

In approaching Socrates we have to invert our method. That means we have to start again with our over-all modern conditions and return to some observations which we made sometime ago. The very remarkable and funny discovery that has been made during the last twenty or thirty years is that ever since philosophers first began to suspect that there might be more to pre-Platonic thinking than had been considered up until their own time, (and consequently were forced to re-evaluate [Plato](#) and [Aristotle](#), because all of the knowledge that they had of those early thinkers came from them), they discovered that since Plato and Aristotle were system builders they greatly misinterpreted the pre-Platonic philosophers for their own purposes. Their own thinking of course, had developed out of pre-Platonic thinking, and it is probable that they felt it was not necessary to mention every time they happened to redesign a thought of one of the elder thinkers.

This rediscovery has led recently to an even more amazing result, and one which is intimately connected to the above. It is a result I tried to sketch earlier when we first considered [Heraclitus](#): Namely, that the ›dark‹ Heraclitus, who was dark already to the pre-Platonic Greeks not to speak of post-Platonic thought, and who then remained dark throughout the ages, suddenly seems to become very light and bright as soon as we approach him from the point of view of modern science. When [Whitehead](#), a great scientific philosopher of our time, wrote his book »Science And The Modern World«,¹ it was so evident he belonged to those thinkers who had not studied Heraclitus. He didn't even mention him. Rather, he thought that the whole of our scientific tradition could be derived from [Pythagoras](#), however, he came to a point (and this is the greatness of the man) where he realized that science, if it was to continue, had to become absolutely critical of itself, because of the many clashes between science and religion, philosophy and religion, and more recently, science and philosophy. That after science had almost been killed by religion during the time of

¹ Whitehead, Alfred North: Science and the Modern World. New York: Macmillan Company, 1925.

Galileo, we were now living in a period when science was about to kill not only religion but philosophy as well. It had spread so far beyond its limits that it was almost hubris in its manner of procedure. Heidegger also recognized a similar point of view, and so together with Whitehead, was another of the modern personalities who stressed this insight very much.

However Whitehead, in his book, made another discovery. He made the discovery that there is faith or a belief underlying science and that science is based upon this belief: Namely, in the assumption that there is a rational order of things that is also a natural order of things. Well, ironically enough, this is exactly the theory of Heraclitus. The logos of Heraclitus means exactly that and nothing more. He was the only one of the ancient pre-Platonic thinkers that made this claim so the principle underlying belief of modern science was first formulated by him, and although he has been called ›the dark one,‹ ›the obscure one,‹ he is the only one in whom we have all really believed, because none of us has ever doubted that belief to be true. Now we start to doubt it or at least we ask the question. ›Is there a rational order of things that is also a natural order of things?‹ Because the physicist Heisenberg has hit upon a strange effect: Namely, that within the atom the movement of elementary particles do not, as far as we can see, obey strict causal laws, but rather seem to act in a way that, from a rationalist point of view, is entirely arbitrary. We cannot go deeper into that here although I think that philosophically speaking, what Heisenberg has discovered is a false alarm, because we still act according to this assumption of the general rational order of things, however what the discoveries of Heisenberg and Whitehead do indicate is that we stand in need of a real philosophy of science. Questions like ›What is Science?‹, ›What is mathematics?‹, ›How is man able to proceed scientifically?‹, have never been of any real interest to scientists. A few philosophers have occupied themselves with such questions but abandoned them very easily. Now in our own time when science itself seems to have become irrational-crossing all of its borders, no longer the doubtless server of man but rather, like a robot in revolt, a potential destroyer of man, we have gotten suspicious of our own scientific capabilities. It shows for instance in the Oppenheimer case as well as in all of the major events of

our time. We have to reconsider everything.

Whitehead had done that already in 1924 and now it is time that we all proceeded along those same lines. Science has become, in a positive sense, an interest of the masses and so it is a question of life or death for us to find out what is science? Where does science come from? How can it be applied? How can it not be applied, and to whom and what should it be applied? What are the limits of science? Those are the philosophic questions, and through them light is thrown back upon Heraclitus. The same applies to Socrates. Only in our own time has it become possible to understand the warning of Immanuel Kant: Namely, that the very moment when the experience of religion (and I mean by that the possibility of pure faith) is cut out of human experience then reason itself becomes endangered, and reason has become endangered, because we made it into a God in the nineteenth century and have confused it with mere intelligence in our own. The fact that at the very moment when man wanted to set a principle above himself and then failed to call that principle either God or the Absolute (because both are allowed), but rather chose something concrete to make into an absolute (like human reason or what not) this very fact indicates one thing, and that is whenever something concrete is taken to be an absolute it all boils down to the same contention, that man is God. It does not matter what we take. The ›All‹ of Being, or the laws of history, or human reason, or whatever, it finally all comes down to the conclusive statement that man is God.

Since we can see the consequences of this statement and have in fact experienced them in our time, we now are ready to consider the warning of Kant, and when we do that, a very strange thing happens. We are suddenly a little more able to approach Socrates and rediscover that it was this philosopher who first uttered Kant's warning and who had clearly seen the relationship between reason and faith, because he is so to speak, the discoverer of pure reason, and therefore could not have made this discovery without first having discovered its limits, which he did. It was because he had discovered the limits of human reason that he was able to discover human reason as a principle hence

he was never unsure for one moment that reason was something that could not be made into an absolute. He didn't even have to utter a warning but just proceeded along those lines of thought. We have yet to even understand that those are the lines along which he proceeded.

That means the consideration of Socrates is, for our purposes, decisive. Socrates, of whom we know only from [Xenophon](#) and [Plato](#), and who appears in Xenophon as a very average popular street orator with a bundle of banalities in his pocket which he throws out among the people, a quite harmless man of whom it can be said that it is completely non-understandable why the Athenians should have bothered to kill him at all. On the other side there is Plato. Here, the thoughts of Socrates are so mixed up with the thoughts of Plato that it has always been a hard task to distinguish them. We know that Aristotle made the statement, and the statement cannot be doubted, that Socrates himself never talked about ideas,² and the doctrine of ideas is the very core of Platonic thinking and the Platonic system, so if Socrates did not believe in such a doctrine then exactly what did he believe in? It has been suggested by some witty modern philosophers that Plato, being such a great artist (for he had started as a dramatist) after having expressed the opinion in the [Symposium](#) that dramatists should not be divided into comic and tragic poets but rather should themselves be both comic poet and tragic poet, and who created philosophical dramas full of tragedy, full of the trial of man, and the trial of the gods, and finally the trial of ideas, felt compelled to add one constant comic ingredient to the cycle of tragedy, and this ingredient was the figure of Socrates. That Plato, as a young man and a rich man, merely amused himself with this street orator who was the biggest among the [Sophists](#), who could turn the word of anybody around in anybody's mouth by his ever so skillful use of logic, who ended up making himself into a clown because he never wanted to be anything but a clown, and who finally became the chief comical ingredient in Plato's work.

² Aristotle, *Metaphysics*. [987b](#).

This interpretation is quite reasonable if one has lost all possibility of distinguishing the thoughts of Plato from the thoughts of Socrates, however on another level it is very difficult to maintain especially when looked at in the light of Taylor's historical researches, because in his study³ of [Socrates] (and this is the great merit of Taylor) we see how impossible it would have been for Socrates to have emerged as a so-called natural talent out of the Plebian class of Athens and who, being completely uneducated, simply started to argue along the lines of common sense. Rather on the contrary, it is just as probable that before he made his great discovery of pure philosophy he was one of the most gifted natural philosophers of Greece and widely respected as such. In any event, whatever the actual case may be (and we must remember that both positions are legends that have grown out of the mysterious context of the Platonic writings) if we want to bring Socrates out we will have to move by analyzing the content of his thought and our only criteria will be either the consistency of that thought or discrepancy of that thought. This is the only possible approach.

There is an anecdote that the Greeks would tell one another and it concerns something Socrates is supposed to have said to one of his friends about the very young Plato who was his companion at that time. He said:

»Do you see that young man my friend. He is going to tell
very beautiful lies about me.«⁴

The anecdote might seem to be true if looked at in the light of what Plato actually did do but things are not so easy. One thing however is certain for anybody who knows how to read, and who has read the Platonic dialogues a few times: Plato loved Socrates. This is an undeniable fact. Such things cannot be hidden and should not be hidden. It is also possible to prove that Socrates was the decisive turn in Plato's own philosophy, the turn that led him finally to erect a system of »ideas« and that, in

³ Taylor, A.E.: Socrates. Boston, 1951.

⁴ Reference unclear.

its political aspect, became so much the very opposite of what Socrates had said, had stood for, and had died for. Socrates died as a citizen of Athens in obedience to Athenian laws which means that he never tried to establish the right of the philosophers to over-rule the laws of the community let alone to build an ideal utopian state which would have abolished the freedom of all of its citizens and replace it with a system of duties which, of course, would be required of everybody except the rulers who were the philosophers themselves. Plato's idea, that philosophers should be kings, is something that would never have entered Socrates' mind.

Here, we must make a decisive choice. Either Plato, in this important respect, arrived at a position which is absolutely non (even) anti-Socratic; or Socrates was a liar, a poseur, who died for something he didn't even believe in, which is an impossible conclusion. We could never believe that, because not only in his deeds but also in the content and continuity of his thoughts, it is possible for us to get a picture of the man and we can see him now, with the exception of Jesus, as the last of our great philosophers – the last free thinker in an original sense for whom the distinction between body and spirit, matter and energy, did not exist and who never made it. The last whose life and deeds were entirely the expression of his philosophy and one with his philosophy. In the case of Jesus, the real miracle was how he could ever have gotten rid of the absolute underlying Platonic belief which spread throughout the whole Mediterranean world. All of the other philosophers we have considered, including Socrates, lived before Plato, therefore before the possibility of changing pure philosophical thinking into a system of metaphysics. Most of the pre-Platonic thinkers among the Greeks were already metaphysicians with the sole exception of Heraclitus. Either they were materialist metaphysicians ([Democritus](#) and his school) or idealist metaphysicians like [Pythagoras](#) and his school. Basically they were the servants of science in the sense that they began science and so they were astrologers, magicians, and they founded sects.

Then there was Heraclitus. Nobody was like Heraclitus who was absolute in his rejection of anything that smacked of mysticism or magic. Heraclitus, as well as Buddha, Socrates, Jesus, and all of the others we are considering here was an entirely non-mystical philosopher and also an entirely non-magical being. A being free of superstition and entirely free from the framework of myth. So was Socrates. Plato, on the other hand, follows the Pythagorean line. He is not against myth. Rather he uses myth and he crosses the line drawn by Socrates and designs not only a possible hereafter but also the exact indication of it as a kind of punishment and reward. We need only contrast this to Heraclitus who once said:

»Strange things may await the soul after death.«⁵

May! We can never be sure, but to talk about the things after death is entirely non-Heraclitean and non-Socratic. Our first and best proof however that Plato arrived at a completely non (even) anti-Socratic position is in his theory of politics. It is also the key to an, understanding of Plato's relation to Socrates and to the meaning of that one tremendous event in his life, the killing of Socrates by the Athenians.

Plato knew what the ages between the Greek and the modern did not, and what we today through our historical researches can prove: Namely, that with Socrates' death, the death of the Athenian republic and of the Athenian democracy was sealed. Today there are many who call Plato a reactionary and even a fascist and totalitarian, He is none of that. He is rather the first consciously authoritarian figure, authoritarian, not in the sense of the myth (which is fatalistic and not genuinely authoritarian), but authoritarian in the sense of the belief that there must be a higher authority established whose laws can either be given to us or which we can discover. Otherwise the world will go to pieces. What does it mean, for the world to go to pieces? It means that Socrates will be murdered for eternity.

⁵ This is possibly a paraphrase of: »There awaits men when they die such things as they look not for nor dream of.«, Heraclitus, Fragment 27.

The Athenian polis and the world is not ripe, is not mature enough, for this lofty dream of freedom that Socrates had. People cannot live that way. Rather, as the Grand Inquisitor says to Christ in [Dostoyevsky's Karamazov](#), men such as this must be done away with because human beings cannot live according to those teachings. They have over-rated humanity, and hence such ideas only make men unhappy and bring about anarchy and endless murder and death. The real lovers of mankind are the betrayers of mankind, because knowing that men only want their own happiness they will not let people suffer for freedom, which is an illusion anyhow, and for which they do not have the strength, but instead will keep order and decent morality by allowing them to live in peace according to the strength they do have. And Plato might well have thought out of his love for Socrates that Socrates did over-rate them, because they killed him, as well as [Paul](#) might actually have felt that about Jesus of Nazareth. That he had over-rated them and unless an authoritarian law is established to keep the rabble in order then all hope will be lost, and if a Socrates or a Jesus of Nazareth should ever appear again, then they would be killed at once.

The tragedy of the death of Socrates was not realized by anyone to such a degree of profundity as was achieved by Plato. From there he constructs his political theory and he is very very ambiguous with us, because we never learn, when we study him really, if he himself believed in anything like God or in anything like a hereafter. But we do learn one thing from him. We learn that he wants us to believe in it. That he is of the opinion that everyone who is not a philosopher does not have direct access to truth, and a philosopher with him is already a superior being, somebody who had hidden knowledge, somebody who can attain knowledge other human beings cannot attain. Here again, he goes against his master Socrates, because Socrates talked with everyone. Socrates was of the opinion that everybody was capable of reasoning and therefore that everyone can and should philosophize in order to attain freedom. Unlike Pythagoras, Plato, and [Aristotle](#) he founded no school like the [Academy](#) or [Lyceum](#) and he never established himself as the teacher

of the real great decisive discipline that philosophy should be. Oh no!, he thought that: philosophy is intentionally in man. Therefore philosophizing should become the most common possession of all men.

That was his belief. Plato is already of the opinion that philosophers should be separated, they should be kings, they should form a sect and teach other people how to behave because they are the ones who have an access to truth. The others have no such access. Rather a long training is necessary and a training not only in philosophizing, reasoning, and the development of the mind but also a training in obedience similar to the training of Asiatic monks, before one can become a philosopher, one of those elected ones who will run the state.

Any one of those conceptions would have been entirely impossible in the mind of Socrates; otherwise he would not have needed to die. If even the slightest possibility existed that he ever thought along those lines then he could have easily said to his friend [Crito](#) who came to help him escape from prison (the guards were bribed):

›Yes, to preserve the life of a philosopher who is such an absolutely unique being, a ruler of humanity, is always the most important thing, so let us forget about everything else.‹⁶

Then he would have agreed with [Nietzsche](#), the great anti-Platonist who never could shake loose from Plato, who said ›Philosophers have no time to die for the truth they have only to do something for the truth.‹⁷ Socrates would have laughed at that. How can you divide ›to do‹ and ›to die for‹, when you are talking about the truth? What greater thing can be done for the truth by a man who is still a man and so a philosophical human being (not a philosopher in the sense of Plato: Namely the exception among human beings, the expert of all experts who has the right to exempt himself from even the basic fundamental obligations of creative duty) than to die for it? The line of Plato is entirely different from the line of Socrates as soon

⁶ The opposite Socrates has done. He stayed. See: Plato: [Crito](#).

⁷ ›They deem it a poor taste to play the martyr. ›To suffer for truth‹ – this they leave to the ambitious, the stage heroes of the spirit and whoso has time enough for it. (They themselves, the philosophers, have to do something for truth.)‹ Nietzsche, Friedrich: On a Genealogy of Morals. Third Essay. Part 8. [The Works of Friedrich Nietzsche. Ed. by Alexander Tille. Vol X. [p. 150.](#)]

we face living issues and not just ideas.

Plato will not be of much concern to us from now on (which isn't meant to say he is not one of the greatest thinkers of all time). Looked at from the viewpoint of his historical situation, he (as well as Aristotle) might have been right to a certain degree in establishing metaphysical systems to put a kind of awe into the masses of that time. Without him – without the Romans, who developed the other source of absolute authority in a tradition of legality founded upon an abstract law that could not be changed – without [Moses](#), who transformed the free man of [Abraham](#) into the authority of the given laws of the Lord, laws which are eternal and which must be obeyed without even Paul again, who changed the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth into an authoritarian point of view then all of what we have been considering might never have happened. We might never have heard of Socrates, or Heraclitus, or any of the others. In all probability they would have been forgotten because the development of a European culture and hence a western culture would not have been possible. There would be no tradition so we could not crawl back and search into the forgotten foundations as we are doing now.

The way we shall approach Socrates is through the consideration of philosophy in his sense: Namely, as the most important thing men have in common. The capability of free judgement through the use of reason. Today, this sense of philosophy has been almost entirely lost. Philosophy today is equal to the term theory. We have a philosophy of gardening, a so-called philosophy of physics, a philosophy of this and philosophy of that. We have the newspapers full of the philosophy of Mr. [Taft](#) before he comes to power, the philosophy of Mr. [Eisenhower](#), or what not, which means we use the term to indicate a theory we might have about gardening, or a theory Mr. Eisenhower has as to what politics is, or a theory that each of us have about anything. We then call that our philosophy. Philosophy, as a tradition, has even started to go back to myth in order to escape. They try now, by reawakening Indian myth, to tell us that the real task of philosophy is to save itself from the domination of science, to leave science to the world and take philosophy out of the world, because it has higher things to consider: Namely, mystical speculations

in thin air. Or else they try to make themselves into the servant girls of the sciences and say that philosophy is only there to help to develop a certain unification of methods. Or else we have the revival of authoritarian philosophy such as neo-Thomism.

What all of these approaches have in common is that they all consider philosophy in the Platonic sense to be something entirely divorced from life, not only from politics (from which it has been divorced since Plato and Aristotle), but from life as a whole. Either philosophy is there to lead us into a dream world of mystical speculation with a shot of second rate poetry thrown in for good measure, or it is there to clarify the methods and approaches used in our different sciences (which is a very fine thing for the sciences but it has nothing whatsoever to do with life). They are all out of life.

Then, there is still another group who want to get us back into life at any price. They call themselves the [existentialists](#). They feel that philosophy is completely lost and if it is to survive it has to go back to certain foundations. [Heidegger](#) does that especially, but Heidegger fortunately is no longer an existentialist. Those who still are however, fall prey to another thing: Namely, life itself, which had been abandoned by philosophy, is now made into a God and a new metaphysics arises the metaphysics of existence (which is the inner form of life) and; so existence becomes the new absolute which replaces all of the old ones, and there does not seem to be anything which cannot be deduced from this term. So from this idea they try to tell us what men are (another attempt to tell us what we are) which is supposedly deduced from this special insight into the absolute nature of existence. We don't know what existence is! We only think we know what it is until there are ten of us together in the same room, and then we discover that we all mean different things let alone that we should be able to deduce things which are applicable to the conduct of our life from it. That is our situation, and it is decisive for our consideration of who Socrates was and what he believed in, Socrates would never have claimed to know any of those things. He would have

realized there is a difference between what philosophy is and what we have decided to call philosophy. And now my friends, I ask you to hold onto your hats. Philosophy (and this is the general opinion) is supposed to be absolutely objective, an activity which is completely disinterested (as in science), and the foremost expression of this great capability of the human mind to be totally objective and disinterested about its objects. Those things should be there and philosophy should be ruled by them, otherwise we will never accept philosophy as philosophy. That, in any case, is the general superstition. Socrates would have said philosophy is no such thing. He knew that philosophers want things from human beings. They try to convince them, not indoctrinate, and if they are pure and good philosophers in the sense we have used this word, they do not try to overwhelm them with objective proofs and magnificent claims as scientists do, because there is no freedom in science in that sense. When somebody says to me that this roof will fall down on my head I move out. There is no freedom of choice. The scientist who proves that to me does not need to convince me of it. He has proved it. He does not need my agreement for me to walk out. I am already out the door.

The philosopher, and this is the great discovery of Socrates, needs for everything he proposes the agreement of the other free human being, because he knows that in matters of the conduct of life there can be no other way except to reason it out through mutual agreement and take the common risk one might have been wrong, that one might not have had sufficient insight, because we never have sufficient insight, and if we are wrong to accept our defeat and try again. That is how philosophy moves. Philosophers want to convince by reasoning. They want to open up possible new ways of life and explore those ways of life. They approach other human beings and say to them:

›You see my friend, I have explored that and I can assure you of one thing. It might not be the truth, and it certainly will not be the truth because we will never have the truth but at least one thing we do know. It is a truer thing than we have

had up until now and I can prove that to you to a certain degree. Because you will see, if you try it, that it will make for a deeper meaning, a more profound meaning, in your own life. It will enrich you and your life will be truer in that sense. You can become truer by it. But this is not the truth that I am giving to you. I am just proposing this living risk and experiment, first in thought, to think it over, and then try it a little bit so that you might not burn your fingers too much. If you see it serves you then go on with it and it will help you to a much deeper meaning to life and a higher significance of your own existence.'

That is all philosophizing can do. Philosophers want to try to convince people of this possibility and that means they want to convince people to try to do a terribly dangerous thing; a thing that, after it had been discovered, everyone from Plato to the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoyevsky has tried to hide from human beings, and that is the terrible consequences that are involved if one makes a decision for freedom. Freedom is not given. Men are not born free. Men are born as beings that can free themselves and in order to do that they must make a decision for it. The decision for freedom is a very terrible one. It means to believe in something absolutely unbelievable: Namely, that there is a possibility for freedom and truth. It means to have faith, not religious faith, but philosophical faith. Philosophical faith means that man trusts and believes that there might be a meaning to Being, that it is worthwhile to live in Being in order to find this meaning, that truth is possible and we can live by it and it will satisfy our life, and finally, that we will really grow and enrich the humanity of human beings by taking this task upon ourselves.

All of that we owe to Socrates who was the first to state the goal of philosophy which is not knowledge but rather »sophia,« the eternal wisdom. This is a transcendent principle, not a natural principle, and like the Tao of Lao-tze, the Nirvana of Buddha, the quality of decision in man of Zarathustra, the transcendent God of Abraham, and the logos of Heraclitus, it is absolutely set against the mythical framework of mind and the great safety of that framework. To believe in them requires courage. It means to strive towards them which is why Socrates thought

that courage was not only a virtue but the source of all other virtues in man. As long as a human being does not dare to stand upon this small possibility of freedom and truth but tries to fall back upon other assurances then he is lost in slavery because he is not able to fully develop his powers of reasoning. To make the decision for freedom means to stand alone as a human being, and face the world and life with the equipment we have been given, the human equipment, and no other equipment. To take the risk of thinking (which is the common faculty of all free men), and to really try to take this risk. To go the way of human reason and human logic which is not absolute and cannot be absolutely reached (as Heraclitus understood when he said):

»You will never find the limits of the human soul, even if
you wander down every path, so deep is its logos.«⁸

To go the way of human judgement and human wisdom which is not absolute, because as Socrates realized, the absolute wisdom and judgement can never be reached. We have no divine judgement. We have no divine qualities. We have no divine logic. We have no divine will. We have only, as Zarathustra said, a human will, but we are not Ahura-Mazda. We do not, in Lao-tze's terms, have divine unity with the Tao.

»The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The Name that
can be named is not the eternal name.«⁹

Because the Tao has to be told incessantly and always by human beings. That is how the Tao is approached. To go toward it with our human equipment, and that means with reason and all of the capabilities of the human mind. All of the others, although they may appear to be super-human or divine are only illusions.

⁸ »You will not find the boundaries of soul by travelling in any direction, so deep is the measure of it.« Heraclitus, Fragment 45.

⁹ Lao-tze: Tao-Te Ching: [Chapter 1](#).

That is what all of these philosophers want us to do, because the philosophical quality of man (which is the center of all of his human qualities) can only work in freedom. The search for truth is bound to freedom at the very origin, hence to be a philosophical man means to have made a decision for freedom, because otherwise one cannot be a philosophical man. That is how freedom, the possibility of truth, the search for truth through our human faculties, and human reason hang together. They are there, together at the source, which is the center.

So philosophy wants to convince us of this one thing. Nobody who does not make this decision for freedom, who does not take upon himself this risk, can ever hope to think really philosophically. That step has to be made. From then on philosophers just make propositions, but this one first step must be taken in order to enter the philosophical activity at all.

One might object that the metaphysicians whom I criticize so much, by saying that all of their ideas are based upon general assumptions not accounted for, could easily come back at me with the same criticism:

›But you also base your so-called free philosophy on an assumption that is not accounted for: Namely, the human capability for freedom. You believe in freedom, and so you want to make others believe in freedom?‹

And we could answer:

›Not quite so. We want them only to make a decision and put their trust into something which, as soon as they have made that decision, will prove itself.‹

Freedom is this possibility. For if a man makes a decision for freedom and really tries it, then as soon as he has made that it becomes reason: Namely, it proves to him that he can create things in freedom. Freedom proves itself to a man when he acts according to it. The freedom we propose philosophically as the main creative possibility of man is the one upon which all of the others depend. It is the soil, the foundation, for the development of all creative capabilities.

If one accepts this, then with whatever capability one chooses to exercise freedom will increase. We will see that freedom really works, that it is possible, and that we have made it possible. It is the same with all of the other creative capabilities of man. They are all only possibilities. Man has no nature. He is the undefined being. His possibilities exist, only if he takes them up. Freedom is there if we want freedom to be there. More truth will be there if we want more truth to be there. Beauty will be there and art will be there if we want beauty and art to be there, but not otherwise. All of these capabilities are related to the decision for freedom, because all of them are possible only for a man who has the capacity to be able to make decisions.

If decision is denied, then any scientist could come up and prove to us that any given human being is incapable of creation, that he cannot make decisions, and therefore is incapable of having a will. Yes, quite so. It all depends on this person, and so it is with all of us. If we look at the history of mankind we can see that the risk of the decision for freedom is a terrible one. But it is also, so to speak, the most natural one for man, if he starts to realize who he is and how he is distinguished from all other beings in Being. That he is a being that can be and that can be more than any other being in Being. That he can become transcendent, that he can transcend all other beings and can transcend even Being itself, but that he can never transcend himself.

To say that one has transcended oneself means that one has moved away from the individual naturalness of his own being towards that being he can be, away from what he is, an individual, and towards the person he has decided to become (what all of our philosophers have called the Self with a capital ›S‹, the person, or personality that every human being can become). When an individual has made such a decision and crossed over those limits we usually say of him that he has transcended himself, which is nonsense. He did not transcend himself, because no human being can transcend man. Man cannot transcend man. If he could, then he

would approach God, and man is not God. By transcending the world man can come to himself and he comes to himself only by transcending the world. Man, as Heraclitus would say, by transcending the logos of Being, of nature, finally approaches the infinite logos which he himself is, and that means to move from one quality into a higher quality which is why man cannot transcend man. If we could transcend our human qualities then we would be able to enter the realm of the highest being and that means we would be able to unite with God, but we do not have that possibility.

The abyss then, between the Absolute and between us is an absolute one, as Heraclitus, Lao-tze, and especially Socrates would all agree. If this abyss is to be crossed then it can only be crossed by the highest being itself. We can approach this higher being infinitely, just as we can approach truth infinitely, but we cannot reach it, because we cannot transcend ourselves. This is impossible for man. To understand that means to stay within the limits of our human qualities and human creative capabilities.

Lecture XII (S-II)

4/30/54

Part II [Socrates]

Whatever we think, whatever we do, there are beliefs underlying it. To believe in such a thing as the quality of man is to have made a definite decision that changes everything. In the Jewish as well as in the Christian religion, all belief is anchored in one principle: The absolute transcendent God who is separate from nature and man, but in order to show that this God Creator is an absolute transcendent Other it was also necessary to show that man is superior to nature, in other words, the distinction between man and nature is drawn too sharply. The negative consequences of this can clearly be seen in the theology of the Jews. In order to set man above nature, in order to insure that nature will never be turned into an idol for man (and the Hebrews hated nothing more than idols), they assigned nature over to man as something absolutely unimportant and with no rights in itself. The Christians did exactly the same, only more so.

The Greeks, in so far as we shall consider them, did not. Heraclitus in creating his three logoi: Namely, law, meaning, and being, assigned a law to nature, an infinite though not absolute meaning to man, and a being in man. According to his theory, which is also the theory of Socrates, we can always distinguish ourselves from nature by our larger and more meaningful logos which is infinite. We can also work with nature and turn the processes of nature to our benefit but we can never feel that nature is our slave or that it belongs to us. We must always respect certain inherent laws in nature and not try to break them.

With [Descartes](#), who is one of the founders of modern science, everything changes. The philosophy of science he gives to us really comes out of Christian belief, but unconsciously so, or better yet instinctively so, because now the opposition of man and nature is turned into an absolute where man, so to speak, is either the slave of nature or the tyrant of nature. Science becomes a battlefield between

man and nature, a battle that is being fought to the death, a battle where man must prove really and finally (and this is the dream of all modern science) that he can rule nature, the whole of physical being, by one mathematical formula. Magic! We are back into magic and with the help of mathematics one can come into magic too.

This philosophic error though it was a productive error was avoided by the Greeks. Socrates moved entirely away from any consideration of nature at all, and his mocking of [Anaxagoras](#) and the great natural philosophers of Greece belongs to the irony of his death, because even his death was tragic and ironical. The irony of it is that in his [Apology](#) he was forced to say to his judges: 'You mix me up with Anaxagoras and accuse me of inquiring into the heavens and into what is down in the earth. I never did such a thing,'¹⁰ and he didn't. Rather he attacked Anaxagoras and the other materialistic philosophers of Greece. This comes out clearly in the *Phaedo* where he says: 'I occupied myself with those things for a certain time when I was young, because I heard someone reading from a book of Anaxagoras that nous (Mind or Spirit) is the creator of all things. So I studied with Anaxagoras and discovered that he was really not talking about that at all. He was talking about matter ... he was saying that the sun is a stone and that it is composed of elements, but that is entirely unimportant to me, because I wanted to hear something from him that would teach me how to conduct my life and I discovered that nothing of that kind could be found there, so I became disinterested in it.'¹¹

¹⁰ Plato: *Apology* 26d.

¹¹ Plato: *Phaedo* 97b-98c.

Yes, he became entirely disinterested in it and he is the only Greek who was.
This is a miracle that has yet to be explained.

We have seen what a tremendous event was this discovery of the scientific creativity of man in the Greek time. It was this discovery that enabled [Herodotus](#) to make the statement that lies at the very foundation of historical science: Namely to say:

›I want to write so that all shall remember and none forget
the great deeds of the Greeks and barbarians alike.‹¹²

and he means by that all great deeds and nothing else. No subjectivity was to be brought into it. Heraclitus believed that man (in so far as he considered himself to be matter) could (if he abstracted from himself) discover the great laws of natural science and hence the logos of nature. All of the Greeks were enthusiastically engaged in science, because science was (with the exception of poetry) the greatest event of that time. It must have been a tremendous event, the discovery of this capability, which inspired Aristotle to bring forth the first scientific system and Plato to place his famous inscription above the entrance to the Academy:

›Let no man enter here who does not know geometry.‹

As we said before, Socrates didn't have the slightest thought about science. It was settled for him. How is it that a Greek, living during that time, could make such a decision? We know that if he had not made that decision he would never have been able to find his way into pure philosophy and hence would never have been able to set science apart from philosophy. He would have gotten mixed up exactly as Plato got mixed up and as every other Greek philosopher got mixed up including Heraclitus (although Heraclitus can be pardoned for that, because he

¹² See: [Herodotus: The History of Herodotus](#). Translated by George Rawlinson [Book 1](#).

discovered science as a human possibility through philosophical means). The others were just mixed up. To them, science and philosophy were indistinguishable.

Socrates was not mixed up. We know, through Mr. Taylor, that Socrates must have been a tremendously educated man before he started his own philosophy. — that he could have assimilated the teachings of all of his predecessors, and hence of Heraclitus as well. Now Heraclitus had shown that the logos of nature is a limited logos which is why the laws of nature can be discovered by man. But the logos of man is of a different order: Namely, it is an infinite logos which is self increasing. So on this basis Socrates could have drawn the conclusion:

‘Well, we have a clear field before us now. The whole of nature is left to science, because science has the means by which the laws of nature can be discovered, so why should I occupy myself with this? There is a much more interesting thing for me to occupy myself with and that is this doubtful and infinite logos that Heraclitus ascribes to the human soul (that is, to the person that man is), and to find out what is this infinite logos of man?’

To approach this logos only by means of a finite logos, that is, only by what we know according to the laws of nature would be crazy, because how can one approach the question of an infinite law solely by means of finite laws finitely given? It will never do. There must be a specific method for approaching this infinite logos which is man.

Heraclitus gave to man the specific method by which he can approach nature. He also discovered the specific reason why man could not approach God (the highest principle) because God is unapproachable. All of these things Socrates also accepted and he could have gotten them from Heraclitus. Now, there is really only one thing left, and that is the task of finding a principle of action to approach this infinite logos of man, and that apparently is what Socrates set out to do. First, negatively, by rejecting the natural approach (by saying I am not concerned with whether or not the sun is a stone or a god) and second, positively, by looking into himself (into his most immediate experience) because that is the most immediate experience a human being can have. In other words, he approached the question ‘Who is man?’, by

first approaching the question ›Who am I myself?‹ This is exactly what Heraclitus had already done, but with far different results.

There is a saying of Heraclitus: ›I searched into myself.‹¹³

And he had searched into himself. Through his discovery that the logos of nature and the logos of man are not the same he made the first decisive distinction between man and nature, however he did not succeed and could not succeed in finding the logos in man no matter how much he searched into himself. He could not go on with this procedure. He was stopped, and quite understandably so, however we do not have the time to explain why it is that a one-sidedness or certain directness of philosophical thought excludes other directions. We could prove this right out of the context of Heraclitus but it is too difficult for us to attempt here. We will only say that Socrates took up, so to speak, where Heraclitus left off, and so he must have shared and apparently did share the contempt that Heraclitus had for the other Greek philosophers, especially Pythagoras. Heraclitus hated Pythagoras once saying of him that ›the learning of many things did not teach him understanding‹ and that his inquiry did not give him wisdom but merely ›a knowledge of many (particular) things‹ that was ›an art of foolishness.‹¹⁴ He had nothing but contempt for all of them including Homer (although there he was wrong) and he speaks mockingly of them when he says:

›No one of those who all think they are so wise in the Greek things understands that the Absolute is absolutely apart.‹¹⁵

¹³ »I searched myself.« Heraclitus: Fragments [B101](#).

¹⁴ »The learning of many things does not teach understanding; otherwise, it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, and again Xenophanes and Hecataeus.« Heraclitus: Fragments [B40](#).

¹⁵ »Of all whose discourses I have heard, there is not one who attains to recognizing what is wise, set apart from all.« Heraclitus: Fragments [B108](#).

Pythagoras tried to approach the Absolute by creating a sect and through mystical experiences. Out of this school of thought came [Empedocles](#) who even believed that he had once been a god, then became a bird, then a man, and finally that he would become a god again. Heraclitus would have laughed at that. Rather he said:

›The most beautiful ape is uglier than the ugliest man.‹¹⁶

meaning that the most beautiful man is also uglier than the ugliest god. He wanted these three absolute realms distinct. He would, never have moved in order to become a god.

Pythagoras and Empedocles were very much under the influence of oriental thinking which was also Greek to a very large degree, and which was absolutely rejected (not by Plato) but by Aristotle, Socrates, and Heraclitus. Aristotle was much too sober, much too interested in science to take up such a thing, and as to Socrates and Heraclitus, both were absolutely of the opposite opinion and that means also absolutely opposed to the philosophically muddled Hebrew and Christian idea that man has something divine in him. Man has nothing divine in him. The infinite logos of Heraclitus (which is man) has nothing to do with the idea of an infinite transcendent God, because his infinite logos is not an Absolute. Man is alive, man is a mysterious being that can be, man is a creative creature, but he remains a creature, and since he has nothing divine in him he cannot give up his soul to God after death. His soul does not go back into the substance of God, returning back home, so to speak, after having been initially parted from God's substance. Oh no! What is meant by the soul in the sense of Heraclitus: Namely the human person, is something absolutely different from God or from gods. No substantial

¹⁶ »The most handsome of apes is ugly in comparison with a human.« Heraclitus: Fragments [B82](#).

inner equality or partnership is allowed. Rather on this one basic thought of Heraclitus, Socrates' own thought starts to move.

He makes the same distinctions with the one exception that he concentrates on the logos of man, searching really into himself, following the saying that was inscribed on the temple at Delphi: »[Know Thyself](#).« He tried nothing more than to know himself, to find out about himself in order that he might find out about man and especially about the human qualities of man. He has been called an ethical philosopher, the founder of •western ethics, but Socrates did not speak about ethics, only Aristotle, did. He was not that narrow. He did not create a discipline, he did not want to become an ethical scientist or the founder of the science of ethics (whatever that might be). He just wanted to discover the principle of action in man. What is the source of this creative principle, and how we can use it? This is the central question of pure philosophy and that is what he was after – the possible answer to this question which he was the first to raise.

If we reflect back for a moment we seem to have proceeded so far that we have philosophers for almost everything. At long last we have a philosopher of science in Heraclitus and now even, a philosopher of philosophy: Namely, Socrates, and there is such a thing as the philosophy of philosophy. It means the power of reflective judgement. We cannot know what science is except philosophically, we cannot know what art is except philosophically, and we cannot know what art is except philosophically. All other human creative capabilities are non-reflective except this one. That means they cannot reflect upon themselves. In order to find out what they are we have to ask philosophy. It is a philosophical question what science is! How science proceeds is a scientific question. But what science is in so far as man is concerned, what it is as a human creative capability, what are its limits and what are its sources, are questions that can only be answered by using reflective judgement and judgement is available as a procedure only in philosophy, and it is available only because the judgement of judgement is possible in philosophy.

This is the reflective capability of man, where one can philosophically reflect on a thing called the power of judgement (which is the real action principle of philosophy) and determine its limits. Philosophy is that capability of man, the only one, which can know its own limits. Which can find those limits on the basis of reasoning. All the others cannot, except either through practice or through catastrophe.

The clashes are unavoidable. Science must strive to go over its limits, art must strive to go over its limits, religion must, all human capabilities do and must, because otherwise they cannot move. In order to show them their limits and to know about their limits, judgement must be applied. An equilibrium of forces has to be brought into existence and this can only be done philosophically, because philosophy is able to not only know its own limits but also to design them. Otherwise the capability of philosophy would not be a capability of judgement.

This might seem complicated but it is quite logical in its structure, because judgement would not be possible if judgement could not be critical of judgement. We have in this central capability of man the same miracle that we have in man himself and that is why philosophical inquiry has to start with man himself, with man looking into himself, and reflecting upon himself. That I am an ›I‹ and a possible ›You‹ in myself. If [not] I could not even think. This possible existence is a precondition for thinking. The most refined thinking, the most pure thinking, like philosophy, moves exactly according to the same conditions that man moves. It is also capable of self reflection and that is the real content of the power of judgement which is given to man, and which does not mean wisdom. There are no wise men. Wisdom – *sophia*, which is Socrates transcendent Absolute, can be approached, because we have the power of judgement and we can exercise that power rightly. We can make the decision for freedom and be certain that we will become wiser and wiser without ever becoming wise, because we can never have wisdom although we can lead ourselves in the direction of wisdom.

So the power of reasoned judgement (what Heraclitus called the infinite logos that is in man) is Socrates' formula, and it is this infinite logos which he tries to analyze and move towards step by step in philosophical practice. To »practice« is one of his main terms. To have telos, to set possible aims and to be able to reason out these possible aims in community with other human minds. Never alone, never trying to be the big shot over everybody, the expert, but always trying it out. From here Socrates goes on to design his own life and the way in which he will proceed in his life. So we will have to see the next time how he unfolded this procedure and what the results were. How he came to his death, how his death is bound up with those results, and finally, why his death, like the death of Jesus of Nazareth, was so unforgettable. Because here he succeeded in doing as Jesus succeeded in doing the greatest thing any human being can achieve: Namely, to make their own death the highest expression of their life and to design their death in such a way as it becomes the pinnacle of their life and the ultimate triumph of their life.