

Bertrand Russell

WISDOM OF THE WEST

I



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Bertrand Russell

WISDOM OF THE WEST

A Historical Survey of Western Philosophy in Its Social and
Political Setting

I



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藏书章



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Hylas and the Nymphs by John William Waterhouse (1896).



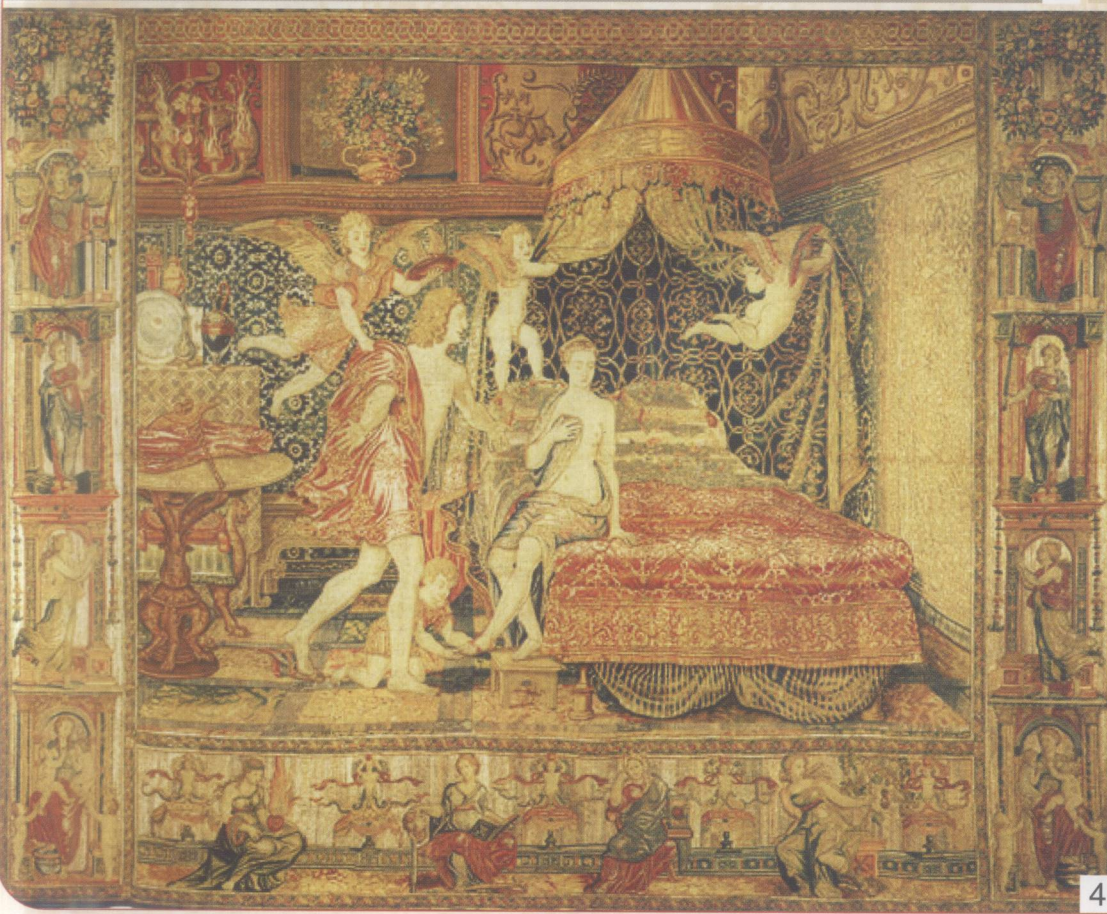
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1. Architectural Frieze, second quarter of 12th century, French; Possibly from the abbey church at Cluny, Burgundy. 2. The Challenge of the Pierides, ca. 1600, by Karel van Mander (Netherlandish, 1548–1606). 3. The Belles Heures of Jean of France, Duc of Berry, 1406–8 or 1409. 4. The Bridal Chamber of Herse, ca. 1550, Made in the Workshop of Willem de Pannemaker (Flemish, flourished 1535–78). 5. Saint Gabre Manfus Kiddus with the wild beasts to whom he preached—ETHIOPIA'S RICH ARTISTIC LEGACY. When he found a bird (shown flying perilously close to his face) dying of thirst, he allowed it to drink water from his eye. 6. A woman by marriage bed, in a frieze from Pompeii.



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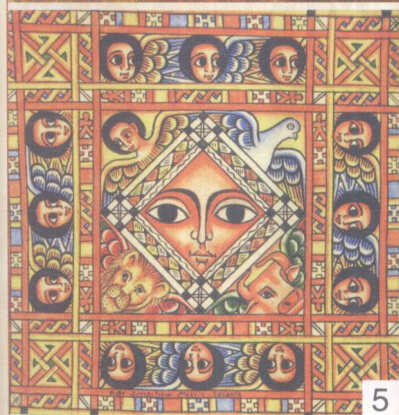
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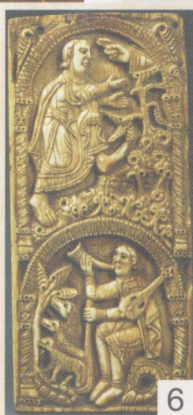
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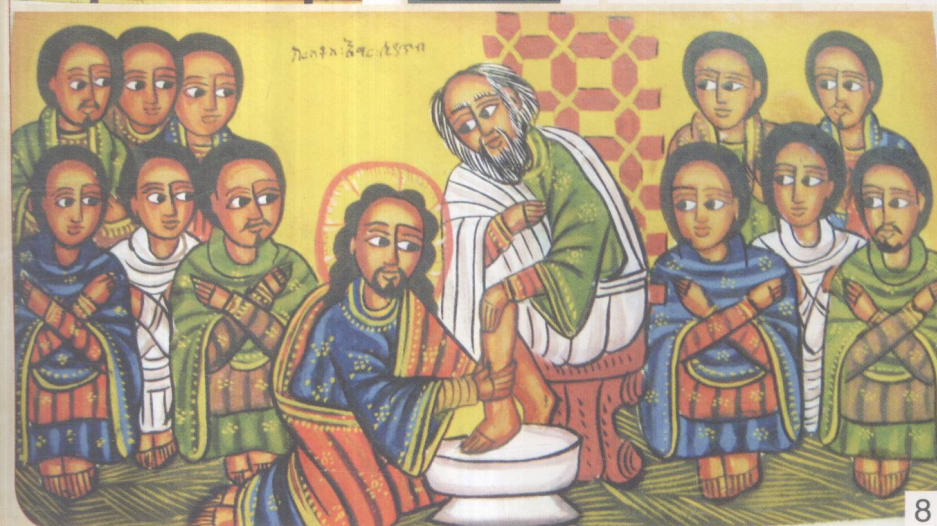
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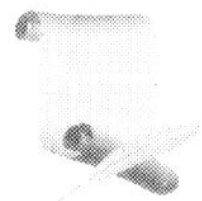
1. Ancient Greek scholars invented the concept of philosophy, or "love of wisdom." It was a practice of discussion and reflection that allowed them to seek the truth of the world through knowledge, instead of relying on the beliefs of traditional mythology. Philosophy was at first an oral tradition. 2. Psalter and Hours of Bonne de Luxembourg, Duchess of Normandy, before 1349, Probably Jean Le Noir, his daughter Bourgot, and his workshop, French (Paris), tempera, grisaille, ink, and gold leaf on vellum. 3. Seated woman playing a kithara: From Room H of the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale, ca. 40–30 b.c.; Late Republican, Roman. 4. Saint George and the Dragon—ETHIOPIA'S RICH ARTISTIC LEGACY. 5. The face of Christ in Glory, surrounded by symbols of the four evangelists and by angels—ETHIOPIA'S RICH ARTISTIC LEGACY. 6. Plaque with Saint Aemilian, ca. 1060–80. 7. The Fourth Day of Creation. 8. Jesus washes Peter's feet; both painted on goat skin—ETHIOPIA'S RICH ARTISTIC LEGACY. 9. The Miracle of the True Cross near San Lorenzo Bridge (Miracolo della croce), 1496–1500, canvas, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice.



Last Supper by Frida Kahlo.

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Foreword

‘*A* big book,’ said Callimachus the Alexandrian poet, ‘is a big evil!’ On the whole I feel inclined to share this view. If, therefore, I venture to put the present volume before the reader, it is because, as evils go, this book is a minor one. Nevertheless, it calls for a special explanation; for I have some time ago written a book on the same subject. ‘Wisdom of the West’ is an entirely new work; though, of course, it would never have appeared had not my ‘History of Western Philosophy’ preceded it.

What is here attempted is a conspectus of Western Philosophy from Thales to Wittgenstein, together with some reminders of the historical circumstances in which this story unfolds itself. To support the account, there is a collection of pictures of men, places and documents, which have been chosen as nearly as possible from sources belonging to the period to which they refer. Above all, an attempt has been made, wherever this seemed feasible, to translate philosophic ideas, normally expressed only in words, into diagrams that convey the same information by way of geometrical metaphor. There is little to fall back on here, and the results are therefore not always entirely successful. However, it seems that such methods of presentation are worth exploring. Diagrammatic exposition, so far as it can be achieved, has the further advantage of not being tied to any particular tongue.



Reliquary of the True Cross (Staurotheke), late 8th-early 9th century, Byzantine, made in Constantinople, cloisonné enamel, silver, silver-gilt, gold, niello.

As to the appearance of yet another history of philosophy, two things may be said in extenuation. In the first place, there are few accounts that are compact and reasonably comprehensive at the same time. There are, indeed, many histories of greater compass that deal with each item at much greater length. With these works the present volume obviously does not set out to compete. Those who develop a deeper interest in the subject will no doubt consult them in due course, and will perhaps even go to the original texts. Secondly, the current trend towards more and fiercer specialisms is making men forget their intellectual debts to their forbears. This study aims to counter such forgetfulness. In some serious sense, all Western philosophy is Greek philosophy; and it is idle to indulge in philosophic thought while cutting the ties that link us with the great thinkers of the past. It used once to be held, perhaps wrongly, that it was meet for a philosopher to know something about everything. Philosophy claimed all knowledge for its province. However this may be, the prevailing view that philosophers need know nothing about anything is quite certainly wrong. Those who think that philosophy ‘really’ began in 1921, or at any rate not long before, fail to see that current philosophic problems have not arisen all of a sudden and out of nothing. No apology is therefore offered for the comparatively generous treatment of Greek philosophy.

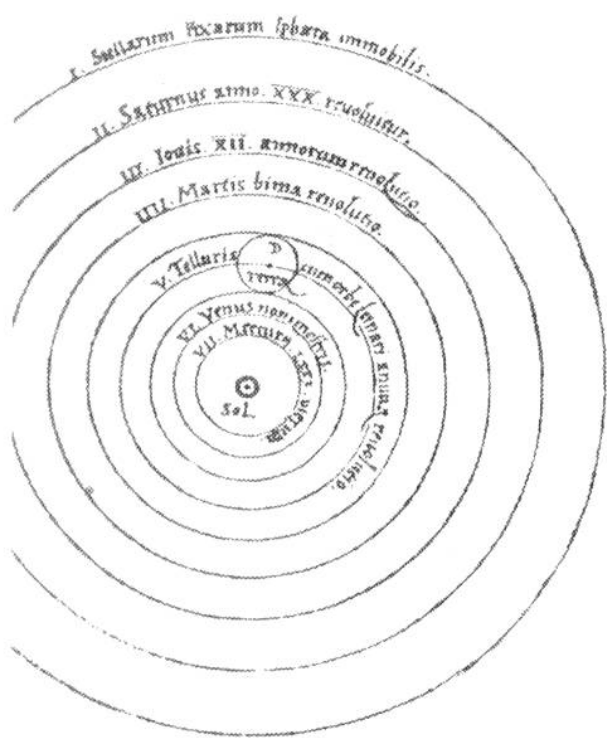
An account of the history of philosophy may proceed in one of two ways. Either the story is purely expository, showing what this man said and how that man was influenced. Alternatively, the exposition may be combined with a certain measure of critical discourse, in order to show how philosophic discussion proceeds. This second course has been adopted here. It may be added that this should not mislead the reader into believing that a thinker may be dismissed out of hand merely because his views have been found wanting. Kant once said that he was not so much afraid of being refuted as of being misunderstood. We should try

foreword

to understand what philosophers are attempting to say before we set them aside. It must be confessed, all the same, that the effort sometimes seems out of proportion to the insight achieved. In the end, this is a matter of judgment which everyone has to resolve for himself.

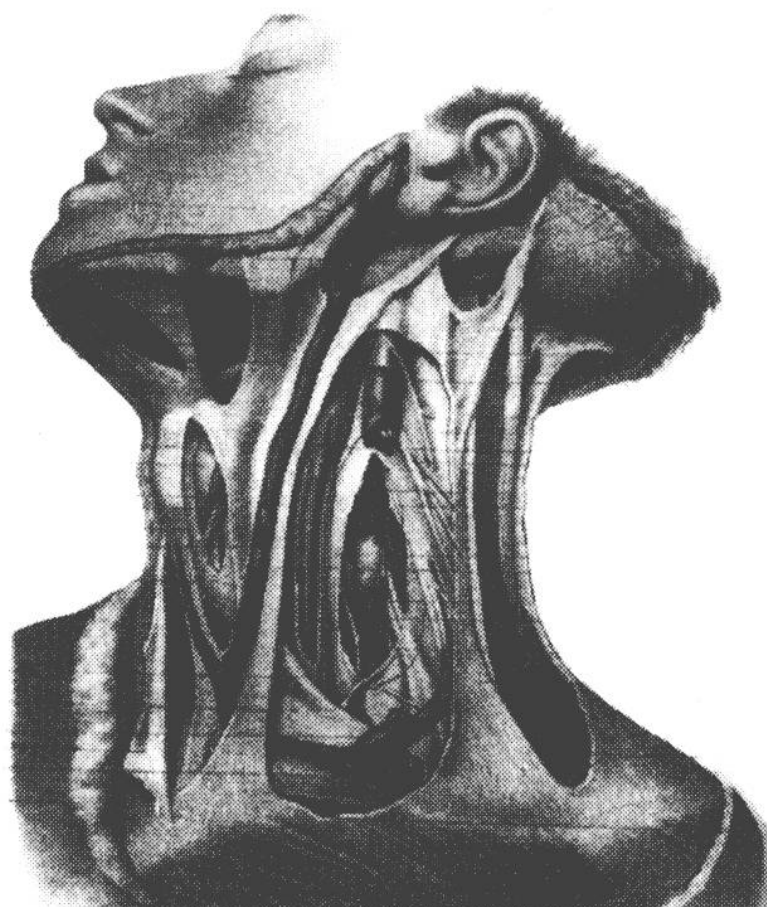
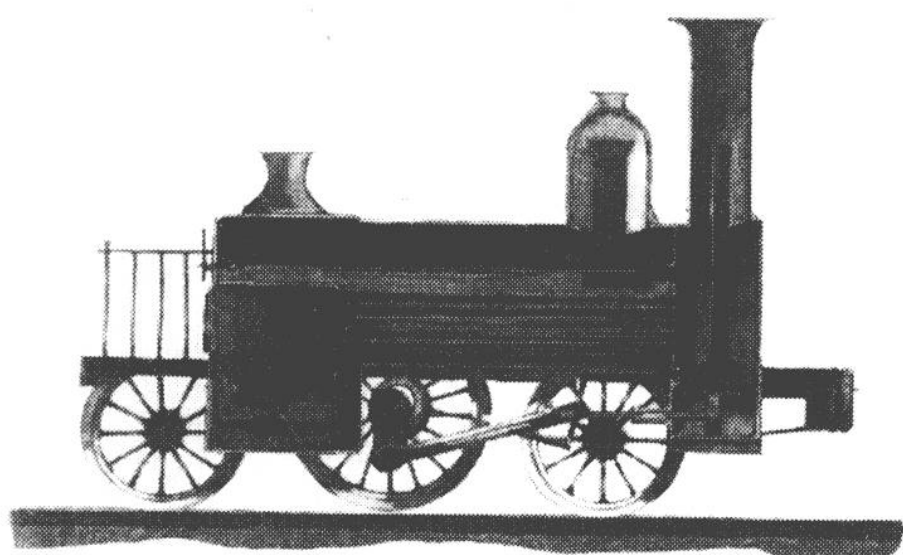
The scope and treatment of the subject in this volume differ from those in my earlier book. The new material owes much to my editor Dr. Paul Foulkes, who has helped me in the writing of the text and has also chosen many of the illustrations and devised most of the diagrams. The aim has been to provide a survey of some of the leading questions that philosophers have discussed. If, on perusing these pages, the reader is tempted to pursue the subject further than he might otherwise have done, the chief purpose of the book will have been attained.

Prologue



*Science deals with known facts,
philosophy with speculation*

What are philosophers doing when they are at work? This is indeed an odd question, and we might try to answer it by first setting out what they are not doing. There are, in the world around us, many things which are understood fairly well. Take, for instance, the working of a steam engine. This falls within the fields of mechanics and thermodynamics. Again, we know quite a lot about the way in which the human body is built and functions. These are matters that are studied in anatomy and physiology. Or, finally, consider the movement of the stars about which we know a great deal. This comes under the heading of astronomy. All such pieces of well defined



Prologue

knowledge belong to one or other of the sciences.

But all these provinces of knowledge border on a circumambient area of the unknown. As one comes into the border regions and beyond, one passes from science into the field of speculation. This speculative activity is a kind of exploration, and this, among other things, is what philosophy is. As we shall see later, the various fields of science all started as philosophic exploration in this sense. Once a science becomes solidly grounded, it proceeds more or less independently, except for borderline problems and questions of method. But in a way the exploratory process does not advance as such, it simply goes on and finds new employment.

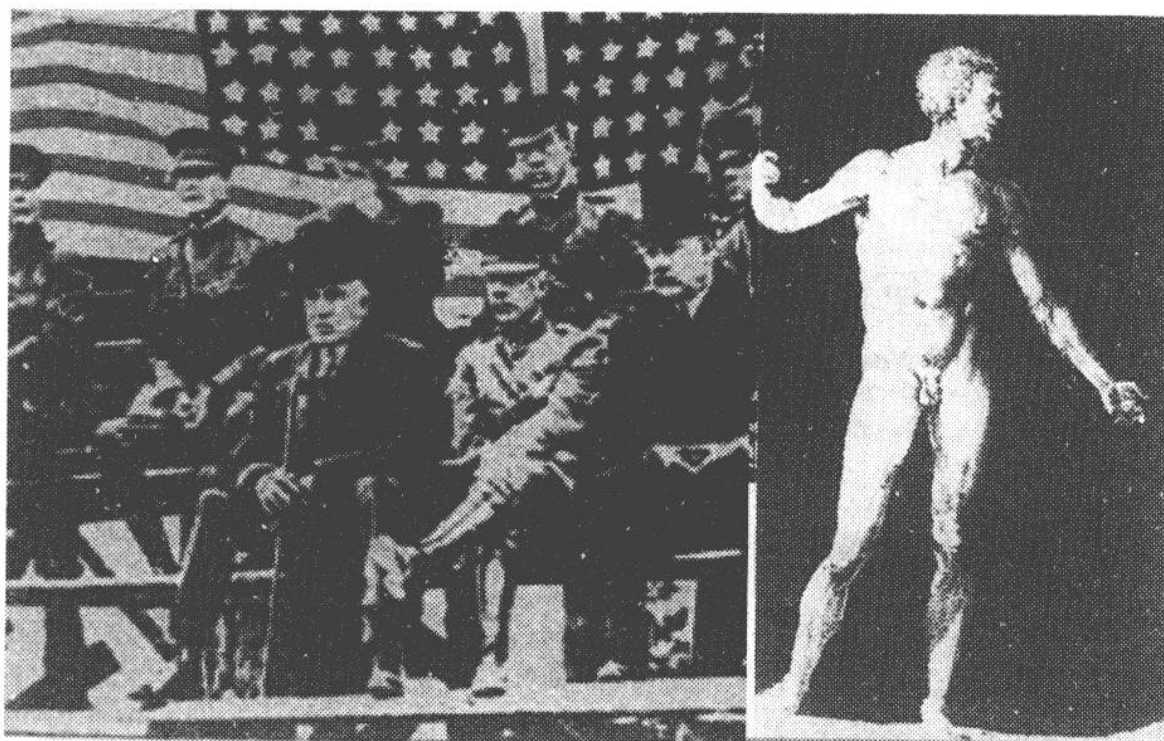
At the same time we must distinguish philosophy from other kinds



of speculation. In itself philosophy sets out neither to solve our troubles nor to save our souls. It is, as the Greeks put it, a kind of sightseeing adventure undertaken for its own sake. There is thus in principle no question of dogma, or rites, or sacred entities of any kind, even though individual philosophers may of course turn out to be stubbornly dogmatic. There are indeed two attitudes that might be adopted towards the unknown. One is to accept the pronouncements of people who say they know, on the basis of books, mysteries or other sources of inspiration. The other way is to go out and look for oneself, and this is the way of science and philosophy.

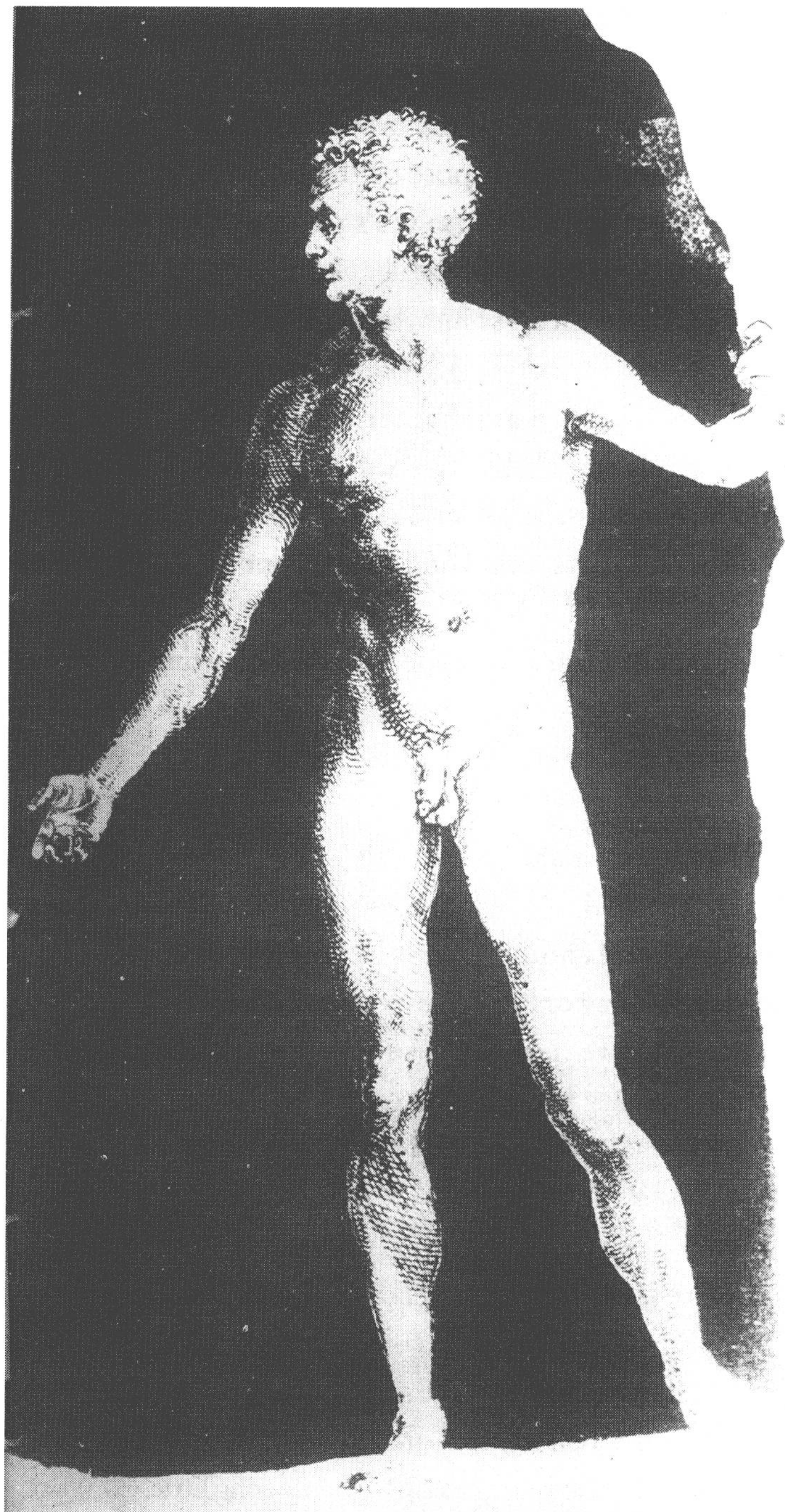
Lastly, we may note one peculiar feature of philosophy. If someone ask the question what is mathematics, we can give him a dictionary definition, let us say the science of number, for the sake of argument. As far as it goes this is an uncontroversial statement, and moreover one that can be easily understood by the questioner though he may be ignorant of mathematics. Definitions may be given in this way of any field where a body of definite knowledge exists. But philosophy cannot be so defined. Any definition is controversial and already embodies a philosophic attitude. The only way to find out what philosophy is, is to do philosophy. To show how men have done this in the past is the main aim of this book.

There are many questions that people who think do at some time or



*Is man a helpless dwarf?
Or is he a lump of earth?
Or is he as Hamlet sees
him?*

Prologue



other ask themselves, where science cannot yield an answer. Neither will those who try to think for themselves be willing to take on trust the ready answers given by soothsayers. It is the task of philosophy to explore these questions, and sometimes to dispose of them.

Thus, we may be tempted to ask ourselves such questions as what is the meaning of life, if indeed it have any at all. Has the world a purpose, does the unfolding of history lead somewhere, or are these senseless questions?

Then there are problems such as whether nature really is ruled by laws, or whether we merely think this is so because we like to see things in some order. Again, there is the general query whether the world is divided into two disparate parts, mind and matter, and, if so, how they hang together.

And what are we to say of man? Is he a speck of dust crawling helplessly on a small and unimportant planet, as the astronomers see it? Or is he, as the chemists might hold, a heap of chemicals put together in some cunning way? Or, finally, is man what he appears to Hamlet, noble in reason, infinite in faculty? Is man, perhaps, all of these at once?

Along with this are the ethical questions about good and evil. Is there a way of life that is good, and another that is bad, or is it indifferent how we live? If there be a good way of life, what is it, and how can we learn to live it? Is there something we may call wisdom, or is what seems to be such mere empty madness?

All these are puzzling questions. One cannot settle them by carrying out experiments in a laboratory, and those of an independent frame of mind are unwilling to fall back on the pronouncements of dispensers of universal nostrums. To such as these the history of philosophy supplies what answers can be given. In studying this difficult subject we learn what others at other times have thought about these matters. And so we come to understand them better, for their way of tackling philosophy is an important facet of their way of life. In the end this may show us how to live though knowing little.

Before Socrates

Philosophy begins when someone asks a general question, and so does science. The first people to evince this kind of curiosity were the Greeks. Philosophy and science, as we know them, are Greek inventions. The rise of Greek civilisation which produced this outburst of intellectual activity is one of the most spectacular events in history. Nothing like it has ever occurred before or since. Within the short space of two centuries, the Greeks poured forth in art, literature, science and philosophy an astonishing stream of masterpieces which



The palace at Knossos; in Crete, the forbear of Greek civilization



Icon with Saint
Demetrios, ca. 950-1000,
Byzantine, ivory.