



XIII. A Dialogue With Students (1968)

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Several weeks ago I assigned to you a paper to write for me concerning the political crisis of our time. We only chose politics, because it is the most dangerous factor in our life and in our world. We have used it, so to speak, to plunge into the middle of our troubles, but also, because all of you wanted me to give you a say, so this paper is only an opportunity for you to speak up and make a statement about this course and about this situation. Much has been said up to this point. Please, take your own stand. Do you agree, or do you disagree? You are not political scientists, because no scientific knowledge is necessary here. Your only guide shall be common sense so please keep this aim in mind.

As for the necessary mid-term marks, don't worry about them. If you feel unjustly graded by me, attribute it to my ignorance, because I am still very much an ignorant man. This paper will only keep me up a bit on how you have been doing so consider these marks to be only preliminary. You will have your chance again at the end of the term.

So today, we are in the mid-term, very much in the middle of our problems and our conflicts. Our problems, which at worst can be scientifically solved, our conflicts, which are much harder to solve. Now I want to give you all a little time to think so that in a while everybody will be able to tell me the difference between a problem and a conflict.

What is the difference between a problem and a conflict? No answer!

A problem is, in a way, a scientific thing. In that sense we have no problems, because anything that can become a problem for us is capable of a solution. We may not know what the solution is but one thing is certain. A solution is there. Conflicts are an entirely different question. We cannot approach a conflict the way we approach a problem, because a conflict involves opposing forces of human will and not just natural or objective things that have an inherent order to them.

There is a very wonder[ful] problem that has recently been solved, and I am going to tell you about it, because it illustrates what I have just said. The man who solved this problem is Piet Hein, a Dane, and he was a friend of Niels Bohr, he was a friend of Einstein, but he himself is

not a real scientist. He is an engineer, not a scientist, and he occupied himself with the following question. If opposites cannot be united, as science suggests, and as all experience shows, then when is it possible to mediate them? He took, as his point of departure, a very famous problem in the history of mathematics, the problem of squaring the circle. Why can't we square the circle? What is a circle and what is a square and where do they lie? They are just ideas, ideas which our mind produces and with whose help we are able to rule and imitate nature. In this we have succeeded quite well, especially in physics, and now of course in biochemistry, because these ideas are also tools, and if we create a system of tools, such as the square and the circle (which we may take to be ideal figures, and which we can suppose to be opposites) then it seems almost reasonable to try to unify them. Now we know that the circle cannot be squared. For hundreds of years mathematicians tried until finally, in the nineteenth century, the German mathematician Lindemann proved that this was impossible, so finally there was peace in mathematics in Germany.

Then there comes this guy, Piet Hein, and he asks himself a question which can only be called the reciprocal. He says "we cannot square the circle, that much is true, but how about constructing a figure which is neither circular, nor rectangular, in other words, can we mediate the conflict between the two"? For all of human history every one of us has lived under the rule of the circle and the rectangle. The best example of this can be found in architecture. Here we find two things. The first, is the mile high skyscraper, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, which is, so to speak, the pinnacle of rectangular thinking. It hasn't been built yet but someday it will be. The second, is the geodesic dome of Fuller which is the complete, the extreme expression, of the idea of the circle. We have seen them built by the thousands and they are all very impressive.

These two examples represent, formally, in our mathematical thinking, the pinnacle of both sides of our contradiction. Now we have this engineer who constructs a figure which is neither. He undertook this problem, because he was asked to design a freeway for driving in Denmark which would represent the easiest and simplest possible course. It has been built in the meantime, and he has given it a name. He calls it the super-ellipse and when I first saw a picture of it before me I thought my God it reminds me of nothing so much as a perfect piece of music. In a way, it is a perfect piece of music, because it seems to be contra-mathematical. It is a kind of zero. If you look at it sharply from a certain angle, it seems to be quadrangular. Then, if you shift your angle, and look at it again, it seems to be a perfect ellipse. It is both, and it is neither. In Denmark they have started to build tables according to this curve and it turns out that they are able to seat fifteen percent more people around it than another table of comparable surface area. Not only that, just for fun, he takes this idea one step further. He designs what he calls the perfect egg. Now this is a funny egg. Do you remember the egg of Columbus, the egg that was supposed to stand on its tip. Well this man designed an egg, in three dimensions, that really can stand on its tip. It really sustains itself. It has become something of an intellectual game in Europe. If you roll the egg over on a table, it will stand up after an even number of rolls but on an uneven number it will not. It seems like a joke, but the thing itself is not a joke, because this idea could only come alive, could only come into existence, through the mind of a man who was not afraid to interfere with science by thinking philosophically. By saying, as

Socrates might have said, yes, we cannot unite opposites, but let us try to mediate between them. Let us try to create something that is neither, and yet which is still perfect.

I have given this to you only as an illustration of the extent to which science is beginning to lean on philosophy again in order to become more sure of its own results. But now my friends, it is your turn. You have some questions for me. No --- don't be so silent. Bring something. Not everyone has the same ideas.

Question: Last week you mentioned something about the family unit. You said that a parent should be his child's best friend. I would like you to clarify that because I disagree with you!

Answer: Yes, sure, I saw it already on your face when I said it. I meant only that the older man, be the parent or otherwise, has one basic obligation to the young, and that is to be their friends. To look out for their problems and for the challenges they get in life so that, with the experience that can only come out of age, he can help them to meet those challenges successfully. If he can do that, if he can help to guide them, then he will show himself to be a real friend in the highest sense, because a friend is by definition, a guide and a helper. He should not only think about himself. Rather, he should take the whole of his experience so that this boy or that girl can be guided and helped by it, because without that help we are all lost in this world. One of the greatest poems ever written in the twentieth century, by Bertolt Brecht, says exactly that, because every creature needs help from all creatures. This is really what is meant when you speak of the coming community of man. If a father can tell himself that he has really done what is best to help his son or his daughter, that he has acted in their interests, then he has no regrets, and they will appreciate it. Because this understanding takes great patience and we are all so impatient today, which makes it all the more important. It is a tremendous force, this patience, and it is even necessary for a teacher, because any teacher who does not face the problems his students must face as if he were young isn't really worth his salt, regardless of whatever knowledge he has, and the giving of this guidance and help is what Socrates called friendship.

Student: In other words a friend is more of a guide.

Answer: Right, right, and he is also a critic but a real critic, because he shows so much concern.

Student: And that is why Socrates called his students companions rather than students.

Answer: Exactly, because friendship means love without eros. The eros is overcome. It was there in the beginning, but it has been overcome and it doesn't count any more. What counts now is the mutual insight of two personalities who recognize and respect each other as such; who in effect can say to each other "I guarantee you the development of your personality and you guarantee me the development of mine". That is the basis of all real community thinking and such a community can only start with friends, in the relation of the elder with the younger.

Question: Socrates keeps serving as a point of reference for the individual and yet you were very critical of Kierkegaard's notion of inwardness and accused it of being merely an escape. Can you comment on this apparent conflict?

Answer: I cannot really speak about Kierkegaard yet. We will have to wait until we come to that book I assigned to you by Jaspers, where he discusses the breakdown of metaphysics, not only in Kierkegaard, but in Marx and Hegel as well. We will first have to analyze this before I can answer your question.

Question: Can you actually say that Socrates was right in choosing death rather than continuing to try to live under the conditions that had been given to him? Isn't it idealistic for one to say that he would prefer to die rather than to live under laws that he doesn't agree with?

Answer: No, because you see, Socrates didn't make any decision for death. He never meant or said that. He only meant and said life has been made impossible for me. They ask me either to stop philosophizing in the streets, or to go and escape into exile. I cannot go into exile, because if the Athenians cannot tolerate me, if they cannot guarantee me my life and my specific occupation, then it can be guaranteed to nobody, and that means it is time for me to die. That is no decision for death.

Student: But it seems to be idealistic in terms of the fact that he didn't try to continue to live under those conditions?

Answer: My dear friend, he was a Greek, and his action was a Greek action. The Greeks had a word for a life lover. By that I mean somebody who loves life at any price. They said a man who loves life at any price is a slave and not a free man. Life under certain conditions; namely, the conditions of slavery, cannot be accepted and should not be accepted. One has to live and one has to die, but a slave is one who prefers life to any other thing regardless of the conditions under which it is given. It is this fact that lies at the basis of Socrates' action.

Question: Many scientists say today that man is merely a machine in the sense that any definition that can be given of man can be satisfied by self reproducing automata. Is there such a thing as a definition of man that cannot be satisfied?

Answer: Philosophy says and teaches that it is impossible to give a definition of man, because a definition only consists of an answer to the question "What is man"? It never occupies itself with the question "Who is man"? Any explanation of man has to take into account both of those questions and no definition can. As to the first question, we have been given endless answers. One right after the other, but any man who gives an answer to such a question must realize one thing. The very moment he makes his statement he must qualify it by saying: "Up until now man has been this, but now that I have said that, he becomes more than this", because man is still more than any statement that can be made about him, and that is why you can go endlessly on and never have an answer to the question "Who is man"? But that doesn't mean that the answers one gives to the first question are worthless. They by no means are. They enrich our knowledge and open up new wonders before us.

It is such a funny thing that modern science, which at the end of the nineteenth century, prided itself upon having answered all questions, should have broken down completely until it was faced with one miracle after another. Today one only has to look at the newspapers. The Nobel prize has just been awarded to three chemists who have advanced a new theory of molecular structure. It is a sheer miracle that such small things are alive and that we can build models of

them. Any scientific discovery only makes the world and life more miraculous. But we are concerned here only with the question of who is that damned scoundrel who has done all of these things. Because he has done them, and will continue to do them. By he, I of course don't mean we personally. No human being can do everything, but a lot of men have done astonishing things, have performed astonishing miracles of the mind, and will go on doing so, unless, that is, we bomb ourselves back into the stone age, as some have suggested that we do to the Vietnamese. It is unbelievable how such vulgar things can be said in view of the danger that we are all in. They don't realize that if we bomb the Vietnamese back into the stone age we have started to bomb ourselves back into the stone age.

We know now that no war can be won anymore. War doesn't pay. Crime still pays, and more so, because we are busy with other things rather than looking at crime and attempting to find ways to prevent crime. The recipes and prescriptions that are given to us are easy. Just butt their heads in or shoot them down, that is all we have to do. And what will come out of this? What will come is an endless illegal war in our own country. If we don't begin to look for the roots of crime, again, we are lost, and as philosophic people we can look for the roots. That is why I say that in our age it is the task of every one of us to become philosophers, not in the sense of Plato, as philosopher kings, but in the sense of Socrates as philosophizing beings, so that we will not be taken in by the great scientific events and over-rate them, or by the cheap premises that many would like to have us believe. Look at the recent events in Czechoslovakia. What wonderful new theories the Russians have for them. They tell us it was all done for the sake of humanity. Well if this is what we must do for the sake of humanity then to hell with them. We cannot do much for humanity, because we cannot give freedom. Freedom is not given. Freedom is conquered, by every human being and by every nation. A given freedom is worthless. We have given freedom to many African nations and look what has been done with it. Take the case of Biafra and look at what is happening there. They build new nations, and what grotesque and monstrous nations they are, because each of them follow in our own footsteps.

No, we must make the ground clear beneath our own feet before we move onto the dirt of others. It is the same for individuals and all becoming personalities, because we are not born as personalities. Every human being is born an individual but he must become a personality, so the development of a personality, or what Socrates would have called a soul, is something that is the task of everyone. To have accomplished such a task is to make one life significant and to have used it well. That is what Socrates called a man, and that is what puts him into conflict with nearly every philosopher with the exception of Kant and Nietzsche.

Question: You spoke before of the collapse of metaphysics in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Of all the possible solutions that Nietzsche could have chosen, why did he choose the eternal return? Why did he want everything to re-occur exactly as it had happened before?

Answer: You see, Nietzsche started with the insight of the breakdown of all morality, an insight we have only begun to understand. Today we have a crisis of morality. Nietzsche did not attempt to investigate why there was no new morality that we would be able to use. That would have led him back to Socrates, back to philosophical ethical questions. He did not do that. He was much too eager, too fanatically eager, to overcome this crisis, so starting with the understanding that all of the old ideas, God, Christianity, the cosmos, had fallen down, he made very daring

attempts to create new metaphysical ideas. He landed with superman. He landed with the will to power. They are all misfits, because he did not see that they are aesthetic ideas, the ideas of an artist, which is why they could never work. Socrates knew very well why he kept away from the arts. We know that before he died the gods told him that he had to become a music man and so he started to make some poems. The poems are all lousy, poor imitations of the tales of Aesop where he tries to make them rhyme and so on. But there is something else here. The helpless old man before his death still knew that there was something lacking in him. Because an artist is a man who gives soul to the world through his creations. He is, so to speak, in competition with God, and it is this fact that Nietzsche could never forget, and what led him to mistake aesthetic for ethical ideas.

Student: But there is something that bothers me in all of this. Wasn't Nietzsche himself aware of the futility of trying to find an absolute answer in aesthetic values? Because at one place in Zarathustra he says that for all of his life he thought of the importance of the will to power, but then, he goes on to say in the same breath, "the will is a prisoner". If he actually believed in the primacy of aesthetic ideas, why is the will a prisoner?

Answer: My God! Marx would have said, what he could have said about himself, that we are all the slaves of the ideas that have been taught to us in our youth. Nietzsche could never forget the great Greek dream of the cosmos and his whole life was one tremendous attempt to re-establish that dream. In a way, this will was justified because I take a similar position when I say that the world is not a cosmos. We have found that out. But there is no one who can tell us that we should not try to make it one. Now Nietzsche wanted an active philosophy, that is he wanted, in a way, what I want when I say that philosophy doesn't exist. Philosophy is only the history of what philosophizing has done. You have to do your own philosophizing, because only then can it become an activity of the highest creativity; namely, a self-creating activity. That is, an activity by which man can make himself.

Nietzsche's greatest mistake was that, apart from all of his speculations, he should have known better, because he was the most accomplished Greek philologist of his time. Unfortunately certain key terms of Greek philosophy were not entirely clear, and so he misunderstood Socrates as completely as he can possibly be misunderstood. He considered himself to be the great anti-Platonist. Nietzsche was much more of a Platonist than he thought. If he had also thought of himself as an anti-Socratic, one could have said to him "you have much more to learn from Socrates than you know, only you don't recognize it". This is an old problem with philosophers. One must always be skeptical of the things they say about each other.

You see, Heidegger accomplished what Nietzsche could never have accomplished. I mean he really knows the Greek terms now. What Aletheia means is "truth that is not hidden", the not hidden, or naked truth, which is not at all what Nietzsche took it to mean. Only Heidegger discovered that with the help of Aristotle, whom Nietzsche did not really understand either, so all of this led to his great mistake

Question: You talked about certain forms of dreams as being escapes. Isn't that part of our particular human make up; I mean, I'm not trying to define man in this way but rather only asking whether or not dreaming is one of man's defining characteristics?

Answer: There are two sorts of dreams; those of sleeping and waking, and it is the second kind that interests me most, because in a sense we cannot live without it. Without the capability to dream while awake, to dream ahead, so to speak, nothing much would ever have become of man, because man always has to try to transcend himself, he must do it, and without this capacity he cannot. But to distinguish between man's dreams is a business that is extremely hard. That fantasy, that gift of dreaming must be there; this much we know, but when it is an escape and when it is not an escape is another question.

How long does a metaphysical dream last? We have seen it last with whole civilizations. Here I am quoting Oswald Spengler who was an overbearing scoundrel of a Prussian school teacher but this man had a tremendous mind. He wanted to found a science which he called cultural morphology. He did not found a science but it could have very well become one, and even Toynbee still today credits him with having been right in this respect. For many years in my youth I wanted to add a new science which at that time I called cultural morphology after Spengler, and for this, the scientific possibility is correct. By this I only mean that all phenomenon which are produced by one culture or civilization (let us say the Chinese) have a relation to the phenomenon produced by other civilizations. That there is a hidden unity in all of our thinking, scientific, artistic, philosophic, and political which produces like phenomenon in all fields so that we can re-relate them and learn from them. This fact is there and Spengler contributed most to the discovery of this fact. Why is it that the eighteenth century, which is the greatest century in the development of mathematics, also the greatest century in the development of music? Should there not be a certain relation between these two fields of phenomena that would produce such a development? That was the earnest question of this scoundrel, and that question is justified. It is a worthwhile matter to pursue, even though it takes us astray from our main task, because we are not here to study cultural morphology although it is an exciting thing.

Student: But aren't psychologists doing exactly that today, finding cultural unity among various peoples through tests and so on?

Answer: Oh yes, they all contribute to it, not only psychology. But this is not what I mean by cultural morphology. This science can only start with the observation of artistic phenomenon. I will give you an example which I use, very ironically, in my Greek course. Do you know who won the Battle of Marathon? The Greek Temple. Why? Because if you look at the military column that the Greeks built symbolizing their citizenship, you will see that it is a new form which is identical with the form of the Greek Temple and its columns. In the Greek Temple every column is an individual. What does that mean? It means that as citizens all men are the same, as individuals, they are all different. This is a tremendous architectural idea, to conceive of such a thing in all of its symbolic significance, and then to employ such a form in military tactics, which the Athenians did for centuries. It is this kind of thinking which led Spengler to the idea of the "soul" of a culture, which, you know, develops like a flower, and so on. This is of course a metaphysical speculation, and we will take it up again when we come to the mystic, not myth, but mystic experiences of man, and more importantly, in the obscurity of history, because history has such dreams. Scientists shouldn't dream, even though they do, for they can dream only until

they have discovered the next dream, but then, the dream will become another hypothesis, and so it will continue. But a historical dream is a very different kind of thing.

Question: You say that man is changeable. How do you know this to be true? If I can read Homer and recognize the men about whom he writes then how is it that man has changed? Doesn't that show that man is the same?

Answer: No! It only shows that there is a certain basis for all human experience which is the same. But this basis changes permanently. Metaphysically speaking, there is always a new truth waiting to be discovered. Today we are lacking that truth, but we can be certain it is there, because the discovery of metaphysical truth is something that we have done for centuries. In this sense there is nothing unique about our own age, but only in this sense. One could make the same criticism of Dante's age were we not aware of the significance of what Dante had done. Art exists, so to speak, in order to preserve and keep the highest personal experiences of man. It has nothing to do with the possession of truth. It is only a way to truth. To use your example of Homer, we less understand Homer today than we do his heroes, but this is only because we do not have an answer to the question "What is artistic creation"? It is one of the highest capabilities of man and yet we still do not know what it is. This is, to use one of Kant's ideas, the magic of all great art, a magic that he himself first became aware of. Even Karl Marx once said "I can explain why it is that Homer had to write the way he did. I can also explain how it was that Homer came to appear in history when he did, but why he still impresses me and moves me, that I cannot explain". And this is the essential question, because all other questions about art can be answered in a scientific sense.

Why a poem touches us, why Homer after centuries can still move us; this is, as Kant said, "the last magic left to man", and he said it in the hope that men would keep this sense of magic, because philosophically speaking we can only say that art touches us, because it touches the truth, but only touches the truth. As soon as it tries to take hold of the truth it becomes perverted and is ruined. If Shakespeare could have sat down, and developed a philosophy of art as it is contained in the dramas of Shakespeare, it would have been a bloody failure. We would be able to contradict him at any time. He never did such a thing and he knew why it was that he could not do such a thing, because he was a poet and he knew that this was not the task of poetry. He just touched the truth, again and again and again, and it is the truth about human life and the conflicts of human life. That is the task of all poetry.

So in a way, I really cannot answer your question, because to do so I would have to explain to you why it is that Homer still touches me, and I don't know if I can do that. I have tried, and I can give you my answer, which I don't think much of, but nevertheless, the artist tries to show us a piece of the world as it would be if it were perfect; that is, as it would be if being and meaning were the same. In a work of art they are the same. Artistic form and artistic expression is just this unity, and that is why it is unexplainable. This is what constitutes the magic we were speaking of, and the magic is independent of time, place, or culture. If you knew Sanskrit and could read some of the songs of the Vedas you would see that they would touch you just as much. You can go even farther back. When Picasso was taken to see the ancient cave paintings he said "nothing more perfect has ever been done". No, he was right. Because nothing more perfect can be done. A real work of art, a genuine work of art, a meaningful work of art, is the

most perfect thing we have. And that is why all art is equal, and why in a sense, there is no development in art. There is only enlargement and the covering of new fields which is, in itself, an infinite and permanently changing process, but the basis of human experience which lies at its center is the same, and so that is why we will always have beauty produced by man, why we will always have truth touched by man, unless that is, we finally decide to bomb ourselves back into the stone age.