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HUMAN REALIZATION:

AN INTRODUCTION TO
THE PHILOSOPHY OF MAN

JOHN F. KAVANAUGH

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Chapter One

The Philosophical Enterprise

*"I suffer thirst, Govinda, and on this long Samana path my thirst has not grown less. I have always thirsted for knowledge. I have always been full of questions. Year after year I have questioned the Brahmins, year after year I have questioned the holy Vedas I have spent a long time and have not yet finished, in order to learn this, Govinda: that one can learn nothing. There is, so I believe, in the essence of everything, something that we cannot call learning. There is, my friend, only a knowledge—that is everywhere, that is Atman, that is in me and you and in every creature, and I am beginning to believe that this knowledge has no worse enemy than the man of knowledge, than learning."*¹

Hermann Hesse

Perhaps the greatest service to philosophy would be to change its name. The very tone of the word itself calls to mind a vast spectrum of meanings, most of which seem dark, remote, and even unworthy of consideration. We might picture an isolated thinker, within the walls of his room, trying to save the appearances of a world which he does not understand. A great system-builder might come to mind, one who has now been relegated to abstruse footnotes and erudite commentaries. Or, more immediately, we might conceive lists of

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philosophical courses imposed upon us by the academicians who seem to have little contact at all with the demands of the present.

These are only some of the notions which a person might carry with himself when he confronts the discipline of philosophy today. He may often spend his time going through the useless motions of a formal education in order to be handed an equally useless sheet of onion-skinned paper which is somehow supposed to validate his existence. A great part of his formal education will have been made up of what has been called philosophy, in which he memorized answers to questions which he himself had never asked—or perhaps, which never should have been asked by anyone in the first place. He will have taken philosophy courses which most often had turned out being mistakes on all levels—experientially, pedagogically, and humanistically.

And so it is often the case with all of us. We seem to study the philosophy of man in grand isolation from the sociological, psychological, and behavioral sciences. We see little connection between philosophy and history, myth, literature, or mystery. Philosophy must be a “science,” a respectable discipline with subjects and credentials of its own. We are often expected to be more concerned with the problems of “the one and the many,” the development of logical atomism, and linguistic or metaphysical analyses than with the problem of the philosopher himself who once thought it important to question his meaning and the horizon of his potentialities as a man. And just as frequently, we spend our time trying to remember what a philosopher said, rather than trying to understand what drove the philosopher to *want* to say anything in the first place.

This is not in the least to make an indictment of all that has gone before us, or to set up a straw man who will later be destroyed by our own brilliance. Rather, we want to make sure that we first know *why* we are driven to philosophy as a sheer human exigency. To begin with, why do we question at all; what is involved in the act of questioning; and what are the primordial questions that we ask? Consequently, before we even begin to talk about the community of great minds or the perennial philosophical problems, we must first come to the realization that philosophy is at root the pre-eminently

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personal affair of question-asking.

The Discipline of Questioning

The act of questioning, of wanting to know, is the initiation to philosophy. And most fundamental here are the immediate data that I discover about myself in this very act of initiation—I want to know who and what I am. I want to know and understand my identity. This is what we might call the beginnings of a philosophy of man, in which we try to discover the meaning of the self, of man, of the questioner. We must ask ourselves what the significance of questioning, of wanting, and of knowing actually is. Does questioning imply a liberation from and drive out of the confines of the self? Does questioning imply an immediate fundamental relatedness to what is other than the self? Does questioning demand a self-transcending ground for its impetus and intelligibility?

Following these questions, if I come to an understanding of my identity as a man and of my potentialities as a questioner, I will be almost necessarily led to the realm of behavior and action. For a man to ask of himself, "What am I to do?" he must first know who he is and what he can be; and for a man to act morally, he must act in accordance with his understanding of what his true identity and potentialities are. In following this out he might be led to ask whether questioning itself might be seen as the basic human demand for value in the world. Will the understanding of himself as a knowing, loving, related being actually become the immediate basis of value in his life and the standard of his behavior? And at this point, the reflective person is thrust into what might be called the world of ethics.

Moreover, there are many other worlds open to the questioner. He might ask what it *means* to question, why he is driven to question, what it means to be without all the answers, or what it means actually to be, rather than not be at all. He might ultimately ask why there is a *must* quality to his questioning and whether his insatiable drive to question demands an inexhaustible ground of and response to his identity as a questioner.

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All of this is merely to say that philosophy begins with the questioning self—not in the sense that we are looking for an absolutely indubitable starting point, but in the sense that any starting point must be experientially authenticated. It is not in the spirit of morbid introspection or egocentricity that the philosopher begins with the self; it is rather in the spirit of the Socratic imperative to know oneself that he begins there. In fact, the philosopher's conclusion might well be that the self is truly found in exocentric dynamisms.

Likewise, our emphasis upon the self and its identity is not meant to imply that philosophical community, precision, and discipline are not necessary. If the philosophical community and its heritage are ignored, a basic denial of one's identity and historicity is operative. We could never hope, nor should we want to hope, for a vacuum from which we might begin. If this were the case, a beginning might never be made. Similarly, without careful analysis and exacting reflection, our insights and conclusions could most probably turn into sheer conjecture, sentimentality, or philosophical warm blankets. It is not just a question of feeling good about life, nor is it a question of pursuing relevance; rather the philosophical enterprise is one of pursuing truth. For it is the truth of what one actually is which will set one free—be it palatable or not, be it a comfort or a threat.

With all of these considerations and provisos made, however, it remains true that philosophy would never have come into existence had it not been the most personal of human endeavors. In this sense, if philosophy is to die, humanity will wither away not long after. Cessation of questioning can only bring stagnation and the arresting of growth. That is why philosophy as we understand it here is so radically important. Its grandeur does not lie in the fact that great systems have been and will be constructed. Its achievement is not that some perennial "melody-line" has dominated all of western man's thought. Rather, philosophy's greatness lies in the individual philosopher's drive toward the truth; it is in the complexity of "takes" upon the reality in which we are immersed and through which we live; it is the music of the fugue with the incessant counterpoint of questioning and answering. And it did not begin with an answer.

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The Discipline of Liberation

At an even more fundamental level, philosophy as a discipline of questioning implies a release—perhaps even a revolt—from historical, sociological, and psychological encapsulation. By the very fact that a question arises, I am liberated from the chains of unquestioning acceptance of whatever is at hand. I can say “wait a second” to the present situation or the status quo. I am able to place myself at distance from the press of all the data and stimuli that are immediately beckoning me. And what is more, I can resist the currents which pull me toward thoughtless conformity.

In philosophical questioning, then, I am liberated from blind adherence to what is present or what is promised as reward. A horizon of possibilities rather than necessity is before me. To the reflective mind, the society in which he lives is no longer an imprisoning womb offering the cessation of growth with its gifts of security and status. His faith in man or God is no longer adhered to or dismissed out of tyrannizing fear or moral authoritarianism. Rather, the world around the questioning philosopher is an invitation to be listened to and responded to. By placing himself at a distance from his environment, his historicity, and his pre-philosophical prejudices, the reflective man can be said to be effecting a personal revolt at its most radical level.

Herein the philosopher initiates a revolution, not of negation, but of affirmation—by opening himself to the fullest possibilities that might be offered to him. His movement is not one of refusal to recognize the past and present structures, for these are part of his very identity as a historical event; rather philosophical revolt is a breaking out of the confines of those structures when they threaten to become a priori necessities which close viable avenues to the truth.

Therefore, since personal philosophical revolution is the affirmation of one's self possession, only a failure in fidelity to the basic openness which questioning entails could possibly lead to a stifling of the self in hopeless negation. Quite to the contrary, the purified act of philosophical revolt will rather lead to the construction of a personally validated world-view which emerges from

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the recognition of one's own selfhood.

Involved, then, in the concept of philosophy as liberation is the moment of confronting and embracing the past which is part of us—a taking possession of it—and the equally important affirmation of the future as creative self-project. Considered in this light, philosophy is fundamentally a subversive activity, carrying the connotations of both “underneathness” (continuity) and a turning from under (organic diversification). Here is not an obsessive reaction or blind revolution against the past as some externalized threatening force. Nor do we have an acquiescent acceptance of present structures rooted in fear of precarious questioning. Rather, in subversive philosophy, there are both lines of stabilization (openness to our own historicity and to what *is*) and of fluidity (openness to what can and should be).

Perhaps if we could manage to see philosophy in this light, much of our present disenchantment would cease. We will see that it is not a question of updating any particular system or of making philosophy more scientific and objective. What one needs is the conviction that philosophy is the discipline of man's restlessness, of his drive to question in its most fundamental sense. To philosophize is to attempt to take a posture with respect to one's self and one's condition. In our realization of this fact, we will see that diversity rather than conformity or unity will be a primary characteristic of philosophy—not that truth itself is necessarily diverse, but that philosophy as a discipline of free questioners is. For once one has realized that philosophy cannot be a spectator-endeavor, one must come to grips with the fact that historicity will continually emerge within the individual's confrontation with the real world around him. Nevertheless, although one's history, environment, and disposition constantly assert themselves in reflection, one retains a methodological and philosophical vehicle for challenging them—if he remains faithful to the meaning of questioning.

Our emphasis, then, is on the process, the questioning, rather than the certified answer, as the basis of our drive to understand and our fidelity to true philosophical endeavor. Perhaps to demand absolute certainty and philosophical conformity is to present philosophy with its greatest threat, for in finding neither we may

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trap ourselves by these very demands in a snare of futile skepticism; and on the other hand, if we claim success in achieving absolute certitude, we may be guilty of ignoring the process, growth, and incompleteness of the human condition in our very flight from its contingency and temporality—and all of this is to flee from our own identity. As Marcel says in his *Philosophy of Existence*:

*This perpetual beginning again, which may seem scandalous to the scientist or to the technician, is an inevitable part of all genuinely philosophical work; and perhaps it reflects in its own order the fresh start of every new awakening and of every birth. Does not the very structure of duration and of life show that philosophical thought is unfaithful to reality whenever it attempts to proceed from conclusion to conclusion towards a Summa which, in the end, needs only to be expounded and memorized paragraph by paragraph?*²

Such an insight, however, unfortunately misses many of us completely. This is why our greatest concern must be to purify the notions of philosophy we now have. Changing its name, needless to say, will not help. What is needed is the fundamental realization of its radically personal meaning grounded in the identity of the questioner himself.

The Discipline of Personhood

If I am to be a philosopher, then it is I who must philosophize. Even if there were an absolutely perfect philosophical system worked out once and for all, it would be useless to me as a reflective being unless I myself shall have done it, thought it, made it my own. For truth, whether objective or not, must be *my* truth if it is to be operative at all in my life. This is the “one thing necessary” that Kierkegaard constantly reminds us of. One’s life is one’s own unique creative project; and the formation of it must be grounded in the reflective understanding, interpretation, and communication of one’s basic experience. Herein lies the uniqueness and originality of every philosopher.

Moreover, since I am a member of a species-event with

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communal needs, experiences, and drives, my philosophizing will be the basis of discourse with other men. And this discourse itself will be a part of my experiential confrontation of the world; therefore it will demand listening, responding, consideration, and comparison with my own understanding of experience. With these things in mind, it becomes clear that I am not methodologically turned in upon myself. Quite the contrary, philosophical dialogue and historical study are essential parts of the manifold of total experiential data which I am to consider.

If I am able to understand my need for such discourse, I will realize that my own reflection can never be definitively finished. I am an evolutionary event, historically placed. This means not only that I am influenced by and profit from the past—whether it be the past of Plato, Augustine, Thomas, Kant, or Dewey—but that I must never stop interpreting, judging, evaluating, and building my philosophy and my creative life-project. Herein will lie my greatest accomplishment as a philosopher and as a man. This is each individual person's task, as Buber calls it, in "the actualization of his unique, unprecedented, and never-recurring potentialities, and not the repetition of something that another, and be it even the greatest, has already achieved."³

Such is the goal of the philosopher who begins with a question and investigates all that the dynamism of questioning implies. But in trying to solve the riddles of identity and action, he will open himself not only to his own experience and that of other philosophers, but to anything which might be a vehicle for answering the questions of man—the world of literature, of history, of myth, and of the positive sciences. For in each of these worlds man is similarly driven to ask the primary questions: "Who am I?" and "What am I to do?"

If we look at ourselves or listen to the testimony of other men, we can see that the human person is driven, by his very personhood, to know and to do something about himself. This occurs not only in the quixotic man who wishes to "dream the impossible dream," or achieve the Grail, but also in the man who weeps over the world because there is no more to conquer and in the countless others who somehow seek to validate their meaning and their existence. All of

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these dreams are simply the reiterations of primary questions in an intensely practical, existential manner. Every man wants to know himself and do something about himself. Whether it is with Viktor Frankl speaking of "man's search for meaning," or Eric Erikson of "identity and the life-cycle," or Rollo May of "man's search for himself," we see the fact of man's perduring self-questioning. Sociologists speak of the "organization man," the "lonely crowd," and the alienated worker. Historians record the questioning of man in Greek myth and drama, Elizabethan tragedy, legendary heroics, cults of tragic or courtly lovers, and the revolutionary promise. Goethe speaks of the Faustian man, Dostoevsky of the moral hero, Faulkner of the noble individual, and Tennessee Williams of the confused searcher. Our great film directors are epitomized in the endless questionings of Bergman, the sterile loneliness of Antonioni, and the disillusionment of Fellini. The philosophical act of questioning actually saturates our experience. One might even be led to say that the intensity of human endeavor and creativity is based upon the intensity of the quest for one's identity and purpose.

Perhaps all of this arises from the tenuousness of our existence, our lack of rootedness, and the awareness of our contingency. Being spread out in time and space, endlessly incompleting, and consciously present to our own insufficiency, our personhood is characterized by a "calling out." But whatever the reason be, question we must—and we demand answers.

All of us in one way or another, explicit philosopher or common man, try to realize the demands of knowing and wanting that are one with our being. The drive to understand is implicit in the blandishments of power, manipulation, and influence as well as open presence to the world. The drive to do something about it is as hiddenly insatiable in our acts of appropriation and acquisition as it is in the moments of defenseless unfolding and giving. Even if we try to escape the pressure of personhood's demands, their very presence is operative in our flight to unquestioning security or non-committal tentativeness.

Whether our answers succeed or fail will depend on the discovery of that "I" of which we constantly speak. It is only when this question of the "I" is placed and its answer is pursued diligently

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and reflectively that some resolution might be found.

Questioning, then, is the starting point of philosophy and the continuing force behind its development. This is methodologically true because the philosophical moment cannot begin until one has questioned the present state of affairs. Psychologically, moreover, it seems to be the foundation of man's search for his own identity and meaning. Finally, in the act of questioning, I know where to begin existentially. I am a questioner, one who *wants*, one who wants to *know*, one who wants to *act* upon knowing. To all of this we might now apply the term, *person*. And now it remains for the philosopher to reflect upon what personhood means, what knowing implies about himself, and what wanting in its fullest context might entail. Thus, in seeing the dynamisms and demands of questioning, the one who philosophizes will hopefully come to know more about himself as the source and center of these activities.

Such is the philosophical enterprise, at least in part. Realizing that his philosophy must be his own, realizing that his aim is to understand, interpret, and communicate his experience, the man who has a love of wisdom, who pursues the answers to the questions of identity and action, will not reach the point of no return when, once his more immediate dreams and desires are fulfilled, he can find nothing else worth living for.

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?
Karl Jaspers^A

What philosophy is and how much it is worth are matters of controversy. One may expect it to yield extraordinary revelations or one may view it with indifference as a thinking in the void. One may look upon it with awe as the meaningful endeavour of exceptional men or despise it as the superfluous broodings of dreamers. One may take the attitude that it is the concern of all men, and hence must be basically simple and intelligible, or one may think of it as hopelessly difficult. And indeed, what goes by the name of philosophy provides examples to warrant all these conflicting judgments.

For the scientific-minded, the worst aspect of philosophy is that it produces no universally valid results; it provides nothing that we can know and thus possess. Whereas the sciences in their fields have gained compellingly certain and universally recognized insights, philosophy, despite thousands of years of endeavour, has done nothing of the sort. This is undeniable: in philosophy there is no generally accepted, definitive knowledge. Any insight which for cogent reasons is recognized by all has ipso facto become scientific knowledge and ceased to be philosophy; its relevance is limited to a special sphere of the knowable.

Nor is philosophical thought, like the sciences, characterized by progressive development. Beyond any doubt, we are far more advanced than Hippocrates, the Greek physician. But we are scarcely entitled to say that we have progressed beyond Plato. We have only advanced beyond his materials, beyond the scientific findings of which he made use. In philosophy itself we have scarcely regained his level.

It lies in the very nature of philosophy, as distinguished from the sciences, that in any of its forms it must dispense with the

unanimous recognition of all. The certainty to which it aspires is not of the objective, scientific sort, which is the same for every mind; it is an inner certainty in which a man's whole being participates. Whereas science always pertains to particular objects, the knowledge of which is by no means indispensable to all men, philosophy deals with the whole of being, which concerns man as man, with a truth which, wherever it is manifested, moves us more deeply than any scientific knowledge.

Systematic philosophy is indeed bound up with the sciences. It always reckons with the most advanced scientific findings of its time. But essentially philosophy springs from a different source. It emerges before any science, wherever men achieve awareness.

The existence of such a *philosophy without science* is revealed in several striking ways:

First: In philosophical matters almost everyone believes himself capable of judgment. Whereas it is recognized that in the sciences study, training, method are indispensable to understanding, in philosophy men generally assume that they are competent to form an opinion without preliminary study. Our own humanity, our own destiny, our own experience strike us as a sufficient basis for philosophical opinions.

This notion that philosophy must be accessible to all is justified. The circuitous paths travelled by specialists in philosophy have meaning only if they lead men to an awareness of being and of his place in it.

Second: Philosophical thought must always spring from free creation. Every man must accomplish it for himself.

A marvellous indication of man's innate disposition to philosophy is to be found in the questions asked by children. It is not uncommon to hear from the mouths of children words which penetrate to the very depths of philosophy. A few examples:

A child cries out in wonderment, "I keep trying to think that I am somebody else, but I'm always myself." This boy has touched on one of the universal sources of certainty, awareness of being through awareness of self. He is perplexed at the mystery of his I, this