To the president of the 8th International Congress of Philosophers, Prof Dr Rádl in Prague[[1]](#footnote-1)

Dear Colleague,

The answer to your question you submitted to me on behalf of the committee can only turn out to be mediocre by letter, since the reasons that were able to effectively sustain that, which I had to say, needed a voluminous treatise. Thus I can only speak in theses.

Philosophy is the organ of a new kind of humanity’s historical being, the being from the spirit of autonomy. The original shape of autonomy is that of scientific self-responsibility. The sciences are the primal shape of cultural formations from such a spirit, for their part dependent members of the one full and complete science, philosophy. Philosophical self-responsibility is necessarily actualized in philosophizing community. Considered fundamentally, the community of philosophers and philosophy is the primal phenomenon and at the same time the power being effective in constant vivacity, which resulted from mere internationality through power in a completely new kind of internationality and keeps it, namely a combinedness through the spirit of autonomy. Thereby the specific sense of European humanity and culture is designated. As a Hellenistic one it does not only derive from the Greeks as such, but in its specific mentality from philosophy that has come to primal institution in Greek historicity, with its peculiar [241] sense of a purely theoretical cognizance of the world only from theoretical motives and for which responsibility is to be taken to the very last. This designates in its consequence the cognizance of the all-unity of the being as such in theoretical truth, including that of the norms as well.

The mission to include the whole humanity in the process of such a spiritualization is in the sense of European culture as spiritualizing itself from scientific reason. Europe thus is a vivid task in this mental sense, related to some idea lighting the way, lying within infinity, that of an all-community of the earthly humanity from the spirit of autonomous reason; thus under the guidance of philosophy, science. The historical tasks of all single nations range in this idea as dependent moments. In their purity and authenticity as ideas they are components of the total idea of an autonomous combination of the whole humanity. Autonomy is not the matter of single individuals, but, via their nation, of humanity.

Philosophy necessarily ramifies in special sciences. But it is philosophy and the sciences [are] true sciences only for so long, as this whole of cognizance is governed throughout by a true philosophical spirit, that of the radical and universal purely theoretical self-responsibility. This is only to be performed through deepening into the fundamental essentials, governing as something general the inseparable unity of the sense of the cognizance’s universe, as well as governing the cumulation of senses. This also relates to the sciences of man, that is, according to all problems of humanity, among them problems of the so-called existence, the individual one as well as the national one. They belong to the theory of practical reason, being a special theme of the universal theory, i.e. the philosophy.

True world, all-unity of the being in truth in the complete sense, and true philosophy as universal theory are ideas lying in infinity. Philosophy in empirical historicity is the process of the attempts of the empirical actualizations of philosophy as idea, proceeding within constant will to radical autonomy. Historical philosophy has actuality in a higher sense, as soon as a universal unity of the method and a body of theories has sprung from it, which by way of its apodicticity has [242] effected some most intimate internationality of the community of cognizance and work, carried by the necessary certainty, to have an endless progress of consequent increase of approaching the idea of philosophy before oneself.

Vivid philosophy is dying, if in the generality of the philosophers, the scientists, the paralyzing spirit of skepticism – philosophy always struggles with – threatens to become the general spirit. But also, if unnoticed some degeneration happens in the process of the sciences, as an inevitable result of the necessarily on-going specialization, due to which its original philosophical sense is lost. This is accompanied by the influence of large fates, completely confusing the international community, insofar as thereby the common belief in the idea and the practical ideal of Europe, that of the nations’ harmonious unity of life from sources of the rational spirit, has been undermined.

We are standing in present in the eminent danger of such a dying philosophy, and thereby necessarily of the dying of Europe from the spirit of truth. On the one hand the discordance of philosophy in the narrower sense, namely in the disciplines aiming at fundamental groups of problems, has never been larger. This has a good reason: The critique has done its job insofar as it has discovered reciprocally as unclarity clarity believed in all historical tradition. The most precise concepts, the axioms recognized as apodictic, did not withstand in this regard. Horizons of unclarity are attached to all, all has become dubious. As to the positive sciences on the other hand, their matter is only seemingly better. They gave us an abundance of strict methods and theories, their discoveries have been verified in a thousand ways.

But they have forfeited their philosophical substance, simply that, what made them be branches of a philosophical world cognizance. The proper sense of truth of the special fields they approached, to which their theories should guide us, remains hidden. It is only a true sense from fundamental generalities, preceding the special field and all its positive statements, as finally determining the sense. That this is the case and that quite otherwise directed mental work is needed, proceeding in quite other methods, pressed by unparalleled difficulties [243] – the understanding for that has got lost in the sciences. You may say, that nature’s and mind’s final sense of being has never moved farther away than now, according to the positive sciences’ performances, being so admirable in their kind. They have become ingenious techniques of mediate thinking. The performances of this new kind of technical geniality are no cognitive performances though in the sense of the original and unlosable idea “philosophy” – not in such a way anyway, as they appear themselves as results in the positive sciences.

Accordingly philosophy, the science of the present, is in no way able to be the source of strength for a Europe of an autonomous spirit, and to fulfill the profession history has allotted to it.

But the breakdown of philosophy, and thereby the “breakdown of the occident” in our true sense, is as long not a finite actuality, as there is still an even small community, filled by the true philosophical attitude – as philosophers living in the most inner certainty, that philosophy, in our Greek-European sense, is a possible and inevitably necessary task; and on top of that, having taken over this task as their, in existential determinacy, most proper task of life inseparable from their personal being.

What may in such a situation be the present “task” of philosophy? My answer is, as seems to me, the unambiguously predelineated one. The old way of cooperation between philosophers, also with the scientists, is hopeless. The true philosophers are only united in their attitude. Everyone is for the time being relegated in research to his personal loneliness, and it cannot be closed too strictly. Even with regard to the great ones of history: All renaissances as well are hopeless. The only thing possible, that is, the *unum necessarium*, is the entering in some absolutely radical attitude on the sense of philosophy; the asking on the being or the field of being, presupposed by some philosophy’s own sense, in the way of an apodictic ground, for a question on truth as such, under the epoché with regard to all historical traditions in concepts and doctrines and all naïve matters-of-course of names. [244] Its pure explanation shall open up a process of beginning in apodictic process, if philosophy as such can be, as such can begin. The Few will become something more, and above all a method meaning future, once it has been formed. The philosophers of such radical attitude will, at first completely lonely, again be able to get together, community of critique and reciprocal promotion will emerge on its own accord – if philosophy as such has some sense at all.

Exactly this was, according to intention and considered formally, Descartes’ proceeding in his time’s confused situation of cognizance. He only was himself not radical enough yet, and was unable to be it, back then. We, having become wiser through the experience and critique of some centuries, may trust in our ability to go deeper by repeating its radicalism of beginning with our sharpened critical organs, also not taking over anything else of it but the spirit, the form of its first two *Meditationes*. I have done so and I have arrived at a method and an abundance of strict results in long years of work in more formal generalities, but also in concrete specialties, [methods] satisfying me by their apodictic evidence at least; on top of that [they] have lead towards the inner certainty that the horizon of this method implies all conceivable senseful problems. Where will such radicalism lead others, to the same method indeed, as I am certain? However, I do not have any other advice.

1. First published in: Actes du Huitième Congrès International de Philosophie à Prague 2-7 Septembre 1934, Prague 1936, Pages XLI-XLV. (Compare editor’s introduction, page XXVII). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)