

The Duty of a Philosopher in This Age [1964]

THIS ESSAY WAS written for and published in *Essays in Honor of Paul Arthur Schilpp, The Abdication of Philosophy: Philosophy and the Public Good*, edited by Eugene Freeman, and published by Open Court in La Salle, Illinois, in 1976; Russell's contribution occupies pages 15–22. Russell wrote his paper in August 1964.

Before dictating his essay Russell composed an outline:

The duty of a philosopher in this age

Praise of Schilpp. Repeat what he has said

What is ph? Partly physics, partly ethics (social & indiv)

Thales, water; Heraclitus, change; Parmenides, no change

Plato, ideas.

Social ph.: Plato, fascist; Democritus, dem^y.

Stoics, endurance

Hobbes, state-worship

Locke, dem^y.

Kant, perpetual peace

Bentham, pleasure (*v* natural rights)

Hegel

Marx

Present Day: conflict, end.

Me No time for theory. Direct attention to *effects*.

Will end of Man be good?

Philosophy & History

Heroism *v* happiness

Conflict-ethics *v* peace-ethics

The body of the essay was dictated to his wife, Edith Russell, but the first paragraph is in his own hand, which suggests that there may have been a plan, which was not realized, of reproducing the first paragraph of Russell's manuscript in the book. This device was used by Schilpp in several of the books he edited.

A biographical note on Paul Arthur Schilpp is to be found in the Headnote to Paper 1.

In addition to the dictated manuscript, the Russell Archives contains a typescript

(RA 220.026600) which was corrected by Russell. The corrected typescript is the copy-text; it has been collated with the printed version. The results of the collations are printed in the Textual Notes.

IT WAS WITH great pleasure that I learned of the forthcoming *Festschrift* in honour of Professor Schilpp, and with still greater pleasure that I accepted the invitation to contribute to the work. His *Library of Living Philosophers* has long commanded my admiration, and deserves the fullest commendation from academic philosophers. On the theme to which my remarks in this contribution will be dedicated, he has expressed opinions with which I am in complete agreement, and this must be my excuse if much of what I shall have to say merely repeats what he has already said. This applies particularly to his article, "The Task of Philosophy in an Age of Crisis". It is my profound conviction that this cannot be said too often or in too many ways. 10

One of the difficulties in discussing the duty of a philosopher is to find some difference between his duty and that of every other human being. If a philosophy professor were walking on a beach by the sea and saw a child in danger of drowning, he would endeavour to bring the child to safety and, for the moment, would forget his duty to his classes. He would do exactly what any decent human being would do, and the fact that he was a philosopher would not come into the matter. The present situation of the world is similar to that of the drowning child, but multiplied by many millions. Everybody who has studied nuclear warfare with any care knows, 20 first, that a nuclear war is not improbable, and, second, that it may cause the death of all human beings, or, at any rate, of so large a proportion that the miserable survivors will be incapable of any ordered social life. It is the plain duty of all who appreciate these facts to do what they can to make them known. If they do not fulfil this duty, they are accomplices in mass murder. In all this there is nothing to distinguish a philosopher from other men. The only way in which a philosopher can be considered to have a special duty is through the persuasiveness that he may derive from his knowledge and his preoccupations and from such respect as he may command. 30

There are, in fact, people other than philosophers who are better able to predict the disasters of a nuclear war. There are the atomic scientists. There are medical men. There are meteorologists. There are ecologists. All of these, through their special knowledge, are better able than the philosopher to predict the outcome of a nuclear war. Unfortunately, few of them are active in this direction, and those who are, often fail to rouse general attention. A certain traditional respect attaches to those who are called philosophers, and this respect alone, whether deserved or undeserved, gives a special place in the work of dissuasion to men who are so honoured in public opinion. 40

The word "philosopher" has a different meaning for the general public from that which it has for those who are professionally engaged in teaching the subject. The popular meaning of the word is exemplified by Shake-

speare's remark, "There was never yet philosopher that could endure the toothache patiently." This usage is derived from the Stoics. A man who suffers a misfortune may be advised to bear it "philosophically". The characteristic of a philosopher, in this sense, is courage under suffering, but it is not for courage under suffering that university teachers of philosophy are chosen. If it were, the candidates for a Chair of Philosophy would have their teeth pulled out one-by-one without anaesthetics, and the one who made least fuss would get the professorship. Academic philosophy is something very different from this. It consists mainly of know-
 10 ing what other philosophers have said, to which its more lively adherents may, if they choose, add some speculations of their own on subjects similar to those treated by previous philosophers. There is no reason why people subjected to this discipline should be specially wise or specially noble. Nor is their work, as a rule, of any specially great importance. There is no reason to expect, from the majority of teachers of philosophy, a higher standard of wisdom or of courage than is to be expected from teachers of other subjects.

Nor have the admittedly great philosophers of the past shown any special aptitude in regard to public affairs. Thales, the father of philosophy,
 20 rested his reputation on the statement that "all is water", which was no great help in government. Plato was virtually a Fascist. Descartes, the founder of modern philosophy, took very little interest in political questions. Hobbes thought obedience to the Government constituted the whole of virtue in an ordinary citizen. Hume had only two maxims in politics: that a Scotsman is better than an Englishman; and a Tory is better than a Whig. Hegel believed in absolute monarchy. None of these great men offered us any thought which is useful in the present day. A modern philosopher faced with the problems of the present day will find little to help him in the *dicta* of his predecessors.

30 There is, however, one exception among great philosophers of the past, namely Locke. Locke came at the end of a period of unrest in England and of civil war brought about by the rivalry of fanatics. This caused him to seek a temper of mind which would make it possible for men to live together in peace. The temper of mind that he recommended was one of tolerance, and tolerance was recommended by him on the ground that all opinions, in social matters are questionable. His teaching was so successful that there has never again been civil strife in England. Unfortunately, his disciples in France did not adopt this part of his philosophy.

40 What, then, can a modern philosopher preach? I think, perhaps, the first thing that he should teach is that everything good is bound up with life and that in a lifeless universe there would be neither good nor bad. Good and bad, alike, are confined, so far as our experience goes, to man and the higher animals. I do not know which of them is preponderant.

Philosophers, who are bookish and unusual people, are apt to emphasize forms of good and evil which are unusual and rare and to underestimate the common everyday pleasures and pains which make up the lives of the majority of mankind. This leads to an overemphasis on creeds, and thence to fanaticism. Fanaticism leads to hatred and hatred leads to war. Those who are willing to risk a nuclear war are willing that life, or at any rate the higher forms of life, should disappear from the earth, destroyed, not by some natural cataclysm, but by the fury of human beings. The only way in which such an outlook could be welcomed, is the way of utter pessimism. You may say, like Schopenhauer, that life is essentially evil and that wherever there is life there is a preponderance of pain, but I think that only a morbid despair could adopt such a view. Schopenhauer's sincerity is questionable, since he spent his time consulting doctors as to how to remain alive. There are men who look forward to the extinction of the human species as preferable to any probable alternative. There are men whose hatred and fear of Communism is such as to cause them to reject all compromise and to prefer a world without human beings to one containing Communists. I cannot but regard such men as invalids who need the attention of a medical man rather than a philosopher.

The duty in the present day of a philosopher or of any person of academic capacity is, to my mind, completely clear. He must, first, himself study the probable effects of a nuclear war. He must, then, devote himself, by whatever means are open to him, to persuading other people to agree with him as to these effects and to joining him in whatever protest shows the most chance of success. He will find himself, if he does this, opposed to his Government and to the majority public opinion of his neighbours. He will have to be sceptical of government pronouncements, most of which have for their object the dissemination not of truth but of a belief that, whatever may happen elsewhere, his own country will emerge victorious from the ordeal. Take, for example, the question of civil defence. Public authorities in America and in Britain pretend that large underground shelters will save the lives of most people in an area subjected to nuclear bombs. This is a complete delusion. In a nuclear war, it is to be expected that the first half-hour will obliterate Moscow, Leningrad, London, New York and Washington, and will transform the sites of these cities into raging tornadoes of fire-storms. Those who, relying upon the advice of their Governments, have sought refuge in shelters will be roasted by the heat and will be no better off than those who die of blast or fall-out in the open. The fire-storms are likely to spread through large regions many miles distant from their place of origin. They will kill many millions immediately. Those who survive the first onslaught will be left without food, without medical attention and without hope in a black countryside where they will die of the effects of fall-out if not of hunger. Animals,

vegetables, soil and water would all be poisoned, and nothing could be eaten without risk of disease and death. Those who are remote from the places where bombs fall will be at the mercy of the winds, which will disseminate atomic poisons gradually over the surface of the globe. It may be that some will survive, especially in the Southern Hemisphere, but they will be few. They will be diseased and incapable of producing healthy offspring. This miserable remnant will gradually dwindle. If the last to die belongs to the West, he may die proclaiming a Western victory. If he belongs to a Communist country, he may, with his last breath, proclaim the
 10 world-wide victory of Communism. This is what is to be expected of a nuclear war.

There is, perhaps, one duty which falls specially within the province of philosophy, and that is to persuade mankind that human life is worth preserving and that an opposite view is only open to fanatics. That human life is worth preserving would have seemed at most times a truism, but in our day it is possible to doubt it. I think, however, that such doubt springs from a partial and biassed survey. Most ordinary people prefer to be alive. Those whose happiness or unhappiness is bound up with a creed are exceptional. Moreover, man has potentialities which go immeasurably beyond
 20 what has hitherto been actual. Exceptional men such as poets, composers, painters, architects, and scientific discoverers have shown what man could be. It may be that in time the ordinary population will resemble such exceptional men, and that the great men of that day will stand above the great men of the past as much as the great men of the past exceeded their less gifted contemporaries. So long as there are men, there is hope that they will advance in the future as much as they have done in the past. This thought alone should make the prospect of the end of man intolerable except to blinded fanatics.

Fanaticism is a peculiar form of madness to which individuals and
 30 groups of men have always been liable. In the West, the most notable examples have been the Crusades and the Wars of Religion between Protestants and Catholics. Both these were futile and, in time, gave place to toleration. The weapons of war employed in these contests were not very deadly and could be employed without fatal consequences to either party. This has now ceased to be the case. A large-scale nuclear war can destroy everybody. Victory, in the old-fashioned sense, is no longer possible. Even those who remain neutral are likely to be destroyed. These are new facts and require new maxims of statecraft. At the moment, the chief conflict is between Communists and their opponents, but man is a quarrelsome animal and,
 40 if the present source of conflict were resolved, he might soon find some other equally futile basis for war. The only long-term cure for this situation is the creation of a World Government strong enough to defeat any hostile combination and able to substitute law for lawless force in

deciding disputes among nations. This is, at present, a distant prospect. I do not know whether man has sufficient wisdom to bring it about before his quarrels have brought him to extinction.

It has been a common belief that the human race is divided into groups, each with its own self-interest and each necessarily hostile to some other group or groups by which its welfare is threatened. This belief was never true, but has now become disastrous. It is now necessary to proclaim that the interests of all men are identical. Consider the present condition of armaments on the two sides of the Iron Curtain. Each side continually invents newer and more expensive weapons which keep half the world hungry. If the two sides were tolerant of each other, they could disarm and the useless apparatus of mutual slaughter could be abolished. Similar considerations apply to trade, which could with advantage be free between all nations. Quarrels leading to war can no longer be tolerated. But if those who hope for peace are to succeed, they must appeal to hope rather than to fear. They must point out that we have now only the choice between mutual destruction and mutual happiness. Science, which is at the moment the cause of our fears, is capable of being the very reverse. It has provided the world with means of putting an end to many ancient evils. Poverty could be universally abolished tomorrow if nations could overcome the wish to kill each other. Illness could be enormously diminished. Labour could be reduced to a few hours a day, and the leisure thus gained could be devoted to making life splendid and happy. Those who preach peace should not confine themselves to speaking of the horrors of war, but should build also a picture of what men could achieve if wars were abolished.

Man has existed for about a million years and, during that period, has climbed gradually from the status of a frightened, hunted creature to that of lord of the world. He suffers no longer from fear of wild beasts. He has no need to suffer from famine. He lives secure, except from himself. If he would overcome this last enemy, he could swiftly proceed to new triumphs in art and science and private happiness. Nothing stands in the way except the human passions of pride, envy and hatred. These remain to be overcome. It is the duty of the philosopher to do what he can to bring about this last triumph.

How, in our modern world, should a philosopher live? Some of the lessons of philosophy are ancient and timeless. He should endeavour to view the world, as far as he is able, without a bias of space and time, without more emphasis upon the here and now than upon other places and other times. When he considers the world in which he has to live, he must approach it as if he were a stranger imported from another planet. Such impartiality is a part of the duty of the philosopher at all times. It is only its application to the present day that distinguishes the duty of a philosopher

from his duty at other times. Let us consider the probable biography of a philosopher, now young, who has imbibed the timeless lesson of philosophy and wishes to apply this lesson in his own life. Let us, first, look upon the gloomy view. I shall suppose that, until his education was finished, he was too much absorbed in the technicalities of modern philosophy to concern himself with the political problems of his own time. I shall suppose that these problems come to him with an impact of novelty at a time when he is seeking a post as teacher of philosophy. He will find that there is grave danger of the destruction of the human species and that
 10 any pupils whom he is likely to teach will probably perish before they have had time to profit by his instruction. He will find that the same thing applies to everything else, both good and bad, that is taught in schools and universities. He will be overcome by the futility of an existence devoted to fitting men for a life which they will not have time to live. The contemplation of a lifeless world will make his hitherto preoccupations seem futile. His duty will be clear. He must devote himself before all else to combatting the danger of human extinction.

But he will soon become aware of the obstacles which ignorant and powerful men place in the way of such a life. The F.B.I. or Scotland Yard
 20 will discover that he had an uncle who was a Communist and that at this man's house he had frequently discussed human destiny with Communists. On this ground, he will be black-listed and, if he is not already world-famous, an academic career will be closed to him.

When this becomes clear to him, he may take to the writing of books or to political agitation. If he takes to books, he may point out the futility of regarding large groups of men as specially wicked. He may point out that Genghis Khan inspired horror in his contemporaries, but that his grandson, Kublai Khan, inspired no such horror and was a wise and just ruler. He may endeavour to persuade his fellow-men that wickedness is not a
 30 geographical phenomenon and that armed conflict has usually intensified all the evils on both sides. He may endeavour to produce a mood of mutual tolerance in which armed conflict is viewed as the evil thing it is. He may suggest that education should encourage this point of view, that Russians and Americans should cease to think of each other as only worthy of extermination. He may, by such writings, if he is eloquent and learned, convert a small percentage of mankind to his views, but the effect of his writings will soon be obliterated by rival Establishments. Schools will still teach a nationalist morality and will turn out pupils whose minds are closed against reason and whose hearts have been taught to be deaf to hu-
 40 mane feeling. If his writings are of less value than to produce this result, he will achieve only persecution, perhaps prison, perhaps only poverty. If, at last, he survives the first half-hour of the nuclear war, other maddened survivors will put him to death on the ground that he has been an obstacle to victory.

If he rejects this dismal prospect, he can restrain his advocacy within a technical framework. He can suggest this or that minor measure which seems calculated to diminish the likelihood of nuclear war. He can proclaim that the enemies of his nation are also human beings and have the same grounds for hating his country as his country has for hating theirs. By the exercise of a certain degree of prudence, he can avoid the worst consequences of his heresy. He can make compromises with his conscience which will gradually grow wider and wider until, if he survives long enough, he is ready to enroll himself in the ranks of patriots. Some few men escape these tragic consequences by achieving technical fame before embarking upon political controversy. Of these, the most notable hitherto has been Einstein, who was world-famous before he began to denounce the policy of universal suicide. But such men, by their nature, are rare, and they are rendered powerless by the attitude of practical men, which is like that of the Roman magistrate who said to St. Paul, "Much learning doth make thee mad" (Acts, xxvi, 24). 10

There is, however, another possibility of a more cheerful kind. It is possible that a band of philosophers may grow up devoted heart and soul to the preservation of Man. It is possible that, by their eloquence, their knowledge, and their grasp of what might be done, they will succeed, before it is too late, in persuading large groups of men to allow themselves to go on living. It is possible that they may be able to paint a glorious and a peaceful world so vividly that men will see more value in their own survival than in the extermination of those whom they have hitherto regarded as enemies. It may be that, on the verge of a disastrous conflict, the folly of such a contest may become overwhelmingly evident and former enemies may unite in a song of joy. Something of the feeling which might lead to such a reconciliation is already not uncommon among the young, who do not wish to be exterminated before they have had a chance to live a complete life. If disaster can be averted long enough, those young people who now desire peace may acquire positions of power and may create a world happier than any that has hitherto existed. Mankind is engaged in a race in which the brutal and stupid are on one side, while, on the other side, are those who are capable of human sympathy and of imagining a world without armed strife. Philosophers should belong to this second group. If they do, their lives may be useful, infinitely useful, since they will open infinite possibilities of a splendid existence. During the struggle, their life will be arduous and painful, but illumined always by a hope as ardent as the Christian hope of heaven. Given time, this hope may be realized. Will the present rulers of the world allow the necessary time? I do not know. 30 40

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458: 1–2 “**There was never yet philosopher ... the toothache patiently.**”

Much Ado about Nothing, v.i.35.

459: 10 **Schopenhauer** Artur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) was a German philosopher whose works are dominated by a systematic pessimism.

462: 27 **Genghis Khan** See A396: 14.

462: 28 **Kublai Khan** Kublai Khan (1214–1294) assumed, in 1260, the rule of the empire his grandfather, Genghis Khan, had established; he became emperor of China in 1271. Although he did engage in some wars of conquest, he was on the whole an enlightened ruler.

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The typescript carbon ("CT") is foliated 1, 2–11, and measures 204 × 253 mm. The textual notes provide a collation of CT with the version published in *The Abdication of Philosophy* ("76").

457: 5 fullest CT] *altered from illest*
461: 27 period, 76] period CT