeat, comprise the whole of philosophical work. Yet the simple enumeration of this triad of functions does not adequately convey the complex motion of the mind in performing these acts, not isolated from one another, but interdependent and interpenetrating. The feel of the thing is, perhaps, much better expressed in a statement by Aristotle which St. Thomas Aquinas expanded. Aristotle, in the opening chapters of the *Metaphysics*, had said, trying to define the highest intellectual undertaking, that it was the business of the wise man to order all things. In the first question of the *Summa*, St. Thomas repeats this: it is the task of a wise man to order or arrange and, he adds, also to judge. To order and to judge. This is what the philosopher must do. Let us look again at these two intellectual obligations and at their relation to each other.

*To judge.*—This imposes upon the philosopher the duty to be a man of conviction, not a man of opinion. The philosopher ought never try to avoid the duty of making up his mind by merely enter-

taining opinions or advancing them lightly. I would go further: the philosopher should eschew the expression of opinion altogether. Opinion is proper to the man of affairs, for in the realm of action, opinion must be resorted to, but it is never admissible in the man of thought, not even as a last resort. If a philosopher has nothing better to offer than an opinion, it would be better that he keep his silence. What, then, is the opposite of opinion, to which the philosopher should restrict himself? It is a judgment, intuitive or reasoned, self-evident or demonstrated. An opinion is an act of the mind in which the will or the passions participate precisely because the evidence is inadequate. When what one is thinking about does not determine what one thinks, one must voluntarily, or emotionally, decide what to think, and so an opinion is formed, to which we may hold lightly or obstinately according to the strength of our desires. In contrast, a purely intellectual judgment is involuntary. The light of reason and the evidence are sufficient to determine what we think, and, when we think dispassionately, one judgment is not stronger or weaker than another. The duty of the philosopher to judge thus requires him both to restrain himself from wishful thinking and to submit his mind selflessly to the object of thought—not passively, however, but with the fullest effort to discern what objectively is demanded of the mind. In short, the exercise of philosophical judgment, in the acceptance of principles and in the demonstration of conclusions, achieves that intellectual objectivity which is supposed to be the special mark of the scientific mind, but which, in truth, is the highest quality of the mind as a thinking and knowing faculty.

*To order or arrange.*—Only things which are different in some respect can be ordered; only the elements of a more complex unity, the parts of a whole, can be arranged. Order and arrangement imply distinction, acknowledge not merely multiplicity but contrariety, and presuppose a unity in which even the greatest diversity can be embraced and the most extreme opposites can be bridged. Distinction or differentiation is impossible without definition. Hence the duty to order requires the philosopher to define. And since definition tells us not only what a thing is but also what it is not, the resulting distinctions involve oppositions of all sorts. But order cannot be fully achieved unless there is a place for everything and everything is in place. Only then is a multitude well ordered; and only then is the unity of a complex whole perceived without the neglect of its least parts or its most intransigent element. To accomplish this, the philosopher must supplement definition by analysis—analysis carried on exhaustively and tested by synthesis, even as addition tests subtraction in the arithmetic process.

*To judge and to order.*—The philosopher must do both, not one or the other. At every stage of definition and analysis he is called upon to judge; and with every act of judgment, whether he is asserting what is evident or what is demonstrated, he must explicate what is implied, acknowledge what is presupposed, and hold the *is not* along with the *is*, so that the movements of analysis and synthesis will not stop at half-truths but will complete their round, to come back later to the *is* understood as *is not*, and the *is not* as *is*. This almost endless process which is perpetually invigorated and renewed by judging for the sake of order, by ordering for the sake of judgment, is the dialectical motion of the human mind engaged relentlessly in philosophical discourse.

Perhaps I can exemplify in a small way this dialectical motion. I have said a number of things about the nature of philosophy. To be philosophical, I should consider the opposites of what I have said. I should then return to my original remarks with new aspects of a larger truth. Since this is a brief and formal lecture, not an interminable, which is to say a good, conversation, I cannot promise to carry the process to completion. But I can begin and, perhaps, reach some conclusion with which we can temporarily pause and say good night.

## V. THE OPPOSITE VIEW OF PHILOSOPHICAL WORK

Let the antiphonal voice be heard. What do my opponents assert? They deny that philosophy is a form of knowledge, for either it employs the method of science or it does not. If it does, it is indistinguishable from science; if it does not, it cannot be knowledge, for—so say the positivists—except for the attainment of scientific research, man has no knowledge. All else is opinion. Or, in another mood, they say that, in order to avoid being undisciplined purveyors of opinion, philosophers must adopt the methods of mathematical logic and confine themselves to purely formal patterns and ideal constructions, having no converse with reality or dealings with existence. The logic-chopping of the medieval Schoolmen is still *verboten*, but under the guise of modern logistics the philosopher is asked to be happy performing new mental gymnastics—the old game of the mind playing tag with itself. On this supposition it is the play of the mind, not serious intellectual work, which the consideration of philosophy should describe. It is almost out of place in a series of lectures which treat of such useful and serious endeavors as science and history.

The implications of such a view of philosophy are plain enough, but what are its presuppositions? Whence does it arise? To tell the

story, and at the same time to make a long story short, let me mention three historical facts which, unless seen in a new light, seem to provide sufficient grounds for the mockery the positivists make of philosophy. Then I shall try to add the light which reinterprets these facts and tears off the mask, or the false face, which is all the positivists see when they look at philosophy in its history.

The first fact is the undeniable fact of disagreement. There is no question about this. Philosophers disagree. They always have. They are still doing it. They will continue to. How, then, can philosophy claim to be knowledge, or avoid the charge that it is opinion, individual and subjective opinion? Consider science and its history. There, agreement prevails.

The second fact is the fact of *isms*. There is no such thing as philosophy. There are only isms—Platonism and Aristotelianism, idealism and realism, the Thomists and the Scotists, the Cartesians and the Kantians, rationalism and empiricism, scholasticism and pragmatism—even positivism. On the surface, this also seems to be true. The history of philosophy reads this way, or at least it is written this way by its loyal and devoted servants. And as positivism itself bears witness, any attempt to do away with isms instantly becomes itself just another ism. How, then, can anyone claim that the work of philosophy is not to build systems? That is precisely what the philosophers do—build systems, each bearing the name of its architect, and worth attention only as a museum piece or as a relic, often dilapidated, of the past. Compare science. It is a single, ever growing body of knowledge, bearing the name of no man, and throwing off isms as a healthy body throws off disease.

The third fact is the fact of progress. Here we begin with science, or mathematics, or even history. In each of these types of inquiry there has been a steady progress from less to more knowledge, from less perfect to more adequate understanding of the matters under investigation. Now compare philosophy. Even its own practitioners have complained about the lack of progress. Certainly, the great modern philosophers, more candid than their forebears, Descartes and Bacon, Locke and Hume and Kant, made the evident lack of progress up to their own time their own point of departure. They found nothing they deemed worthy to build upon. That is why each had to scatter the disorderly stones left standing from the past, clear the field, lay his own foundations, and erect a new system which could pretend to be the mansion of philosophy only for a day; for, with the dawn of the next, it would become just another ism for another philosopher to clear away and start the same process all over again. The scientist, not the philosopher, can say, “In

my house are many mansions,” for the scientists make progress in building the city of knowledge by adding new dwellings to old, but the philosophers are always tearing each other’s down in order to make room for the one edifice that is to house the mind but never does.

These last two facts, like the first, seem undeniable enough on the historic record. There would be no point in denying them, for they lie on the surface of intellectual history, plain for all to see. But there is some point in looking behind the appearances—as a philosopher certainly should deal with the appearances of history—and trying to discover the causes and the reality which the surface phenomena conceal.

The fact of disagreement in philosophy is a half-truth: The other half is the fact of agreement. Nor should the fact of agreement among scientists be allowed to overshadow their disagreements. What gives plausibility to these half-truths is the quite different way in which agreement and disagreement occur in science and philosophy. Scientists of one generation generally disagree with scientists of an earlier day, and this disagreement with the past is praised as progress. In contrast, there are major agreements among philosophers across the centuries—Whitehead with Plato, Dewey with Bacon, Russell with Leibniz, James with Kant, Hobbes with Lucretius, Hegel with Plotinus, Descartes with St. Augustine, Spinoza with Epictetus, Aquinas with Aristotle. Such agreements are seldom fully noted and, when they are, discounted as atavisms. But if the major lines of agreement throughout the history of philosophy were systematically traced and developed, it would be found that the major issues are few, and that many minds have concurred in taking the sides which constitute them.

Yet, we shall be reminded, philosophers contemporary with one another tend to disagree, whereas scientific minds in the same generation tend toward unanimity. This is partly, if not wholly, accounted for by the fact that science is authoritarian and philosophy is not. The appearance of unanimity in the scientific world is due to the fact that any scientist who is not a specialist in a particular field accepts the work of specialists in that field on their authority as reputable scientists. Such docility does not prevail among specialists in the same field; their disagreements are often as violent as they are scientifically fundamental. In contrast, no philosopher worthy of the name is a specialist, and none who had integrity would accept a single principle or conclusion on the authority of another. In a lecture at this university some years ago, Charles Adams Brown epitomized the difference between science and philos-

ophy by stressing this fact—that authority is the primary basis for holding and sharing scientific truths, whereas in philosophy the only basis on which any judgment can be made is the free conviction of one’s own mind. It is this fact which explains the difference between science and philosophy with respect to agreement and disagreement.

I turn next to the isms and to the charge that there is no progress in philosophical thought. Though the lack of progress has been exaggerated, though the isms are often more a matter of language than of thought, I prefer to grant the fact and make the most of it by explaining why, in modern times particularly, these regrettable ills have beset philosophy. I start again from the overemphasized disagreement among philosophers. The men of the Renaissance were unduly impressed by the quibblings of a decadent scholasticism, which, understandably enough considering their lack of perspective, they permitted to obscure the great tradition of European thought. Their dissatisfaction with the bad intellectual climate in which they grew up expressed itself in two equally false reactions: they went either to the skeptical or to the dogmatic extreme. Since philosophers disagree, the skeptics said, let us give it up entirely, for no truth or knowledge can be gained from such an enterprise. Contemporary positivism is their offspring. And, said the dogmatist, if my predecessors in philosophy disagree, there is nothing for me to do but to throw the whole tradition aside and start from scratch as if I were the first philosopher alive. Modern system-building in philosophy was the inevitable consequence. No wonder that philosophy has become so discredited in our day and that the common man seeking wisdom, or the eager student in our universities, turns away with a bitter taste.

But there is a third attitude which can be taken toward the difficulties of the philosophical enterprise and in the face of profound disagreement on major issues. It is the critical attitude which avoids the skeptical and the dogmatic extremes, the dialectical attitude of Aristotle when he said: “The investigation of the truth is in one way hard, in another easy. An indication of this is found in the fact that no one is able to attain the truth adequately, while, on the other hand, we do not collectively fail, but everyone says something true about the nature of things, and while individually we contribute little or nothing to the truth, by the union of all a considerable amount is amassed” (*Metaphysics* ii. 1). Discounting the individual and placing hope only in the collective pursuit of truth, Aristotle formulated a maxim for himself—and for all other philosophers—to follow. “It is necessary,” he said, “to call into council the views



of our predecessors, in order that we may profit by whatever is sound in their thought and avoid their errors” (*De anima* i. 2).

This maxim, and the understanding on which it is based—that philosophy must be a collective not an individual enterprise—has seldom been perfectly honored, but certainly much more so in the ancient and medieval world than in modern times. The debacle of modern philosophy is largely to be accounted for by the loss of this understanding and the violation of the maxim. In modern times philosophers have undertaken their work as if they were poets or painters, each engaged in the utterly individualistic effort of producing his own version of all things in heaven and earth. There is no greater error, no more egregious misconception of the nature of the philosophical task. The task of the fine artist is the polar opposite. In concluding this lecture on philosophical work, I would, therefore, like briefly to describe its essentially social character and to draw there from the light which may guide us in the recovery of philosophy from its present disgraceful plight.

## VI. THE SOCIAL CHARACTER OF PHILOSOPHICAL WORK

Among the works of the mind, the most profound difference arises from their individual or social character—whether by their very nature they are solo performances or must be co-operative efforts. We *would be* shocked at the thought of ten men getting together to write a sonnet or to compose a sonata. We *should be* equally shocked at the notion of one man by himself trying to construct a philosophy. Unfortunately, we take it for granted that a philosopher should retire to the solitude of his study or should ascend to the lofty isolation of his ivory tower. On the contrary, he belongs in the market place, as Socrates so well knew. Solitude may be desirable for the mathematician, but not for him.\* The philosopher could make no worse mistake than to absent himself from the felicity of social intercourse. Far from being a solitary vocation, the philosophical life draws its vitality from conversation and sustenance from the exchange of opinion among ordinary men.

Of all the works of the mind, philosophy is the most demanding of good social conditions and the most dependent on community and co-operation. It is usually supposed that this is true of science, but

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\* There is no incompatibility between the two allocations of the philosopher—the armchair and the market place. The first signifies that he does *not need* to do research; the second that he *does need* the social circumstances of discussion with his fellow-men. In this last respect, he is quite different from the mathematician who can also do his work in an armchair, but who does not need one with wheels so that he can perambulate the public thoroughfares.

it is not true to the same extent or in the same way. Philosophy requires the co-operation of minds which work together on the plane of equality, not of the hierarchical order of master and helper. The scientist is more like the architect than the philosopher. In both cases, the master-builder assigns tasks for subordinates to perform, but he alone organizes their various contributions to produce the whole. The individual philosopher can do nothing well alone. He is merely one worker in the vineyard, and he works well only if he sees the ultimate fruit as the harvest of many hands joined freely and equally together.

The supremely social character of philosophical work follows directly from its being dialectical in method rather than investigative or experimental, or even systematic and deductive as is mathematics. It also follows from the fact that the philosophical mind is discursive rather than contemplative. To say that philosophy is essentially discursive means more than the negation of contemplation; it means positively that it thrives on discourse. Removed from conversation, or from the opportunity therefore, philosophical thought soon dries up and withers. It is a work of conversation; it might almost be said that it is a work of teaching and being taught. The philosopher must be both a teacher and teachable. It is indispensable for the philosopher to teach and to be able to learn from his students. This is true of no other work of the mind. The mind can produce great poetry or music quite apart from teaching poetry or music—in fact, it is usually done that way. The great historian or scientist can dispense with the experience of teaching, and in our universities he usually does for the most part. And if the great statesman or legislator—I do not say educational administrator—is also a teacher of men, that is a consequence of his work, not a condition prerequisite to doing it well. Only the philosopher cannot divorce his work from that of teaching and being taught; which is just another way of saying that his work is through and through dialectical, that it is a work purely and simply of the liberal arts, as is no other function of the human mind. Since teaching and being taught are also nothing but the liberal arts in action, it might be wondered whether the whole educational process can prosper in an atmosphere from which philosophy has been withdrawn or in which it is stultified.

The social work of philosophy cannot flourish where there is no intellectual community to support it. When the factors favorable to communication fail to operate, when the minds of most men suffer intellectual isolation for lack of a common tradition of ideas, common understanding, and common intellectual skills, there is no universe of discourse but only a confusion of tongues. Apart from

a pervasive universe of discourse, and in a century such as ours in which there is no or little intellectual community, the work of philosophy cannot be well done. It is hardly done at all. It is not done in the meetings of philosophical associations or similar scholarly conferences, at which the members read papers at one another, and no one takes the floor except to express his own, usually dissident, opinion. It is not done, nor can it be revived, in our universities, for they are proudest of the fact that they have specialized everything, even philosophy, and that they have abolished the community of scholars in favor of individualistic freedom of opinion.

The American Philosophical Association has recently spent another grant of Rockefeller money to find out what is wrong with philosophy in our institutions of higher learning. Anyone who understood the nature of philosophy would have known the answer without research and at no public cost. Our institutions of higher learning are what is wrong with philosophy; they are at least the proximate cause of the trouble, the ultimate cause being the complete collapse of intellectual community in the culture of our civilization.

Can anything be done? Yes, but not by our philosophy departments or even in our universities more generally. For what must be done is so thoroughly antipathetic to the whole spirit of our institutions and the scholars who therein enjoy their splendid isolation, their freedom from unity, even if the unity required is only that of a universe of discourse; what must be done calls for so radical a reform of the culture which our universities reflect, that it would be naive or ironical to ask our universities to support, or even to participate in, a renovation which would alter them beyond recognition. Without specifying the institutional details, I can summarily outline what must be done, and even if it is not clear how it is to be done, it will be clear that it cannot be done in our universities.

A group of minds, trained in the liberal arts and acquainted with the whole tradition of European learning—not merely its philosophy, but its poetry and history, its science and theology as well—must work together to produce a *Summa Dialectica*. Such an intellectual synthesis would be the bare beginning, not the ultimate fruit, of an intellectual community. It might take twenty or thirty years to draft the first outlines of a *Summa Dialectica*, but if that work were done in the right way in its initial stage, no matter how inadequately or how tentatively, it would be the basis for a continually growing expansion and rectification as the work continued indefinitely into the future.


The great *Summa*'s of the Middle Ages were primarily theological, not philosophical; their framework was dogmatically determined, not dialectically developed, even though within that predetermined framework, the interior elaboration was largely accomplished by philosophical work in the dialectical manner. In contrast, the *Summa Dialectica* will not soon, and perhaps never, reach final conclusions and universally binding agreements. That kind of finality and infallibility is not possible in any work of reason apart from supernatural or dogmatic faith. Finality is not the aim of a *Summa Dialectica*. On the contrary, it aims at the beginning of something, the revival of philosophy and the renewal of the intellectual community. It will succeed in accomplishing these results if it is able to formulate the dialectical unity and the dialectical truth which resides in the whole tradition of learning and thought; which must be there implicitly, awaiting explication, if for no other reason, because that tradition is the expression of the human mind, common to all men of every time and place, living in a common world.

It should be clear from everything I have said that by "dialectical unity" I do not mean unanimity; and by "dialectical truth" I do not mean freedom from contradiction. It is, therefore, neither perfect unity nor perfect truth. But more than a dialectical unity, which grasps the whole in which all oppositions have their ordered place; and more than a dialectical truth, which judges the presuppositions and implications of taking sides in every intellectual dilemma and which discovers the interconnection of the issues; more than this may be impossible for the human mind ever to achieve.

There would be a touch of megalomania in the project of a *Summa Dialectica*, even if it were to restrict itself to searching out the dialectical unity and truth in the tradition and mind of the Western world. But without megalomania of this sort, nothing can be done, for we have reached that stage of intellectual decay where little things will not avail. When the patient is next to death, only strenuous measures hold out hope. Since the situation is so desperate, since world government is needed if civilization is to survive politically, and since world government needs the establishment of a world community if political institutions are to have spiritual foundations, let us carry the megalomania one step further. Why limit the project of a *Summa Dialectica* to the Western tradition? Why should not other cultures construct comparable intellectual syntheses of their own traditions? We may, perhaps, take the lead, begin the work, set the model which, if followed freely and creatively in all the great areas of human civilization, would result in a convergence of the many toward the one. The ultimate *Summa Dialectica* must provide the intellectual pattern of a world community, the

common medium of exchange for all mankind, not only living together in one world at last, but also able to think together in a single universe of discourse.

The central theme of my remarks about philosophical work has been taken from the traditional statement that it is the business of the wise man to order and to judge. But the philosopher is not a wise man; he is not a man secure and established in wisdom, now or ever. He is, as Socrates first said, a lover of wisdom. That is the last, as well as the first, word about the philosopher.

A lover of wisdom aspires to the order which belongs to wisdom. A lover of wisdom emulates the judgment of the wise man. He hopes for a more perfect understanding of the truth than can ever be reached dialectically. So long as he is a lover of wisdom, he will not despair if, always working rightly toward his goal, he falls short of its possession—the possession which would transform his life. The philosopher, the lover of wisdom, remains true to his ideal, and faithful to his love, so long as he strives without wavering to possess the perfect good of the human mind. 

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