

What is philosophy?

"Philosophy is not a mere collection of noble sentiments. A deluge of such sentiments does more harm than good. Philosophy is at once general and concrete, critical and appreciative of direct intuition. It is not--or, at least, should not be--a ferocious debate between irritable professors. It is a survey of possibilities and their comparison with actualities. In philosophy, the fact, the theory, the alternative, and the ideal, are weighed together. Its gifts are insight and foresight, and a sense of the worth of life, in short, that sense of importance which nerves all civilized effort. Mankind can flourish in the lower stages of life with merely barbaric flashes of thought. But when civilization culminates, the absence of a coordinating philosophy of life, spread throughout the community, spells decadence, boredom, and the slackening of effort.

"Every epoch has its character determined by the way its populations re-act to the material events which they encounter. This reaction is determined by their basic beliefs--by their hopes, their fears, their judgments of what is worthwhile. . . . How they react depends partly on their courage, partly on their intellectual grasp. Philosophy is an attempt to clarify those fundamental beliefs which finally determine the emphasis of attention that lies at the base of character.

"Mankind is now in one of its rare moods of shifting its outlook. The mere compulsion of tradition has lost its force. It is our business--philosophers, students, and practical men--to re-create and re-enact a vision of the world, including those elements of reverence and order without which society lapses into riot, and penetrated through and through

with unflinching rationality. Such a vision is the knowledge which Plato identified with virtue. . . .

"Our discussion has insensibly generalized itself. It has passed . . . to the function of a properly concrete philosophy in guiding the purposes of mankind" (AI, 125 f.).

"Philosophy, in the proper sense of the term, is not a presumptuous effort to explain the mysteries of the world by means of any superhuman insight or extraordinary cunning, but has its origin and value in an attempt to give a reasonable account of our own personal attitude towards the more serious business of life. You philosophize when you reflect critically upon what you are actually doing in your world. What you are doing is, of course, in the first place, living. And life involves passions, faiths, doubts, and courage. The critical inquiry into what all these things mean and imply is philosophy. We have our faith in life; we want reflectively to estimate this faith. We feel ourselves in a world of law and of significance. Yet why we feel this homelike sense of the reality and the worth of our world is a matter for criticism. Such a criticism of life, made elaborate and thoroughgoing, is a philosophy" (J. Royce, The Spirit of Modern Philosophy, pp. 1 f.).