

IN DEFENSE OF SOCRATES' JUDGES

Philosophers, rather glibly, have assumed it as a matter of course that in the most famous court-trial of the pre-Christian era, the trial which took place in the City of Athens in 399 B.C., they have been (and still are) on the side of Socrates, the convicted criminal, rather than on the side of his triumphant judges. It does not seem to me that this assumption is justified by the facts. Instead, the actual attitude and conduct of philosophers in most ages appears to me to arraign them on the side of Socrates' judges rather than on that of Socrates himself. This, at any rate, appears to be true of too many philosophers in the present tragic hour in human history.

Instead of rising above the noisy clash of clans and above the battlecries of the moment, instead of undertaking the leadership of humanity in matters of the intellect and of spirit, philosophers once again, as so many times before, are busily engaged in joining the mad chorus of international strife and in adding vehemence to its sound and fury, ready to climb on the band-wagons of stop-gap saviours. For the most part, we are much too busy oiling the machinery of military national defense and keeping it moving to the tune of untold billions and in behalf of the systematic planning of human destruction to be able either for ourselves to see things, with Spinoza, "*sub specie aeternitatis*," or to be fit to provide this sadly needful humanity with the kind of critical thought and intellectual leadership, without which not merely the present but even the future of humanity must be largely hopeless.

At the moment I am not concerned with the detailed arguments as between Socrates and his judges. Rather, I am concerned with the basic fact that Socrates, Athens' wisest man, was on trial for his life on the double charge of being a blasphemer of the gods, on the one hand, and a corrupter of youth, on the other; and with the other equally fundamental fact that the judges of Athens, who tried, convicted, and condemned him, represented the social judgment and conscience of the population of Athens in 399 B.C. Socrates, practicing the real and intended role of the *philos sophiae*, had made the fatal mistake of daring to follow the voice of critical reflection and wisdom rather than the voice of the *demos*. So far from considering it his function simply to mirror and reflect the sentiments and fluctuating emotions of the fickle populace—day before yesterday saying: "We were fooled by idealistic slogans into mass-murder once, but never again," yesterday committed to all possible aid "short

of war," and today whooping it up with all the former gusto and enthusiasm for making the world once more "safe for democracy" by supporting the international mass-murder the second time in one generation—Socrates had the temerity to *think* and to express his thoughts freely: a dangerous thing to do in any age; but never so dangerous as when feelings run high and the populace is off on a rampage, whipped up to fever-heat and fury by demagogues with unholy axes to grind. There never was a better time in our whole national life than the present to remind ourselves of the fact that the wisest man of Athens stood condemned by Athens' best legal minds as a dangerous disturber of Athens' peace, as a rebel and revolutionary, as the "fifth columnist" of his day. No wonder they were determined to stop him! No wonder either that they succeeded. For, the "fifth column," never more dangerous to the state than in times of emergency and of national crisis, must be stopped at any price. Socrates, because he refused to prostitute his thought and speech until it would merely have become the *ancilla populi*, had to pay with his life for his devotion to the unpopular truth and for his insistence upon freely speaking his mind in criticism of the mob's emotions, thoughts, and actions.

The events of 399 B.C., however, are, unfortunately, not unique in human—or, for that matter, even in philosophical—history. The same sort of thing happened in Jerusalem early in the first century (of our own time-recording) and in Holland sixteen centuries later, simply to extract two of the most famous repetitions of such tendencies and procedures. No age seems to delight in the presence, within its midst, of a gadfly, a mind which refuses to succumb to the mere mouthings of the shibboleths of the period, but insists rather upon stabbing bluntly and ruthlessly into some of the most cherished of the era's fairy-tales. The year of crisis, 1944, in this regard differs not one whit from other ages or periods. Just because it undeniably is a year of crisis, it shares with other such critical periods of human history the flare for high-sounding slogans and for what look like very idealistic convictions and commitments. And anyone who does not immediately fall for these slogans or fails to swallow them, hook, line, and sinker, is at once being made to look very devilish indeed. Appeaser, "fifth columnist," traitor! These are the words heard on every side, if one even so much as ventures to question the popular hysteria, the increasing lust for blood, the whole mad rush over the edge of the abyss of total war and mass-murder. Not to be critical has come to be the order of the day, and that even within philosophical circles. Or, if one *must* be critical, then let's be critical of nice neat little questions of epistemology, of metaphysics, of symbolic logic, or of the methodology of science. But, in heaven's name, let's

not be critical of the mob-mind and fury, of national hysteria, of patriotic slogans or nationalistic catchwords,—in short, of the state or of the direction in which the state is moving. Whatever else we be, let's be "good patriots"! Let no one dare to question our patriotism! And, to be patriotic, in these days, has come to be equivalent to accepting uncritically and without question whatever the Great White Father in Washington has, in his divine wisdom, chosen to do.

In other words, the inherent rightness and justice of the decisions of the state must not be questioned. The state is sacrosanct: above the criticism of thinkers and philosophers. And/or *vox populi, vox dei*.

These are, of course, not new doctrines or new procedures. They are, if not as old as the hills, at least as old as Socrates and older. Moreover, they have, more recently, received a quite unusual amount of—even philosophical—attention. For example, for more than a century now, philosophers and political scientists alike have been in the habit of chastising Hegel for his apotheosis of the Prussian State. It has been common practice to denounce Hegel for his easy sell-out to the Prussian powers-that-were. And, still more recently, we have heard it said on almost innumerable occasions that no self-respecting philosopher could live under a modern communistic, fascistic, or nazi regime and prostitute his mind and his profession by becoming an academic protagonist of the procedures, propaganda, commitments, and directions of the political state under which he happened to be living. Let it be said here in unequivocal fashion that the present writer has found himself in complete agreement with both of these judgments all along.

But, having made this confession, the writer never dreamed he would live to see the day when multitudes of his colleagues would turn around and adopt for themselves and for their own program of teaching the same uncritical attitude of mind which they had been in the habit of criticizing so severely in Hegel and in Fascist and Communist philosophers. Who could have dreamed, even three or four years ago, that the critical minds of American philosophers would shortly be converted into mere apologists either for their own (American) State or for that of the British Empire? Who, at that time, would have been believed, had he foretold that American and British philosophers would—within so short a space of time—put their own (supposedly philosophical) services just as unequivocally into the service of their own respective existing political states as Hegel had done a hundred-and-twenty years ago and as German, Italian, and Russian philosophers have been doing for the past decade? And who, above all, would have believed that such a complete reversal of attitude and procedure would be possible on the part of thinkers whose basic and life-long commitment and training

had more particularly qualified them for maintaining a critical attitude of mind even in the midst of national sprees of emotionalism and hysteria, and for the kind of aloofness from the mere immediacy of a situation which, first and foremost, is supposed to characterize the truly scholarly mind?

Fairness to facts demands the admission from us, therefore, that—once again, as, in the days of Hegel and of Heidegger and Gentile—philosophy is failing us at precisely the point where the only justification for philosophy, in the long run, can be found: in its ability, namely, to remain above the noise and cry of the mob-mind, critical and unperturbed, able to see, to judge, to lead,—rather than to accept, agree, and follow.

This failure of philosophy in periods of crisis is to be noted along at least five distinct lines.

1. In the first place, it is the failure to be able to maintain the reflective and critical attitude of mind in the presence of great waves of popular emotionalism. In the light of what has already been stated above, and in the light, moreover, of what only too obviously goes on all about us, morning, noon, and night, it is perhaps, hardly necessary to establish this point by means of elaborate demonstrations. The facts and attitudes all about us veritably shout the truth of this assertion into our ears.

Nor should it be necessary to argue at length that such an attitude and procedure on the part of philosophers amounts to an abdication of reason in favor of hyper-nationalistic sprees of so-called patriotism. I am not asking that the philosopher should be unpatriotic or even that he should be free from—even the emotional—attitude of deep regard and love for his country. It is possible to be possessed of all of that and still maintain a reflectively critical attitude of mind and procedure. Since when does it follow that, because a parent may find it necessary to be critical of the conduct of his child or even to chastise that child, he therefore does not love the child? And since when is *intelligent* patriotism the equivalent of unquestioning acceptance of whatever the powers-that-be in the state decide to do? I had always thought that such attitude was that, not of a free, but of a slave-mind, worthy, perhaps, of fascist and communist enslavement, but not of free, democratically committed minds. Have I been wrong in these assumptions?

2. This failure of philosophy in our present period of crisis is, in the second place, a failure to understand the causal relationship between means and ends. This is a very sad confusion, indeed. For one would imagine that men who, since the days of Hume, have spent as much time on the problem of causality as have philosophers, would not so easily be taken in at this point. The grandson of one

of Britain's most famous nineteenth century philosophers, namely Aldous Huxley, recently thought it of the utmost importance to call the intelligent world's attention to this sad—universal—confusion between means and ends. But, it will now have to be admitted, Huxley's cry was that of "a voice crying in the wilderness." No one has paid any serious attention to his protests or to his warnings. For, no one—under the emotional stress of the present international crisis—is willing either to admit or even to consider the so perfectly obvious fact that "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap: he who soweth to the flesh shall, from the flesh, reap corruption; and he who soweth to the spirit shall, from the spirit, reap life everlasting." If I may be permitted to translate: he who sows the instruments of destruction, shall reap what he has sown, namely destruction; whereas he who has the courage to sow the spiritual and moral qualities of justice, peace, and good-will, shall also reap what he has sown, namely the creative fruits of such moral and spiritual endeavors and activity. There is no "hokus-pokus" in this, it is merely the inevitable operation of a universe which is orderly rather than capricious, in which causality—even though this principle remain yet unexplained in detail—is a real, experimental, and testable fact. In this kind of world it is simply the height of folly to imagine that any nation can make the "all-out" effort for the systematic development of hatred and destruction which modern "total war" requires and then expect to reap the fruits of peace, prosperity and good-will. It would seem that one would not have to be a philosopher (or a scientist either, for that matter) to recognize this fact.

The whole doctrine of "internal relations,"—that fond baby of philosophical idealism, but which has furnished plenty of fuel for philosophical discussions way beyond the boundaries of the idealistic schools—offers further evidence for the direct, immediate, and inherent relationship between means and ends. The proposition: "he who takes the sword shall perish by the sword" is not true because it was uttered by the Nazarene, but rather it was uttered by the Nazarene because he found it to be true; and all human history bears witness to the fact. This is that kind of a world, a world of relationships, a world of order, a world of cause and effect. Who should know this better than philosophers? Who has meditated upon such relationships longer and more carefully than have philosophers? Is it not strange that now we are suddenly asked, by many of these same philosophers, to forget all this work and all the conclusions derived from that work? Or is it merely that—when it is academically more convenient and emotionally more satisfying—we can just blissfully overlook our conclusions derived from the careful and painstaking work of our more coldly rational and theoretical

moments? I shall leave the answer to these questions to those who will find it difficult to give answers which will be at one and the same time satisfying to their emotional needs and to the requirements of truth and validity in an at least related and orderly universe.

3. The third failure of philosophy in the present crisis is a moral failure. It implies the basic surrender of faith in a moral universe, or at least in a moral human universe (for I have no intention at the moment of making the moral category a metaphysical one). The assertion (and active procedure) that evil can be overcome only by the use of more—of the same kind of—evil, though admittedly a thoroughly popular notion, obviously constitutes a fundamental betrayal of the effectiveness of moral categories. How long and how vociferously have we all denied the claim that “might makes right!” But when, in a pinch, in a crisis, it comes to action and conduct, we not only still continue to base our action on the principle, but we go out to defend our action based on such an obviously immoral principle by devious theoretical detours. Not only mankind in general, but even philosophers and moralists themselves have, apparently given up any faith they may ever have had in the effectiveness of goodness in its own right. In the light of such surrender, one cannot but wonder what teachers of courses in ethics will have to teach from now on. But, perhaps the answer to this last question is not so far to seek. For, if I remember correctly, a theological moralist (so-called) tried to find his way out of this difficulty as much as twelve years ago, when he developed a theory of morality for individual man, but claimed that on the broader social level men could not help but act immorally. 1. What such a notion will ultimately do even to so-called private morality needs not much guessing. The author of that claim has, of course, long since thrown himself into the arms of an all-powerful God, in Whom, I suppose, all these contradictions inherent in man find their blissful (though from a merely human standpoint I suppose useless) solution. But this seems to me to be an attempt to save the moral consciousness at a point where it loses every specific human meaning. If this is all that can be said for social morality, the sooner we shall give up the whole concept of morals the better off we shall be; for we shall then at least be honest with ourselves.

Yet, in the light of such a far-reaching surrender of faith in the inherent effectiveness of goodness and truth, especially on the part of the philosophers and moralists themselves, is it really any wonder that we have had to live to see our so-called civilized modern world

1. I refer, obviously, to Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York, 1932).

topple all about us in ruins? What else was to be expected in a world in which even some of the foremost advocates of morality and decency had themselves lost faith in their efficacy? It has taken men like Walter Lippmann, Aldous Huxley, and Lewis Mumford to remind us of the devastating nature of that kind of a loss of faith. And, of course, since those men do not wear the togas of the professional philosophers, we would not think of stopping to listen to their voices. All the worse for us. It isn't Nero merely who, in our day, is "fiddling while Rome is burning," it is we philosophers who are increasingly guilty of that crime. Guilty of it, because we have surrendered one of the greatest privileges and opportunities of our profession: that of being the moral leaders of the age.

4. There is still a fourth failure with which philosophy is to be charged in the present hour of crisis. This failure is due to the blemish of near-sightedness. This too is a strange charge to have to bring against philosophers. For it is the philosopher, after all, who has been claiming to "see life steadily and see it whole." It is the philosopher who is supposed to look at life and the universe *sub specie aeternitatis*, or, if not from the vantage-point of eternity—a point which may, after all, be even beyond the philosopher—, then at least from the long range point of view. It is the philosopher who is expected to be able to rise above the merely specious present, above the merely "here and now," above the clatter and clanging of the momentary noises, above the sound and fury of today's immediacy and its persistently noisy but nonetheless swiftly passing claims. I say, the philosopher is "expected to." But such expectations do not seem to trouble us very seriously. When everyone else howls, we claim the right and privilege of howling with the mob. That by so doing we have forfeited every rightful claim to leadership does not seem to trouble us very greatly.

5. And with this I have already touched upon the fifth and last failure of philosophy in the present crisis: the surrender of our intellectual leadership. In at least a practical way, this is perhaps the most serious charge of all. For, it inevitably confronts us with the question: where is humanity to look for leadership at precisely the time when it stands most seriously in need of intellectual and moral leadership, namely in a time of crisis, if, whenever a real human crisis appears, the philosophers, along with the rest of the population, start at once to run away from the facts and certainly from the light, and begin to seek refuge in Plato's ancient "Cave" or else in the equally as cave-like "black-outs" of modern civilization and culture? If philosophers can just as easily and as quickly be swept off their intellectual, moral, and spiritual feet as are the more untutored mortals, if together with the mob we readily succumb to the

loud trumpeting of the moment and the noisy propaganda of the yellow press,—if, at almost a moment's notice, we seem to be capable of losing all sense of balance, of perspective, of wholeness, of critical acumen, of intellectual detachment, and of moral understanding, where is humanity going to look for, much less find, the intellectual, moral, and spiritual leadership for which no time cries out so loudly as does a time of crisis? Moreover, if the world's intellectual leadership, once again, is ready to sell out to the political state (on both sides of the conflict, as we all know it did during the first world war), where is a trustworthy leadership—a leadership which would guide humanity into the new day and the new world which must be created—going to come from? Who is going to provide it? And if we cannot do so, if we must stand condemned ourselves by our own conduct in this hour of crisis, what help can we bring to those in our civilization who, because they belong to the next generation, are rightfully looking to us for leadership, for courage, for moral faith and spiritual commitment—whereas we have nothing to give them but the husks of yesterday's theories which we have let the outburst of human barbarism and savagery in Europe and Asia rob us of, because we never really did believe in their kernel and core in the first place?

I can find only one immediate answer to all these questions, and that is the frank admission that once again Socrates stands condemned: this time by the practices of his own profession. If we are really still even partially honest we ought frankly and openly to exonerate Socrates' judges from any guilt; we ought freely to come out in their defense. For, did they not save Athens' youth from "corruption" and Athens' state from radical rebellion? Did they not save the *status quo* of ancient Athens? Long live the judges of Socrates!

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