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Introduction

Two and a half millennia ago this month (give or take a decade or so) someone addressed Pythagoras as *sophos*, or “wise one.” Pythagoras declined the compliment; he ought not, he said, to be called *sophos*, but rather *philosophos*, “one who cares about wisdom.” There was nothing remarkable in his use of the prefix *phil-*, which was extremely common in classical Greek—from the *philaboulos* who loved being inconsiderate to the *philoreites* who was fond of mountains, the lexicon contains pages full of terms formed in this way. The general idea is of something one likes, loves, is fond of, cares about, seeks for, is in the habit of doing, and so on—in short, a preoccupation, an enthusiasm, a passion. The *sophia* to which this enthusiasm attached was not only wisdom after the manner of the bearded sage but, as Liddell and Scott put it, “wisdom in common things,” skill, prudence, exact knowledge.

Something of this preoccupation has remained with the profession ever since. It was already a joke at the time of Thales, who was said to have fallen into a ditch while watching the stars, that philosophers in their absorption with ideas neglected obvious practical necessities (the term *sophos* was also used ironically to mean “abstruse”). And it is true that from time to time philosophical attention has wandered far from problems of contemporary moment, too far, perhaps, on occasion—although it is probably good for the human race for some members of it to keep their eyes resolutely on the transcendent. For the most part, however, philosophers have been more or less acutely aware of the state of the real world, sometimes indeed taking refuge in philosophy to escape from it.

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that he did not think wisdom, or prudence, or exact knowledge, were that easy to attain, although he was willing to be known as one to whom they mattered. The difference between the philosopher and everyone else who also recognizes our failures in these respects—who observes that we fall short in our grasp of the truth of things, that we fail to be as good as we ought or as intelligent as we need to be—is that the philosopher is content neither to observe merely, nor having observed to dismiss the phenomenon as an essential weakness of human nature about which there is nothing to be done, but persists in worrying away at one aspect or another of this endemic lack, trying to get things clearer, more consistent, closer to an adequate account of the nature of things, or of human subjectivity, or of language, or of society.

The focus of this insistent and necessarily patient inquiry shifts—from philosopher to philosopher, from epoch to epoch, from country to country. Philosophy is not wisdom, it is precisely the human activity, embodied in persons, that takes as its object, if not wisdom, then at least some improvement of the understanding, as Spinoza put it. If we wish to get an idea of that activity, of its present concerns, its methods, its convictions, the obvious strategy is to ask the persons in whom it is embodied to step back for a moment from their immediate preoccupations and to reflect on their own work and that of their colleagues. The present issue of *Social Research* was conceived in just this spirit. Contributors were asked to prepare

informal assessments of the state of affairs in various fairly obvious subdivisions of philosophy. I have in mind [the letter of invitation read] not exhaustive summaries of what is being done everywhere, with massive bibliographical attachments, but impressions of the fields by philosophers active in them, which would be illustrations, as well as reports, of what current work is like: what problems are dominant, who is breaking new ground in connection with them, how the writer of the article reacts to principal trends. Within these approximate constraints on length and content, contributors will have complete liberty of approach and emphasis. This will no doubt lead to some unevenness of treatment, but I take this to be a positive feature of

the arrangement, since I would wish the issue to reflect among other things a group of personalities representative (if not typical) of the profession.

The responses to this invitation speak for themselves (and have been left, for the most part, as the contributors submitted them—bibliographical attachments included where these proved irresistible after all—in the spirit of diversity alluded to above), but a few general remarks are in order.

First of all, due to pure contingencies and not at all by design, no essays will be found here on logic or the philosophy of science. They were solicited but did not materialize. In one sense this was a fortunate accident, if such an accident had to happen at all (fortunate in the sense that if *other* essays than these had not been forthcoming the unity of the issue would have been more seriously compromised), for there has come to be a kind of informal division between these domains and the rest, for example in the professional organization of the subject, both nationally and internationally. It might, in fact, be interesting to devote another issue to the very extensive work that is now being done in the philosophy not only of the physical sciences but of the biological and social sciences as well. Secondly, however, another kind of division that might have been expected—by people who have been exposed to popular prejudices about philosophy—to be in evidence hardly shows up at all. The time seems ripe to get rid of the cliché that there is a split in philosophy between “analytic” or “positivistic” or “linguistic” concerns on the one hand and “metaphysical” or “existential” ones on the other. Some philosophers, it is true, maintain a paranoid form of this distinction. But most would now agree that philosophy cannot help being analytic in the broad sense and has always been so; that it is inextricably tied up with language, and that all philosophy involves, implicitly or explicitly, a metaphysical commitment.

Contemporary philosophy has, of course, inherited the distinction, due in its modern form to Descartes, between mind and body, matter and spirit. It has been infected with dualism

and with a resulting partisanship (materialism versus idealism, empiricism versus rationalism). But in this century it has come to be realized that the only *inescapable* dualism is that between consciousness and the content of consciousness. On this realization rests the philosophical school of phenomenology. It has also become clear that the languages in which philosophical arguments are expressed, and the social contexts in which philosophizing is done, cut across the old dualisms and pose problems of a new kind. The dominant themes now are no longer mind and matter but language and society. And this last is a division which does, very roughly, show up in what follows, although it cannot be said to dominate even so, since there are several contributions which fall on neither side of it.

The philosophical interest in language has shifted from the formal syntax of Rudolf Carnap and the ordinary-language philosophy of John L. Austin, Gilbert Ryle, and the later Ludwig Wittgenstein to the semantics of natural languages and the implications of modal logic. Syntax deals with what it is logically possible to say, but philosophically richer questions surround the constraints that language places on what we can mean or believe. The crucial problems lie neither in the world nor in language as such but in the relation between them, in the attempt to understand how language mediates between man and the world. But the concern about society that marks contemporary philosophy is not directly related to this concern with language. It arises—in the English-speaking world at least—from a different sensibility, formed by a long-standing interest in theories of law and government, especially American and British, and sharpened by the race problem, the war in Vietnam, and so on. The shortcomings of contemporary society in these last respects have jolted the awareness of moral philosophers down from the second-order level on which it had been operating for decades to a new engagement with immediate problems of injustice, violence, scarcity, repression, and the like.

The result of these shifts of attention, local and recent embodiments of the generally shifting focus of preoccupation in philosophy at large, has been, I believe, a reinvigoration of the discipline, which has also extended to branches of it not immediately involved with basic problems of language or society. These essays, spanning the field from aesthetics to the theory of knowledge, and connecting theoretically or practically to other domains—through aesthetics to art, through ethics to politics, through hermeneutics and philosophical anthropology to history and culture in general, through a concern with public affairs to social and legal problems of contemporary life—convey a lively sense of what philosophy presently is, how the preoccupation with wisdom that we inherit from Pythagoras translates itself into specific examples of professional work. They also provide, more or less transparently, a glimpse into the styles and personalities of a number of individual philosophers, for whose willing cooperation I here record my thanks.

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