



XI. Academic Freedom (1967)

*The First Common Course Lecture
Bard College, spring, 1967*

There is one means by which to make this course absolutely impossible, and that is if the American academy is taken over. We are all standing before the world now deeply ashamed. We have been painted red in the face by shame, because we are like the others. We also spread books and knowledge which has nothing whatsoever to do with truth. The C.I.A. has infiltrated the National Student Organization. That means we are being bribed, we are being used, and we are no longer academicians any more. If we want to raise people either as conformists, or as nonconformists, (that means either as squares, or as nonsquares), then they will amount to the same thing, because both deny the higher values of academic life and academic pursuits. They want, as nihilists cynically say, "to do whatever we want, and we will do whatever we want," and soon we have that whole juvenile delinquency.

Conformity is a conviction. Nonconformity is a conviction, too. What the government says must be right, it must be spread, and no dissent shall be possible. If they call that consensus, then to hell with it. Both thoughts of human beings are being used to deny the values of human life and of the higher human capacities. They want to use them and degrade them. If our students come to an international student meeting now, the others will laugh in their faces. Because we are doing what the others (the totalitarians, the Russians) did all along. There was never any doubt about it. Every word they said was dictated by the government. We laughed at them. We said "you are not free, we are free." "In the United States every fool can make up his mind, and he will tell you so, and you can only say he is a fool. But you cannot say he does not pursue the truth. He is, with one word, a human being and not a machine, or a criminal."

This kind of sneaky infiltration of a secret organization that has too much money, into a student organization that has too little money, is all very understandable, but we cannot let it go that way because we will lose our standing in the world. It has been said that some people (the conformists; that means the employees) are born slaves. Certain people have a slave soul. I would say that some people have an employee soul, and certain people have no soul whatsoever, because they are not concerned with it. They are concerned only with their own pleasure, and that pleasure as well as this other (nonconformism) leads only to murder. The consequence is murder. It is always murder because both are nihilistic signs of the time. The readiness to give in, to become an employee, and say what the boss says is as nihilistic as the readiness to rape a girl, or to leave a human corpse at the scene, caused either by automobile or knife.

The students of the United States are worthy of better treatment. They have to be recognized first as academic persons before they leave the universities. And to be an academic person has always meant to be free.

This freedom has to be guaranteed, or we had better all give up. If they want to infiltrate us, this only means that they will take the best used material away from us, all this has been going on in many ways. Too many research grants with strings attached. One private foundation after another is involved in it, and we must ask where does the money come from? We do not want to eat if that money comes from those sources. We cannot, until we starve, begin to think that way.

If the distinction between the totalitarian societies, and the American republic no longer goes, if they begin to deliver more and more of the same results, then we are all lost. This is a bitter question that I put forth in bitter earnest, because I am not only concerned with the keeping up of the Academy (which is self-evident), but I am also concerned that it should not be replaced by conscious lying. That the truth, which the Academy pursues, is not replaced by the lie. It is much easier to lie. It even pays. But it has nothing whatsoever to do with the Academy and with what academic life stands for.

In our society, American education has become questionable. It became questionable long before this happened. It has been an automatic process. We are getting more and more vocational training. The universities have gotten so big that we don't even know if they are universities any more, or multi-versities (like Berkeley), or professional schools. It is all one big mess. In a way, this has been unavoidable so long as the nucleus of the whole thing holds, and the nucleus (the criterion) will always be how far is university teaching an academic teaching, and how far is it not? Academic teaching means to be able to teach in freedom, for freedom, and to be able to pursue the truth regardless of any other point of view.

We are a small college. Fortunately, we are not very much in that business yet. Until, that is, we become leaders of the National Student Organization, and then we might be bribed and taken in. We mustn't be. Here in Bard College, we still have an academy going. We can still pursue our aim, and that aim is manifold but it has one center. That center is the development of the higher faculties of man, (not higher education, but higher faculties). We are concerned with the creative higher faculties which are the endowment of man, and they carry a certain obligation. This obligation is that we have to prove true to them, and not to us or to anybody else. Those original ideas, first developed in Plato's Academy, and finally pursued under handicaps until we get the academy as it exists in the freest republic in the world, and which those forces we mentioned have tried to undermine. We have been very, very happy, because in this academy we were finally able to speak what we thought. The time might come when we cannot do that any more.

With the infiltration of the C.I.A. and organizations like it, we see the growth of a kind of government. It is a secret government. They tell me, and I believe them, that it is necessary. They tell me every state needs self defense. Wonderful, I agree. But I have only one thing to say. Such organizations, if necessary, must be under public control. I want the control of congress, of the president, and of the supreme court forced on them. I am ready to tell the congress, the president, and the supreme court to "do your duty."

This is quite an unusual beginning for the Common Course. I have never had the occasion to do that, because here we have always taken consideration of the higher faculties of man, and we will do it again. Always, we ended up with politics and namely with the question "What is politics"? What is this strange thing, this creative capability of man, that endangers the lives of so many men? What is really the matter with our political thinking and our political acting? On this occasion, for the first time, I had to act politically for the very simple reason that we have been attacked, and you don't know how deep the attack goes. It aims right at the heart of the whole academic world.

The others have accomplished it already. It is easily done. You just have to create a totalitarian state, and everybody says the same thing. But to come voluntarily to such a state of affairs, that is grotesque. No, this course has been established in the shifting scene of American education to hold up a certain center. To make the following criterion. Namely, that an academic place is only worth as much as the human beings in that place in so far as they are educated in a real way, in the deepest possible respect for themselves and for their higher human faculties. As long as this is sure, we can spread out as much as we like. There will be many drop-outs, but it always has been so. They will go into business and other rules will prevail. The pursuit of truth is not always so useful. But at least they will be able to say that they have been to a good academy. They will remember what the higher values in life are, and will still be ready to bring certain sacrifices to them, even in their own lives.

This kind of education, namely, education which makes men and women, is much more important than any kind of learning. We can learn everything in order only to repeat it. To accept it without criticizing it, without discussing it, without making it our own. Then, we will never get great use from it. It is a precondition for becoming an automaton, for becoming the usual guy, or run of the mill stuff. No, we want more, and so we have proposed this course. What we need for it is academic freedom, and I don't mean by academic freedom boys and girls visiting each other (and God knows what else) which has been called academic freedom. I mean the atmosphere of freedom in which we can carry on the pursuit of truth, unhampered by any kind of recognition, or non-recognition, money or non-money. This is the central aim of education if it is a good education and a human education.

The course itself is a difficult one. It makes only one general metaphysical assumption. The assumption is that man is capable of gaining the freedom to pursue truth. There are people who deny that he is capable of winning that freedom. I do not say that man is free. We are not born free. We are born with the capability to make ourselves free, to institutionalize ourselves in a way that can bring freedom to the earth. And we want it, which means that the academy wants it, and every human feeling wants it. The possibilities for this remain, and we will in this course pursue those possibilities. Man can throw them away. -He may not want them. He can fall down, but he cannot deny that he once had them. Man may not be born free, but he is endowed with a certain set of higher creative faculties, and they distinguish him as the only being in the world of beings who experiences his life (his surroundings, society, nature, the whole of Being) as a world. World consciousness is only in man.

It could be only a wish, because we are starting to doubt now that this is a cosmos, that this is a universe. Perhaps it is a multiverse, nature, and all the infinite phenomena there. But the will of

man, that this be a world in which he can meaningfully live, remains. We have tried many ways to get at these capacities. Many great people have tried and have established metaphysical assumptions from which to work. We can say that of all those metaphysical assumptions, the first and most important is that man is more than nature. If God exists, he is less than God. But he is certainly more than nature for the very simple reason that he is conscious of nature. He can change nature around, and to what a degree can he change it around. To a disgusting degree, by polluting the air and polluting the water. We have been tremendously effective in doing things to nature so that nature is, so to speak, in our hands, and therefore we must be more than nature. If we can have nature, then the old metaphysical law comes into play. He who has must be more than what he has. This law goes for every kind of human and natural relationship.

On the other hand, mighty as we are, (and no humanity has ever been as mighty as we are), there is a short-coming. God, what we can do. We can blow up the earth. Everything is now a possibility and we don't know what to do with these possibilities. Sociologists will often say that we haven't developed the social sciences as much as the natural sciences, otherwise we would know how to handle man. I have the question then on my lips:

"Do you want to handle man?"

Do you want to handle men scientifically? You want to make them slaves, Don't you? Science will not help. We must do it ourselves, without any commandments whatsoever. We are in a sorry situation, and in the twentieth century, many people have noticed it. This is the first time in the history of mankind that we are indeed living together on the globe. For the first time man does not know who he is, and he knows that he does not know. This is the only ray of hope.

So man's knowledge must become more fundamental. We must really find out to what degree we are lost before we can help ourselves. Anybody who wants to wait for a savior is welcome. We have had so many messiahs that I have grown rather skeptical of them. They don't seem to have helped much. We still kill each other. We have kept the first commandment (thou shalt not kill) less in this century than in any other. We haven't managed, we kill for any kind of reason, and we have to forget that. The globe is shrinking and before we blow it up, before we reach the Moon, (where there is no water and where we will have only bigger problems), we have first to answer the question of how to live on earth together, and that is a political question of the highest order.

The time of conquest is definitely over. If anyone tries to conquer another people, or another nation, he will bitterly fail. There will always be the possibility of getting some combination against him, and he will go down like Hitler went down, or else he will get involved in a war which is a little bit grotesque (like in Vietnam) where we have the defeat of modern technology. General Motors, junk; the large plane firms, junk; the wonder works of humanity reduced to junk, because a few people seem to have decided to resist all of that to the last. They have not much. They have given resistance by digging themselves into the earth, and going miles and miles under the earth, where the modern means do not help any more. Bombardment has very little effect on that kind of environment. American generals (as generals go), have forgotten the saying of Clemenceau during the first world war, when he took over and made the statement

that "war is too earnest a thing to be left to the generals". We have forgotten that here. We have instead, the wonderful idea of some general who is quoted as having said "oh, we will just bomb them back into the stone age."

They have just come out of the stone age.

They are living half in the stone age. You cannot really smash them. There seems to be something (a resilience) in human beings which is unbelievable, and we had better try to recognize this and say "let's make a compromise and get out of this business." One thing is certain. Better weapons will not help, unless we decide on atomic war, but no one will dare to do that.

We are stuck instead, with our power plans. We are the biggest power in the world, and we are stuck with it. The reason for this is that the age of conquest is over. The history of western civilization is the history of conquest. Everybody thought that he could conquer anybody and they did with big slaughters. Suddenly, the whole thing has gotten lame. It is not possible any more to conquer, because to conquer means to take over, and that would be a fine thing, (with American mail delivery in Vietnam), and so on. If we wanted to take over, everything would have to be done by ourselves, and so nobody wants to take over. We have been stuck with an issue that we don't know how to get out of, and we must find ways.

In the whole of whatever institutions we have developed, we must look forward to sharing this globe, as long as we don't blow it up. We have to share it with many other peoples and many different civilizations who have many other rights. No, you say, man is like a rat against man. I know that. I know that we are all at each other's throats. We have to find ways to find peace. We have to find ways of creating a mutual understanding among the best parts of the world. That means we have to take in the problems of Chinese civilization and of Indian civilization. We have to learn to understand Asia. We might still reject it, but we have to understand it. For that aim a course like this can help, because we have always taken certain Indian and Chinese thinking into our consideration. We will do that again.

Today we live in a strange situation. There are many writers who say that everything seems to have to be changed, and fundamentally this is true. Everything has to be revised: Everything. Every kind of human relation has to be reevaluated. We need that. It is a tough business to do but we will not survive without it. We want to contribute a little bit to the preparation for this, because you will be in it for a long time, and you will have to do your best. You must develop the readiness to understand the other guy; or, as Immanuel Kant once said:

"Man is a strange being. He is, if he wants to, capable of listening to the other fellow's point of view for just five minutes."

This capability, this readiness, to listen to the other fellow's point of view can only exist in our academies, because there we have to learn that no argument is valuable before it is examined, before it is proved. Before, that is, we have entire clarity about it. They (the squares; I mean the nice squares. Older men like me, not the squares who are conformists) often say that in an academy, or university, you have to teach everything in perspective. This is quite true, which only means that things become clearer. Issues develop, which are not only academic but also

political. We have let politics go too far on our campuses today (that is, political activities which, by the way, change every day). That explains it already. We must replace this finally by an academy, that is, a place for public events.

This, however, is not our (immediate) task. We must shelter our youth, as far as we can, for a few years in order to enable them to listen to all of the other fellow's points of view, and to put everything they learn into perspective. Oh God: That means to put it between past and future. That means to relate past events to present events with their future aspects. That is a terrible job, but we will try, as long as we have the peace, to do it.

All human activities are made with the metaphysical assumption that man is unknown to himself. He does not know where he comes from, and he does not know where he goes. This is a very interesting question, an unanswerable question. He is born, existentially speaking (existentially means here how he finds himself in the world) into a world, and the common experience is that he is like a babe in the woods. He is born into this world, which is entirely unknown to him. His parents introduce it to him a little bit, and as he grows up the world grows stranger and more complicated, and still stranger and more complicated. He has to orient himself within the world into which he is born, and that is exactly the task of every man in our own time.

The mankind that is alive today will have a very hard time of it, because we are not believers any more. Formerly we had been told "oh don't worry; God made you, God will know. Just go to church, believe, and you will be shown how everything is." Then, in the nineteenth century science moved in and said "don't worry; you are just a product of nature, and we will find out what you are, what you can do, and what you shall do." Years ago, when I was studying the nineteenth century (with one foot in it) I was always asking them:

"Are you so sure? That is an infinite proposition. I will not be told that in five million years we will know more, and then later we will know still more. Where is your answer?"

Because science, if it is real science, has one big advantage. It never speaks a last word. There is no last word in science. There is always a newer word. Tomorrow, a new discovery will be made. We can never take out of that an answer to our question of "What shall we do?", or "how shall we live?, what is the way to conduct one's own life?"

Now, there comes a second metaphysical assumption. It is not only an assumption, it has been proved and it has been shown. Great people like the ones we will consider have been able to show that they could conduct their own lives in such a way as to make those lives kind of like a work of art. To really conduct it, lead it, and we can also, because we have been born with the possible possession of life. We are not only alive Every animal is alive. Perhaps everything is alive. I suspect (although I am not so sure), that even stones are alive, because science might discover that there is a little movement within them that could be called spirit, and then they will find that they are alive. (That is not my distinction). My distinction is:

"Who has life?"

Man, and only man. He knows that he has life. It was put, in a very funny way, by Pascal who was a Christian and a great pessimist. Pascal said:

"Man is a very fragile being. The frailest being in the world. A bubble of air introduced into his veins will kill him, yet he is greater than the whole universe together, because he knows that he dies."

Now I would be a little bit more optimistic about it. I would say that if I know that I must die, that is merely the price I must pay in order to know that I live. Because to know that we live means to know that our life depends largely on ourselves. That we are supposed to do something with it, and that we can if we try hard enough. If somebody comes to me and tells me that God has done it all I will- say "fine, fine, you just might believe that, and it is wonderful for you, but you cannot convince me". "Just show me what your God commands you to do, and I will measure that with a merely humanistic yardstick." "How many people will you have to kill if you follow this God?" "My dear Christians, how many Muslims will you have to kill, or my dear Muslims, how many Christians?"

I am not very much in favor of propositions like that, because in the main I do not think they can prove it. There is no God who wants us to murder for whatever reason. We can at least go that far. Don't think I am a non-religious man. I'm not. But in order to find out who we are, what we are, what we can do, and above all "what do we want to do" (in the human sense) we don't need any God. If we needed one he would have already done his business. He has given us everything we need to find out for ourselves what we are supposed to do, and this finding out is what is called philosophy. It is the science of life as it is lived and as it is used, for whatever purposes.

So many writers now say that what we need most is a reorientation of our total character. One after the other say this. Even Fulbright recently came out and said: "My God, this is a task that is unbelievable, what we have before us." Indeed, it is Mr. Fulbright, because you will not be able to sit aside, but try to control the congress, try to control the president. Oh please, reinforce your powers so that we can reconsider the whole set up. President Kennedy once said a very bitter thing. Having come from Europe, and having witnessed, (at least in academic surroundings), so much freedom and so much humanity (that I thought to myself "my God, these are such fine institutions"), he said:

"If we are to hold up the Republic and democracy in this century then we must prove that it will be able to work, because it doesn't any more."

Those are bitter words, and many people feel them, and they get very skeptical about our institutions. To revise all of that we have to fall back upon minimum conditions of existence. What kind of existence can a human being accept, and what kind can he not accept? What can we do about it? How can we do better things?

To orient oneself in the world as one is being thrown into the world has always been a tough business. In our time it has become almost impossible, because the world is so complicated. Every day it gets more and more and more complicated, so we have to boil it down to absolutely necessary issues. We are trying to do that here, because we have shown that man always lives

with certain essential factors. He lives first with himself, and he has to find a new relationship to himself. He also has to find a new relationship with other people. We have to learn about the worth of a person and the possibilities of a person. We have to establish a relation to the Thou, to the other guy, to women, to men, and to other individuals. We have to establish human relations to society as a whole. Society is on its way to becoming united, to speak with one voice, and so it is no longer possible for the academy to fashion the face of society. Rather it is society that fashions the face of the academy. And what a face that will be, with the [most false] of reasons and the [most false] of tendencies in objects.

Reorientation means to accept the status of being utterly lost and of looking around and trying to evaluate everything anew. We are born into a world which we call a natural world i.e. nature, or what scientists call a world of natural occasions, or happenings. We still assume that nature is united and that we belong to nature at least as far as our body goes, and even to a large degree, as far as our mind goes. We have to use science to find out more about this natural world in which we are, to a certain degree, stuck.

We also live in a second world, a social world, which includes technology, industry, and everything that we have made out of nature. It is another kind of world that includes all of our human institutions, and we have to orient ourselves in it and establish new relationships between ourselves and our social institutions. Individual relations and social relations must all become human relations. Even our relation to nature must become humanized, because we are very very rough with nature. We ruin it in every place for our own advantages. We must come back to that certain respect for the life of nature that the Persians had, that Zarathustra had, and that the Greeks had. Trees are tremendously important and one has to establish a relationship with them, because they are a joy and they can be a joy. In one word, let us abolish every kind of public relation, and replace them with human relations. Public relations is business. It merely means you buy and sell. You sell any product, and that's fine, because it is a necessity. Those are the necessities of life so let's forget about it, and not take it so seriously. We take it so seriously, that we think we can take our human and social relations and measure them quantitatively. Fine idea. That means to drive every quality out of the world and out of human beings, and they can only be distinguished from everything else by quality. They can only be measured qualitatively, and that is a very hard thing to do. No effective result is possible, but the process of reorientation will have to go on.

I have been enumerating, up to now, the higher capacities of man. There is a last word to be said before we go into them, and that is there is not a single one, science, art, philosophy, politics, or religion, that does not have its root in the question of morality. We have to find our way back to that knowledge which we have lost. Everything we do involves an ethical and moral decision. We have to regain that freedom. We have believed for too long that we could be told what to do. They tried to tell us what to do on the authority of God; they tried to tell us what to do on the authority of science, and both no longer hold. We have to make up our own minds as to what we shall do and what we will do. That is the essence of freedom. It is not a freedom that is at hand. It is a freedom that has to be established, that has to be kept, and that has to be developed, or it vanishes like thin air.

A permanent academic effort is necessary. Fortunately in societies like our own, the students now number in the millions. Mass education is a big nuisance, but it is also a big hope. The hope is that all of them will get some portion of the academic spirit, which means a deep devotion of their own to the human possibilities of the highest order, of the creative order. As soon as they have gotten this self respect they will have the criteria by which to judge others who come along and claim a lie to be the truth. Because they are paid to do so.

So resistance can only start by first resisting this invasion which we are the object of, and then developing our own ways of life. We will need a lot of resistance, critical, and against every position taken. We will start here with the analysis of a few great turning points in human history. We are not interested in history as such, but there are a few great turning points where new ideas of how man is related to God, to the world, and to everything that is there, set in. You know that God is there. He is in our consciousness, don't worry. He is a possibility, and a strange possibility. We have to consider religious thinking, because here human beings try to establish a kind of relationship to God which has sometimes had wonderful results. How this is done we will have to see. A few great figures will guide us. They are all old guys (not very modern, or, on the other hand, more modern than any modern). If we look nearer into them they will guide us in this enterprise. Namely, of checking our human possibilities, and perhaps that is what we need. Because if we lose religion (and we lose the guidance of religion day by day), and if we lose science (and we lose the guidance of science day by day, because we are skeptical about it) then indeed we need that.

The first who are skeptical about science are the scientists themselves. The top scientists have gotten skeptical and know well that there are certain kinds of questions for which they will never have answers. These are the questions which are most interesting to human beings. Questions like the one concerning "what shall we do"?

Immanuel Kant once said that there are three metaphysical questions. The first question is "What can I know?" We check that by epistemology and the sciences: What can be known; what cannot be known; how can we know for sure; how can we know objectively; what hypotheses do we have to accept in order to know better; how can we reject a hypothesis? As soon as it doesn't work anymore, we must get a new one.

The second question is "What shall I do"? That means how shall I live? What should I use my life for? It assumes that my life is singular, you know, and it is an assumption, because we don't know where we come from or where we are going. That means we don't know if eternal life is impossible. We know that as little as we know it to be possible. We cannot reject the question out of hand, because we think we know better. We do not know better; we know less. The question of what shall I do is hard to answer, and so we have to find out more about the things we mentioned today in order to redirect ourselves within life. -

The third metaphysical question of Kant's is "For what may I hope?" Hoping is a big business with human beings, isn't it? Let's put it another way. "For what may I reasonably hope", in all situations?" I might, for instance, hope that mankind might become able to establish a lasting peace, and so on. These are questions of hope, but of reasoned hope.

All of this we have to try to face. It is a hard business. It becomes harder as far as the general business becomes harder. They all think we have to redesign everything, (not perhaps everything), but at least we have first to redesign ourselves. There is not a single question in all of the fields that does not relate to moral questions and to ethical questions, that does not go back to them. Ethics is a strange field. It teaches us how to handle ourselves, and what to do with ourselves, not what to do with others. What aims do we have? What can we really agree to? It is a long way before we will be able to find that out, but it all starts here. Now we are in the center of things, and the center of things is again man.