63. *The Aim of Philosophy*[*]

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The task of a University is the creation of the future, so far as rational thought, and civilized modes of appreciation, can affect the issue. The future is big with every possibility of achievement and of tragedy.

Amid this scene of creative action, What is the special function of philosophy?

In order to answer this question, we must first decide what constitutes the philosophic character of any particular doctrine. What makes a doctrine philosophical? No one truth, thoroughly understood in all the infinitude of its bearings, is more or less philosophical than any other truth. The pursuit of philosophy is the one avocation denied to omniscience.

Philosophy is an attitude of mind towards doctrines ignorantly entertained. By the phrase "ignorantly entertained" I mean that the full meaning of the doctrine in respect to the infinitude of circumstances to which it is relevant, is not understood. The philosophic attitude is a resolute attempt to enlarge the understanding of the scope of application of every notion which enters into our current thought. The philosophic attempt takes every word, and every phrase, in the verbal expression of thought, and asks, What does it mean? It refuses to be satisfied by the conventional presupposition that every sensible person knows the answer. As soon as you rest satisfied with primitive ideas, and with primitive propositions, you have ceased to be a philosopher.

Of course you have got to start somewhere for the purposes of discourse. But the philosopher, as he argues from his premises, has already marked down every word and phrase in them as topics for enquiry. No philosopher is satisfied with the concurrence of sensible people, whether they be his colleagues, or even his own previous self. He is always assaulting the boundaries of finitude.

The scientist is also enlarging knowledge. He starts with a group of primitive notions and of primitive relations between these notions, which defines the scope of his science. For example, Newtonian dynamics assumes Euclidean space, massive matter, motion, stresses and strains, and the more general notion of force. There are also the laws of motion, and a few other concepts added later. The sciences consisted in the deduction of consequences, presupposing the applicability of these ideas.

In respect to Newtonian Dynamics, the scientist and the philosopher face in opposite directions. The scientist asks for the consequences in the universe. The philosopher asks for the meaning of these ideas in terms of the welter of characterizations which infest the world.

It is evident that scientists and philosophers can help each other. For the scientist sometimes wants a new idea, and the philosopher is enlightened as to meanings by the study of the scientific consequences. Their usual mode of intercommunication is by sharing in the current habits of cultivated thought.

There is an insistent presupposition continually sterilizing philosophic thought. It is the belief, the very natural belief, that mankind has consciously entertained all the fundamental ideas which are applicable to its experience. Further it is held that human language, in single words or in phrases, explicitly expresses these ideas. I will term this presupposition, The Fallacy of the Perfect Dictionary.

It is here that the philosopher, as such, parts company with the scholar. The scholar investigates human thought and human achievement, armed with a dictionary. He is the main support of civilized thought. Apart from scholarship, you may be moral, religious, and delightful. But you are not wholly civilized. You will lack the power of delicate accuracy of expression.

It is obvious that the philosopher needs scholarship, just as he needs science. But both science and scholarship are subsidiary weapons for philosophy.

The Fallacy of the Perfect Dictionary divides philosophers into two schools, namely, the "Critical School" which repudiates speculative philosophy, and the "Speculative School" which includes it. The critical school confines itself to verbal analysis within the limits of the dictionary. The speculative school appeals to direct insight, and endeavours to indicate its meanings by further appeal to situations which promote such specific insights. It then enlarges the dictionary. The divergence between the schools is the quarrel between safety and adventure.

The strength of the critical school lies in the fact that the doctrine of evolution never entered, in any radical sense, into ancient scholarship. Thus there arises the presupposition of a fixed specification of the human mind; and the blue print of this specification is the dictionary.

I appeal to two great moments of philosophy. Socrates spent his life in analyzing the current presuppositions of the Athenian world. He explicitly recognized that his philosophy was an attitude in the face of ignorance. He was critical and yet constructive.

Harvard is justly proud of the great period of its philosophic department about thirty years ago. Josiah Royce, William James, Santayana, George Herbert Palmer, Münsterberg, constitute a group to be proud of. Among them Palmer's achievements centre chiefly in literature and in his brilliance as a lecturer. The group is a group of men individually great. But as a group they are greater still. It is a group of adventure, of speculation, of search for new ideas. To be a philosopher is to make some humble approach to the main characteristic of this group of men.

The use of philosophy is to maintain an active novelty of fundamental ideas illuminating the social system. It reverses the slow descent of accepted thought towards the inactive commonplace. If you like to phrase it so, philosophy is mystical. For mysticism is direct insight into depths as yet unspoken. But the purpose of philosophy is to rationalize mysticism: not by explaining it away, but by the introduction of novel verbal characterizations, rationally coördinated.

Philosophy is akin to poetry, and both of them seek to express that ultimate good sense which we term civilization. In each case there is reference to form beyond the direct meanings of words. Poetry allies itself to metre, philosophy to mathematic pattern.

[*] Lecture 9 of *Modes of Thought*, by permission of The Macmillan Co.