

## THINKING, DOING, AND TEACHING

RICHARD MCKEON

THE interest and importance of philosophical inquiry concerning practical problems are not found simply in the conclusions to which inquiry leads, for these frequently differ from opinions, beliefs, or conclusions held on other grounds only in the principles, the precision, and the consequences found for them by dialectic and by philosophic discussion. The opinions and beliefs which Professor Wick sets forth in his "Note" (*Ethics*, LXIII [July, 1953], 305-7) are as sympathetic and alluring as they were in his original statements about philosophy and communication. The argument which he reiterates, however, is not improved, and he has said nothing to alter my conviction that the conclusions drawn from the argument are false and therefore, since they have practical applications, dangerous. The difference that separates us is not simply, as he seems to suggest, that his desire to stress the ideal leads him to analogies and simplicities, while my preference for the circumstantial and the existent leads me to distinctions and complexities. The important difference between us is that the arguments and distinctions I set forth lead to a series of programs for philosophers, which UNESCO might promote effectively and which might have theoretic, practical, and cultural consequences, whereas the only practical consequence I can find in Professor Wick's reiterated argument is the injunction to philosophers and to politicians to be rational or, if they cannot be quite rational, to be as rational as they can. Much of our ineffective moral and spiritual preachments takes this form. The ineffectiveness of such preachments is sufficient ground for objecting to them, but I have a further objection to Professor Wick's descent to moralism because it is based on an erroneous argument which leads him to three false conclusions.

The dilemma with which he begins is, as he alleges, simple, but it is based on an hypothesis. If, and only if, philosophy is thought to be a body of opinions to be believed or renounced, the problem of teaching is either an immediate problem of propagating accepted beliefs or a prior problem of determining the content of orthodoxy. This dilemma "was resolved because it evaporated as soon as its generating assumption about the nature of philosophy was denied." I was not "looking for something much fancier," as Professor Wick charges; I was fascinated by this process of dialectical evaporation. One assumption concerning the nature of philosophy can be denied only by accepting another assumption, and I tried therefore to show (though Professor Wick makes no mention of that effort) that the assumption he accepts is involved in a like dilemma: if philosophy is not a body of opinion but rather a dialectic or some like philosophic method, the problem of teaching is either an immediate problem of drawing the consequences and refuting the alternatives of an accepted dialectic or a prior problem of determining the method and principles of dialectic. My difficulty in stating Professor Wick's dilemma was not rhetorical. It arose rather from the choice between the dilemma he stated and the parent dilemma in which his treatment of that dilemma was involved. His failure to examine the assumptions on which his argument was based led him to three conclusions which I tried to show to be erroneous. The root of these errors is found in his reduction of the problem to purely theoretic terms, and it is this error that inspires him to seek questions about the practical bearing of philosophy and its teaching "such as philosophers, reflecting philosophically about their own activities, might well examine for their intrinsic or 'philosophical'

interest as well as for their practical relevance to this survey." This is an enterprise based on an erroneous assumption concerning the relation of philosophical "activities" and practical problems which permits Professor Wick to rest comfortably in his conviction that something practical does come from those reflections. It is important to separate the errors of these conclusions from incidental statements and beliefs, employed to adorn the arguments, concerning which we are in agreement.

I argue that it is an error to conclude that philosophy and philosophizing will be improved if all philosophers resolve to be more rational and to examine more assiduously the intellectual activities in which they are engaged and the principles to which they are committed. This error is apparent, since all philosophers are convinced that they are as rational as it is possible or proper for them to be, and they are all able to expose the inadequacies of the principles and methods of other philosophers. Any proposed means to accomplish such improvements in philosophizing—such as the use of a Platonic dialectic or a return to the Kantian concern with philosophizing rather than philosophy—is only one among contending proposals, and when it is employed it results in many orthodoxies. A second error follows from this first, the error of concluding that the community of men—in states or in societies or, in general, in associations based on common interest—may, since it is based on reason, benefit by the example of the community resulting from philosophic reasoning. It is an error precisely because the agreements of philosophers transform their principles into common beliefs and their associations into schools, while states based on a philosophy transform that philosophy into a party line, and the arguments by which adherence is secured into force. Kant (from whom Professor Wick derives encouragement in his argument) recognizes the true relation between practical reason and philosophy when he remarks that ordinary reason in its practical concern has as much hope as any philosopher of hitting the mark, for the solution

of practical problems does not depend on transforming them into problems which philosophers alone, or peculiarly, can solve. The third error, which completes the trio that results from the reduction of thinking and doing to communication, is the error of concluding that the communication by which mutual confidence can be established on mutual understanding is analogous to, or dependent on, the communication established by rational or scientific proof. It is an error precisely because common values have diversified expressions, and common expressions of value have diversified interpretations. The recognition and the effectiveness of the community of values which unite the peoples of the world do not depend either on a common expression of those values or on a common interpretation of any of the forms of their expression.

Even if it is true, as Professor Wick argues, that the philosophic, the political, and the cultural uses of reason are in some theoretic sense identical "because in the ideal but impractical case they would be the same," this Platonic coincidence is saved from the consequences of the three errors only if consideration of the ideal case is supplemented by consideration of second best and actual cases. To distinguish the three uses of reason is, therefore, more than a practical counterpoise to the simplifications which result from recognizing their theoretic unity; it is a necessary preliminary to planning practical programs in which knowledge, community, and communication are brought into conjunction, for the function of philosophy is not discovered by meditating on what philosophers do when they philosophize but by examining the circumstances which are the subject matter as well as the condition of these applications of philosophy. The conditions of our times give new significance to the applications of philosophy, and the possible practical applications of philosophy make it plausible that UNESCO might assist philosophers and make a contribution to philosophy and the teaching of philosophy.

The conditions of our times bring into

prominence the differences of the three uses of reason. The practical use of reason is distinct from the theoretic, and the establishment of community is not a consequence of philosophic argument. The alternative to a community based on a common philosophy is a community whose commonly accepted ends—such as freedom, equality, justice, democracy, and peace—may be justified by different philosophies and be achieved by common action undertaken for different reasons. There is a philosophic problem in the relation of divergent principles to common action, and that problem has been treated by the UNESCO inquiries into the use of the concepts of human rights, democracy, freedom, and law in the current ideological conflict. The use of reason in communication is distinct from the use of reason in proof, and the establishment of mutual confidence through mutual understanding does not require identical expression or common interpretation of the community of values. The alternative to the subordination of all expressions of value—in science, religion, art, personal morality, and philosophy—to arbitrary political or social determinations is the establishment of communication based on values which are achieved only in particular and in divergent forms and on the detection of spurious values which are the result of uniform community. There is a philosophic problem in the relation of common values to their divergent expressions, and that problem has been treated in the UNESCO inquiries into the relations of cultures.

These, I suggest, are new problems for philosophers, and in the context of these problems the UNESCO inquiry into the teaching of philosophy poses still another new problem. Teaching *philosophy* is not the same as teaching *a philosophy* or, again, of teaching *several philosophies*. The problem, as UNESCO poses it in the context of the modern world, is precisely the reverse of Kant's problem. Kant hoped to differentiate philosophizing from mere repetition of the actually existent philosophies from which philosophizing might be learned; the closer

contacts of cultures afford the hope that the differences and mutual incompatibilities of actually existent philosophies may concentrate attention on the nature of philosophizing and so improve the quality of philosophy as well as of the teaching of philosophy. There is no great agreement among the philosophers of any one country today, and the philosophic modes of agreement and difference of one tradition, say that of the United States, are little understood or esteemed by philosophers of other traditions, by Mexican, British, French, Arabic, or Hindu philosophers. UNESCO can facilitate contact among these traditions, and those contacts might have the effect of improving the practice of philosophy, but it is neither likely nor desirable that differences of philosophies will be reduced by those improvements. If the process is dialectical, it is, as I suggested, dialectical in a new sense. It is dialectical not in the sense of the dialectic developed as a philosophic method by dialectical philosophers, nor in the sense of the dialectic employed by nondialectical philosophers to examine, adjust, and refute other doctrines as a preliminary to philosophic inquiry proper; it is dialectic in the sense of investigating the track of argument from accepted principle to warranted conclusion while recognizing that philosophers differ in principles accepted as basic, in modes of argument accepted as cogent, and in data accepted as factual and relevant.

The three problems in which it has seemed to me that philosophers might assist UNESCO in its purpose to promote peace and mutual understanding are easily distinguished in that dialectic. The problems of community and common action are problems of practical agreement based on different principles and beliefs; the problems of mutual understanding and confidence are problems of discerning the relations among different expressions of principles and values; the problems of philosophy are problems of clarifying principles and systematizing proofs. Any given philosophy, even pluralisms and relativisms, imposes a unique and characteristic commitment concerning

the nature of community and the nature of values, which sets it in opposition to other philosophies. The novelty of these three problems is nonphilosophic. It is the result of plurality in principles, methods, and values: the problem of common action undertaken in a community for a plurality of reasons; the problem of common values discerned under a plurality of expressions and distinguished pseudo-values; the problem of common knowledge systematized in a variety of philosophies. These are not problems of any one philosophy, and little light is thrown upon them by speculations of philosophers about their philosophizing; the

consideration of these problems would, however, throw light on the processes of philosophizing. For these reasons I had hoped to turn Professor Wick from his theoretic speculations concerning the nature of philosophy (in which our agreements seem to me less important than our differences) to a consideration of practical programs of inquiry, which are new to philosophy and relevant to the practical problems of our times; they are practical problems, but their resolution would provide us with more accurate means by which to examine and test our theoretic agreements.

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO