

The Way toward Wisdom

*An Interdisciplinary
and Intercultural Introduction
to Metaphysics*

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The Problem of the Unification of Knowledge

A. THE INFORMATION EXPLOSION AND INTERDISCIPLINARITY

1. *The Fragmentation of Knowledge Today*

Today students at the college or university level are faced with the serious difficulties of a knowledge explosion. This explosion has resulted in an extreme fragmentation of knowledge. It is increasingly difficult to use all this information to obtain a consistent worldview or, as J. Ian H. McDonald calls it, a “cosmic vision.”¹ Yet how can we make even ordinary decisions without some sense of what is and is not important? We cannot make decisions in a consistent and informed way without a freely chosen value system. Without some ranking of values, choice would be blind. During a lifetime each person’s value system gets modified as a result of experiences and influences. Yet without a stable commitment to some definite value system, life becomes a series of contradictory choices that gets nowhere.

A value system also implies a worldview. We cannot decide what is important for our lives except in terms of what we truly think are the choices realistically open to us, what our world, our own potentialities, and our situation in the world make possible. We know we must distinguish between dreams and reality, or our decisions are made in vain. Because a value system must be grounded in a worldview, I will in this book use the single term “worldview” to include the value system it grounds.

Therefore, a worldview, since it includes a value system, also implies that we live in a community or expanding circles of communities from local to global, each with its own history and traditions. We are, as Aristotle said, “political animals”²—we need others who share our views to help us make and carry out decisions, but we also need others with whom we can share our gifts and achievements. The Desert Fathers of Egypt, seeing the halfheartedness of so many Christians, became hermits to live the

Christian worldview without compromise. Yet the hermits soon gathered into communities of other committed persons to strengthen each others' resolve. So did the Buddhist monks. Recently in the United States, the Unabomber became a hermit to perfect his ecological fanaticism, but then sent letter bombs to get his extremist views socially disseminated in the *New York Times*. Thus, because we are human, we cannot arrive at a satisfactory worldview except by participating in a community and its culture. The notion of lone, "creative" genius can only be a half-truth, since geniuses always long for immortality in the public regard for their work.

Therefore, however original we may be, we all need some kind of wisdom, our own and that derived from others wiser than we are, that takes account of all the information accessible to us and unifies it in a useable way. This process of achieving a synthesizing wisdom has recently been given the name of interdisciplinarity and defined as follows:

Approaches vary and disputes over terminology continue. Broadly speaking though, interdisciplinary studies may be defined as a process of answering a question, solving a problem, or addressing a topic that is too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline or profession.³

Thus, interdisciplinarity concerns how different fields and resources of knowledge, each with its own language and mentality, communicate with one another.

2. *Interculturality and Contextualization*

A second kind of difficulty for students today is another type of fragmentation that affects not only kinds of knowledge but also total ways of life. It is the fragmentation of the multiculturalism or pluralism of an emerging global civilization. Students today work side-by-side with students from every continent. Yet as J. Ian H. McDonald writes concerning the situation of early Christianity: "Pluralism is by no means the prerogative of the modern or postmodern age. Many ancient cultures were acutely aware of pluralism in some form or other and adopted attitudes to it—whether positive, tolerant and inclusive or hostile, intolerant and exclusive."⁴

But this is now intensified because our universities have become centers where Americans, Europeans, Africans, and Asiatics study together, yet often have difficulty in communicating with each other. If there is to be dialogue and meeting of minds in such a multicultural milieu, we must recognize the contextuality of the truth embodied in any worldview. By this term "contextuality" I mean that no element of the thought or speech or behavior of a person can really be understood unless serious account is taken of its cultural context.⁵ If one is really to understand Native

American ideas and attitudes, they must not be interpreted apart from the context of the culture and worldview in which Native Americans are reared and in which they live. Likewise if I do not recognize the cultural context of my own worldview, I will misunderstand myself and those of other cultures with whom I wish to communicate.

Recognition of the contextuality of our thinking does not necessarily imply that we are forever imprisoned in our own culture and worldview. Rather, by the very act of recognizing this contextuality we find the possibility of liberation from its limitations. Such emancipation from ethnocentrism is especially urgent today when so many cultures confront each other inescapably. If it is difficult for one modern discipline to communicate with another in interdisciplinarity, how much more difficult it is for diverse cultures, some with very long histories and built on very different foundations, to find common ground!

The modern university has always been troubled by such problems of fragmentation into competing worldviews.⁶ Thus the great German thinker Immanuel Kant wrote an important essay, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, as did Johann Fichte,⁷ and F. W. J. von Schelling;⁸ from a quite different perspective, Cardinal John Henry Newman wrote *The Idea of a University*; more recently, Robert Maynard Hutchins of the University of Chicago wrote *The Higher Learning in America*; and later Alan D. Bloom wrote *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. Now, at the beginning of this twenty-first century, we must face these same problems that have become ever more urgent.

B. THE COMMON HUMAN SEARCH FOR MEANING

1. Older Worldviews

A starting point for meeting these challenges of interdisciplinarity and interculturalism is the recognition that all cultures share at least a yearning for “wisdom.” They seek a unified worldview that can guide their individual and communal lives and give them meaning or purpose, a goal or goals worth living for. Hence, because we must live with others, we must seek some common ground, some meaning that we all share, even if incompletely. I do not claim that everyone feels this need for meaning constantly or with equal intensity, but only that at times this fundamental human desire for meaning and understanding inevitably emerges. We experience this when we explore world literature and find in it people and life situations that are, in spite of differences, those of our own times and place. When I read in the *Iliad*⁹ how the aged Trojan men sunning on the walls murmur to each other as Helen walks by, “Such a

woman is worth this awful war!" I might be viewing a scene in a modern movie about life today.

From these considerations it is evident why every culture from the simplest to the most complex includes a notion of "wisdom" as the summit of human knowledge about how to live well. A denial of the possibility of such wisdom is really a claim that cynicism is the true wisdom that alone can make life bearable, since by having no illusions it can prevent the disastrous pain of disillusionment. Yet wisdom about life not only guides judgment about how to live but flows from a deep understanding of the world and our place in it. It is what Socrates meant in his famous saying reported in Plato's *Apology*: "The unexamined life is not worth living."¹⁰ To examine life and find it meaningful is to be wise. In every culture the paradigm of this wisdom is located in certain persons: the elders, the shamans, the priests, the gurus, the philosophers, the scientists, the media pundits. These leaders are supposed to embody the wisdom of the people of their culture and its traditions and to exemplify and lead its creative progress.

The wisdom of prehistoric humanity seems lost to us and is only hinted at by such few relics as archaeologists have uncovered. Yet prehistoric wisdom is no doubt preserved somehow in the traditions of the preliterate, tribal, and indigenous cultures of the world. These survive today mainly in sub-Saharan Africa and in largely marginalized situations in Asia, Japan, Australia, the Pacific Islands, and among the indigenous peoples of North, Central, and South America.

In his famous and controversial work, *A Study in History*, Arnold J. Toynbee (1889–1975) identified some twenty-one civilizations, exclusive of less advanced cultures. He listed: (1) Sumerian, (2) Egyptian, (3) Minoan, (4) Hittite, (5) Babylonian, (6) Hellenic, i.e., Greek-Roman, (7) Syriac, (8) Orthodox-Byzantine, (9) Islamic-Arabian, (10) Islamic-Iranian, (11) Western, (12) Orthodox-Russian, (13) Ottoman, (14) Indian, (15) Chinese, (16) Korean, (17) Japanese, (18) Mayan, (19), Andean, (20) Yucatec, and (21) Mexican civilizations. In a more recent work, *World Philosophies*, Ninian Smart discusses fourteen worldviews, including the traditional philosophies of (1) South Asia, (2) China, (3) Japan, (4) Korea, (5) Greece-Rome–Near East, (6) Islam, (7) Judaism, (8) European, (9) North American, (10) Latin American, (11) African, and the considerably changed cultures of (12) Modern Islam, (13) Modern South and Southeast Asian, and (14) Modern China-Korea-Japan. These classifications are of course somewhat arbitrary, but they give some idea of the historical richness of human culture. A visit to any large art museum will illustrate the rich variety of this precious heritage.

In his brilliant *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community*, William H. McNeill uses the term "ecumene," from the Greek for a "household," now more familiar as a religious term, to designate the major portion of the human race that,

at any point in history, enjoys a community of important cultural interchanges. Of course very broad classifications, such as those of Toynbee and Smart, or the discussion of ecumenical interchange provided by McNeill, give no more than a general notion of the complex web of human culture. First, a distinction must be made between these great cultures centered in cities and many more older or marginal cultures that were not “civilized,” that is, citified, some of which survive but only marginally today.

According to recent DNA studies, our human race, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, originated probably in east Africa about 150,000 years ago. It probably numbered only a few thousand when it began to spread into the Near East and thence into Asia 73,000 years ago, and into Europe 51,000 years ago. It was, however, so needy and so adventurous that it soon began to occupy the whole globe. It reached Australia and the Pacific Islands in several waves, beginning about 40,000 to 33,000 years ago, Japan perhaps only 30,000 to 10,000 years ago, and Hawaii perhaps not until 300 CE. It spread through the Americas beginning perhaps 30,000 years ago.¹¹ Humankind was then still so widely scattered that each tribe, probably originally of a few thousand at most, quickly became isolated. They survived on a simple economy of hunting and food gathering. Yet, as the famous paintings of the cave of Chauvet-Pont-D’Arc from 31,000 years ago and other sites demonstrate,¹² these scattered people already had remarkable cultures, as do many of the marginal people at this same level of economy today, such as the natives of Australia.

The transition to economies of food production through agriculture and the domestication of animals made possible the rise of villages, then of cities and of the invention of writing, which enabled humanity to pass from its prehistory to its history. This process began in the Near East around 6000 BCE and resulted, about 3000 BCE, in the great civilizations of Mesopotamia (Sumeria, Akkadia, Assyria, etc.) and Egypt. It then spread west into Europe and east into India. In Europe, it produced the civilizations of Crete and Greece and Rome. The influences of the Magi of Iran are evident in the first Greek philosophers.¹³ Thus McNeill argues that Toynbee’s Sumeric, Babylonian, Egyptian, Hellenic, Orthodox, and Western civilizations eventually mixed and are preserved as the true Western Ecumene.¹⁴ This is plausible, as is evident from the fact that even today the achievements of Mesopotamia and Egypt are included in the living memory in the West through their monumental remains and through the Bible.

On the other hand, major cultures were not a part of this Western Ecumene. The culture of India, though it was in contact with Hellenistic Greece in the 300s BCE and with Rome between 100 BCE and 200 CE, was gradually cut off from the Western Ecumene. China had, from about 1500 BCE, developed its own independent culture that influenced Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia, though it was perhaps

stimulated to do so by influences from the distant Near East.¹⁵ Like the civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and India, Chinese culture was centered on the valley of a great watercourse, the Yellow River, where irrigation made necessary major social cooperation. It favored a hoe-cultivated garden agriculture, rather than one of plowed fields prepared for cereals (as in Egypt and Mesopotamia), and it developed its own system of writing. Humans entered the Americas, probably through the Bering Straits land bridge, in about either 36,000 or 17,000 BCE and eventually reached the tip of South America by about 11,000 BCE. They reached the level of city dwelling in Central America with the Olmecs between 1300–400 BCE. A prime example can be found in Mexico with the city of Teotihuacan, which by 350 BCE was probably larger than any other city in the world. Other peoples, such as the Toltecs, Zapotecs, Mixtecs, and especially the Mayas, enjoyed what is called their Classic Period, 250 BCE–900 CE. In 1325 CE the Aztecs, invading from the north, founded Mexico City, which finally fell in turn to European invaders in 1521. The other American civilization was in Peru with the first kingdom of Chavín from about 950–450 BCE, succeeded by other cultures until the rise of the Incas in the 1200s CE, who reigned until invaded by Europeans in 1531. Whether these cultures were influenced at any time by Eurasian culture before the sixteenth-century European invasions remains controversial. Yet they created remarkable art and architectural works and, some of them, forms of hieroglyphic writing. Some also invented a very precise calendar and devices for simple arithmetical calculations. They did not, however, as far as we know, achieve the level of Greek science. Thus the civilizations of India, China, and the Americas developed in ways largely independent of the Western Ecumene.

The rise of Islam in the seventh century CE had the remarkable effect of joining the Western Ecumene with northern India (Pakistan) and eventually sub-Saharan Africa and, in the sixteenth century, with the East Indies. The invasion from inner Asia of nomadic Turks into Islamic territory produced the great Ottoman Empire, which lasted from the thirteenth century CE to World War I. Other great invasions by the Mongols from Inner Asia into both China and the West complicated this picture of the Western Ecumene, but did not essentially change it. Yet after the Middle Ages, the Islamic regions grew more isolated from the Western Ecumene. The Muslims (adherents of Islam), through the Christian Byzantine Empire that they conquered, acquired much of the ancient Greek heritage and, by also conquering Latin Christian North Africa, opened a way to eventual influence in sub-Saharan Africa. Yet Islam also moved east into India (Pakistan) and stood in stark opposition to the Christian domination of the West.

To understand any of these world cultures it is necessary to become acquainted with the artistic, oral, and written forms of expression in which they were pre-

served and through which they were transmitted, and hence with the thought forms these media were developed to record. In the earliest known cultures, the wisdom or worldviews of the people were generally expressed orally in mythologies. A “myth” as a literary form can be defined as a story of events that took place “once upon a time,” in which the forces of nature and human experience are personified as spirits, gods, or heroes thus expressing the worldview and value system of a particular culture. Although prehistoric in origin, these traditional stories shaped both Old and New World cultures and were elaborated into systems of ritual and worship in a complex pantheon characterizing the type of religion called “polytheism.”¹⁶

In the first millennium BCE, however, Zoroaster in Persia, the biblical prophets in Israel, Buddha in India, Confucius in China, and Socrates in Greece subjected these ancient worldviews to profound criticism.¹⁷ They placed greater emphasis on higher ethical values and a corresponding lesser emphasis on an anthropomorphic view of the divine. In the Hebrew Bible, this shift took the form of a strict monotheism, in which the origin of the world and of humanity was attributed to a personal and free Creator. Christianity and Islam then adopted this Judaic monotheism. In India, however, and the cultures under its influence, religious reform intensified a monism in which the visible world and its invisible gods are all viewed as purely phenomenal manifestations of an ineffable Absolute. This Absolute is accessible to human seekers only through mystical meditation, in which the human self rediscovers its identity with that Absolute. In China and Japan a similar monism was common, especially in Taoism and in the Buddhism imported from India; but, under the predominant influence of Chinese Confucianism, the emphasis was shifted from the mystical and speculative to a this-worldly pragmatism.¹⁸

Today these ancient cultures are now much affected by what is often called “modernity,” either in the radically materialistic form of Marxism, as formerly in Russia and now still in China, or, as in the United States and other capitalist countries, in its agnostic form of moral relativism. This modernity differs from older worldviews by its almost unlimited faith in the power of modern science and scientific technology to reveal and control natural forces.¹⁹ While the older cultures all had some knowledge of practical mathematics and a practical, common sense view of nature (for example in astronomy, agriculture, and engineering), none of them achieved the kind of knowledge that now characterizes modern science and the advanced technology it fosters. The earlier worldviews were not elaborated and transmitted in abstract scientific treatises. Instead they took on a variety of literary forms: myths, legendary or historical narratives, rhetorical sermons, ethical proverbs and parables, and poetry, such as survive for us today in the Judeo-Christian Bible.

The cultures associated with the great family of Indo-European languages (not to be thought of in racial terms) probably spread from the steppes around the Black and Caspian seas beginning in the 4000s BCE.²⁰ The branch of that family that moved into Iran and India about 2000 BCE called themselves “the Aryans” (noble people). The Iranians attained the great Persian Empire under the Achaemenid dynasty in 549 BCE; this empire dominated the whole Near East and Greece. The sage Zoroaster, traditionally dated about 600 BCE,²¹ but today dated as early as 1000 BCE,²² undertook the religious reform of these peoples. He held that the world is governed by two principles, a good god of light and fire, Ahuramazda (hence the religion is called Mazdaism), and a bad spirit of darkness, Ahriman. The Zoroastrian priestly caste was called the Magi. They forbade blood sacrifices but worshiped fire along with other rather abstract deities and the countless angels who formed Ahuramazda’s court. They promoted an ethics of justice and anticipated a final judgment with heaven and hell to follow. Human bodies were not interred or burnt, lest they pollute the earth; instead, corpses were exposed on towers. Zoroastrian dualism probably had an influence on Jewish thought during the period when the Holy Land was subject to the Persian Empire. Zoroastrianism survives today, however, only as the small sect of the Parsis in India; yet recently, in Washington, DC, I met a Zoroastrian!

Another branch of the Aryan peoples spread into India, where they were much influenced by the native civilization that had been flourishing there since 2500 BCE. The sacred literature of that native civilization consisted primarily in the hymns of the Vedas, the Rig Veda dating from as early as 1500 BCE. These compositions were orally transmitted for hundreds of years and were elaborated both by the commentaries of the Brahmana and Aranyakas, which dealt mainly with ritual matters, and also by the more speculative Upanishads (from about 800 BCE).²³ These works display a rich polytheistic mythology, but with a marked tendency to treat the many gods as manifestations of some one mysterious Absolute of which the universe is a monistic manifestation. The human self (*atman*) is separable from the body, and undergoes transmigration from inferior to superior bodies or the reverse, according to the preponderance of good or bad deeds in each life (*karma*). The goal of life is salvation (*mukti*) by emancipation (*moksha*) from transmigration and all suffering. The Vedas support the three-caste social system of priests, warriors, and manual workers, a system that probably goes back to the early Indo-Europeans, but was afterwards supplemented by a fourth class of “out-castes.”

The Aryan Vedic religion was opposed by two other religions that did not accept the Vedas or the caste system, Jainism and Buddhism, each with its own extensive sacred literature. The great leader of Jainism, Mahavira (c. 599–527 BCE) was of the warrior not the priestly caste. His teaching flourished in India until about 1100 CE, but, as our twenty-first century opens, the influence of Jainism is much diminished,

and is largely confined to India. Jainism teaches a very rigorous asceticism marked by belief in an infinity of spiritual souls, yet is atheistic.

The Buddha (Enlightened One), Gautama Siddhartha, known also as Shakyamuni (c. 563–c. 483 BCE), came from the warrior caste. He taught that release from transmigration can only be achieved by recognizing that the whole phenomenal world, including individual human souls and the gods, exists only momentarily. This teaching differs radically both from Jainism, which holds for the reality of matter, and from Hinduism, which tolerates a spectrum of views on this question. Buddhism flourished in India until about 900 CE. Then, probably because of its opposition to the caste system, Buddhism became almost extinct in its native India, yet continued to thrive in Sri Lanka, Tibet, China, Southeast Asia, and Japan, and now has global influence.²⁴

With the rise of Buddhism and its radical denial of the phenomenal world, Hinduism was forced to define its cosmology more exactly, with the result that it developed systems (*darshana*) of quasi-philosophy,²⁵ usually given as six in number. These *darshana* all had ancient roots but were systematized only after 500 BCE. Hence they are contemporaneous with the great age of Greek philosophy and developed concurrently with that philosophy as it continued into the Middle Ages.²⁶ To these six systems must be added that of the Cavarka School, which flourished from c. 600 BCE to c. 1300 CE. Members of this last school were total materialists. But their influence faded in India, and their literature is lost to us.

In China there were also traditionally six schools of quasi-philosophy, also not clearly distinguished from religious systems; and only one, the Yin Yang School, was much concerned with cosmological problems.²⁷ The other five schools—of Confucianism, Mohism, Taoism, the School of Names, and the Legalists—were chiefly ethical in character. Mohism believed in “living according to nature,” in opposition to the Confucian emphasis on “education in virtue.” Taoism agreed with Mohism on naturalism, but also developed a strongly mystical character in opposition to Confucian worldliness. The Legalists, for their part, put more trust in government coercion than in education. Confucianism, however, became the dominant school, while the Taoists remained its severest critics. When Buddhism entered from India, it colored the thinking of both these dominant schools and was colored by them.

Thus, in both India and China, some study was made of formal logic to be employed in highly speculative and sophisticated debates. Yet the worldviews of these two great cultures did not make a shift to systematic reasoning and analysis of empirical evidence, but continued to rest on age-old traditions or on intuitive knowledge of a mystical type accessible only through ascetic meditation. Even so, both in India and China, some serious attention was given to many of the problems of natural science with which the Greeks were so concerned.²⁸

2. *The Global Expansion of Science and Technology*

We are now witnessing the ever more rapid advance of modern science and technology, an advance that would be impossible without the kind of systematic, logically deductive reasoning found in mathematics. Rapid population growth, also largely a consequence of modern medical technology and the overcoming of famine by scientific methods of food production, is forcing emigration and cultural mixing. The cinema, television, and now the Internet provide a worldview that is communicated around the globe.²⁹ Thus, although there are still distinct centers of culture in the world surrounded by marginal peoples, all cultures are being drawn into a Global Ecumene that is, in effect, an expansion of the Western Ecumene in its present state of secularizing scientific and technological advance. Therefore all these centers look for education in the modern sciences on which progressive technology is based, and such education is mainly available in universities of the western type.

What then was the origin of this special feature of modern global culture, namely, the cultivation of the sciences of nature that have spawned modern technology? It seems that China, isolated as it was up until about 1600 CE, at that time had technologies equal or even superior to those of the contemporary Western Ecumene; yet China afterwards rapidly fell behind.³⁰ Most historians of science agree that the roots of modern science go back in a unique way to that remarkable culture that came to dominate intellectually the Western Ecumene, namely, that of the Greeks. Only in that culture did the concept of “science”—in the sense of a strict system (such as pure mathematics) based on a limited set of intuitively known first principles (axioms) and proceeding by logical deduction—enter into human history. This notion of science incorporated a view of reason as having an autonomy respecting social authority, including religious authority and belief; this view characterized and distinguished Greek philosophy in the ancient world, as also Latin philosophy in the medieval world. This view of human reason gradually, after many setbacks, came to dominate the Western Ecumene that, by its scientific and technological power, is now creating the Global Ecumene. The steps by which this came about will be outlined in the next chapter.

For a long time this concept of an empirical yet logical science of nature remained relatively ineffective, the pursuit of a few curious investigators. Yet its tradition was preserved and somewhat advanced by Islamic thinkers and then by the medieval Christian universities, until finally, around the seventeenth century, with Copernicus, Galileo, and Harvey, it found more effective and technologically fruitful applications in the so-called “scientific revolution.” Only then did the extensive use of special instruments of observation, such as the clock, the ther-

mometer, the telescope, and the microscope, along with the techniques of controlled experimentation, come into play and make possible the gathering of precisely measured data.³¹

In subsequent years, especially after the work of Isaac Newton (1642–1727), this revolution produced the rapidly advancing modern science of nature that has given humanity today its unprecedented technological control of the forces of nature. Although the first modern scientists, such as Galileo and Newton, were strongly Christian in their worldview and saw science as a support for their faith, the religious wars in Europe occasioned by the Protestant Reformation tended to disillusion the intellectual elites with worldviews based on revelation.³² It eventually led many to join the movement called the Enlightenment, which placed its hopes for the solution of human problems not in divine, superhuman powers and prayer but in the purely rational power of modern science and the technological advances it makes possible.

Yet because this new version of natural science was more and more conceived as strictly impersonal, non-teleological, and “value free,” the Enlightenment also gave rise to the Romantic movement.³³ The leaders of this movement looked to the more subjective, intuitive, and creative fine arts to provide a value system that was counter yet complementary to the “value neutrality” of modern, mathematicized natural science. It has often been observed that the fine arts, especially as they are popularized in music, film, theater, and television, together with the competitive excitement of sports, are the religion of “modern” humanity. This is perhaps an exaggeration, yet “modern people” do seek to “create” their ethical values by “social construction” and a kind of competitive “game playing,” much as they create their works of art and their sports contests. For both kinds of values, styles constantly change, often overnight.

Since it is necessary to give a name to this modern worldview, granted that, like other worldviews, it exists with many variations, I will call it “Secular Humanism,” because I believe this indicates both its refusal to be classed with the other world “religions” and its focus on human rather than superhuman powers.³⁴ These two features oppose it to Christian or other types of religious humanism that regard human dignity as derived from its imaging of God or the Absolute. Born of the Enlightenment, Secular Humanism places its trust in the kind of wisdom best found in modern science and its technology, but complemented by the social construction of values. It is this shift to “beings” with a “forgetfulness of Being” that the most influential philosopher of the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger, saw as the destined end of Western culture. By this he meant that modern western man no longer has a vision of the whole of reality (Being) but is lost in a fragmented concentration on the concrete things accessible to technological control.³⁵

Clearly this Secular Humanist worldview ought to be subject to dialogue and criticism on a “level playing field” with other worldviews. In order to be free of ethnocentrism, sociologists of religion and culture generally prefer a functional rather than a substantive definition of religions and other worldviews. Thus Secular Humanism in its varieties is comparable to the other world religions, because it has replaced these religions by providing society with a functionally equivalent worldview. Of course, by this very rejection of the world religions it invites comparison with them.³⁶

Today, Secular Humanists, confident in their current global hegemony, prefer to think of their own worldview as the only truly “modern” one. They take for granted that it has inevitably replaced older worldviews discredited by progressive modern science. But is this not also a form of ethnocentrism? By no means is it self-evident that an advanced science and technology is necessarily dependent on the Secular Humanist worldview. Modern science had its roots in the older religions of the Greeks, the Islamic Arabs, and the Christian medieval universities, and was “revolutionized” by devout Christians like Copernicus and Galileo. Today, the question of the valid foundations of science has again been opened by “postmodern” controversies in the philosophy of science. Postmodernism, while it is sometimes nothing more than a recrudescence of ancient skepticism, has taught us not to take for granted any worldview, including modern Secular Humanism, without critical reexamination and revision.

In particular, Secular Humanism tends to make too sharp a distinction between the philosophies based on reason, which it favors, and the theologies based on faith in revelation, which it rejects. Actually, if one attempts to apply to most cultures this distinction between a wisdom based on reason and a wisdom based on revelation, a host of difficulties are encountered. The wisdom of preliterate cultures blends elements of reason with other elements attributed to guidance by superhuman spirits. Because these worldviews did not adopt the critical methods of Greek thought, they were not inclined to distinguish sharply between reason and revelation, science and faith.

In Chinese thought also it is not easy to decide if Confucianism is a religious “theology” or a rational “philosophy.” Even in India, the sacred texts of Hinduism and of Buddhism are not understood as “revealed” in the same way that a Jew or Christian understands the Bible, or a Muslim the Qur’an, as “the Word of God.” Rather, the Hindu and Buddhist texts are generally regarded as paradigmatic expressions of experiences open to all truth seekers who practice the required disciplines of asceticism and meditation. In these religions, as in Greek Platonism, ultimate truth is thought to be immanent in the human spirit, and often no essential distinction is recognized between the human spirit and the Absolute Spirit. This does not mean, of course, that

in these cultures there has been no development of rational, critical thought parallel to Western philosophy and “science,” but only that it is not so sharply distinguished from religious thought as it came to be in the West under the influence of the Greek conception of philosophy as a relatively autonomous exercise of reason.

Secular Humanism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has experimented with totalitarian Marxist Communism and National Socialism, as well as with capitalist democratic political regimes. Today, after World War II, state-moderated democratic capitalism is seeking to establish itself globally, but finds it must still seek a *modus vivendi* with some totalitarian regimes, such as those of China, Iraq, Iran, and so forth. The older worldviews of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism are also under intense pressure to accommodate themselves as minority cultures to the dominance of Secular Humanism in its many versions. In Islam, these pressures have recently generated a violent reaction to the United States as a secularist superpower threatening all religion. Even more culturally threatened are the marginal, indigenous peoples of the world, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, India, Australia, the Pacific Islands, and the Americas, who are still in transition from worldviews based on ancient tradition to some *modus vivendi* with modern science and technology.³⁷

C. THE CONDITIONS OF EFFECTIVE INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

The fragmentation of knowledge and the absence of the wisdom to “get it all together” are especially dangerous today, a time when there is a global confrontation and intermingling of different cultures. These culture wars could end in a tyrannical global uniformity of the utmost mediocrity. We would much rather like to preserve our rich cultural diversity. Yet we also know that communication and reconciliation at both the level of interdisciplinarity and interculturality is one of the pressing intellectual and social problems of our times. To feel it, one has only to walk the streets of urban America. Hence people today are becoming more keenly aware of the contextuality of thought. When any of us evaluates what is true and false, what “reality” is and what it is not, what is right and what is wrong, we do so within the context of the culture in which we were born and educated to think and speak in some particular social role.

Among linguists and semanticists there is a long-standing controversy between what is called the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis and the Cartesian innate “deep structures” claimed to be uncovered by Noam Chomsky.³⁸ Sapir and Whorf held for a “mould” theory, according to which the features of a culture are shaped by its predominant language. If this is true, can it really be possible to translate the

worldview and value system of one culture into another? Chomsky, on the contrary, argues for a “cloak” theory of culture. He believes that the deep structures of any language reveal a logical pattern of thought common to all human cultures, since language is merely the cloak or expression of thought. Hence all human thinking, in whatever language it is cloaked, can be translated into any other language. Most linguists, it seems, now prefer moderate mould theories that emphasize the difficulties of intercultural translation but do not deny its possibility. Thus, on the one hand, we need not despair of intercultural communication, yet we must always be acutely aware of the dangers of misunderstanding. Language conditions our thinking, but we can be confident that by critical thinking we can find ways to overcome the barriers to communication.³⁹ Not that we will always succeed, since Socrates and Jesus failed!

The most obvious example of intercultural translation is the fact that modern science and its technology and business are actually present and operative at least to a degree throughout the globe. People from all cultures now come to our universities to learn the common language, often very technical in character, required for this kind of communication. No doubt we must grant a contextuality by which there are different “mentalities” or styles of rational thought in different cultures, for which allowance must always be made. Philosophers like Jürgen Habermas can be commended for arguing for “civil discourse” and “communicative competence” in an “ideal speech situation” to provide a meeting of minds.⁴⁰ But we must recognize that this rather utopian concept of dialogue seems proper to the academic and democratic culture of the West. Some ancient cultures, like that of India, were tolerant of different opinions, but to the point of indifference, which made them little interested in seeking a positive, critical reconciliation among these views.

Michel Foucault’s contention that discourse is an exercise of power (or resistance to power) used to dominate the other⁴¹ is certainly often verified; but this power, as Foucault also granted, need not be destructive. It is constructive if it seeks to produce a community of persons in truth, and Foucault never proved that the claim to such an aim has to be dishonest. Jacques Derrida and the fellow “deconstructionists” claim to expose the illusion that face-to-face communication by speech is superior to writing. Yet they argue that even writing is inherently ambiguous, since a text’s meaning cannot be determined without reference to other texts, and so on into an infinite regress of “intertextuality.” Yet would Derrida be writing about the ambiguity of writing were there not a desperate hope, even unconscious, of improving honest communication?⁴²

Some writers on multiculturalism, influenced by the concept of “academic freedom,” assume that for genuine dialogue between worldviews to take place, the participants must accept at least a hypothetical relativism, or (what amounts to much the

same thing) a neutralism as regards truth-claims. This assumption, however, restricts multicultural dialogue to relativistic worldviews by automatically presuming that all nonrelativistic worldviews must be false.

Einstein's theory of relativity made time and place relative to the observer precisely in order to maintain the absolute value of the speed of light and the invariance of basic physical laws in the systems of all observers. The only form of relativism compatible with honest multicultural dialogue requires that questions about the nature of truth, whether it is relative or absolute, be left open for discussion. This openness to criticism is the absolute invariant condition of multicultural dialogue. Hence in this book I frankly state what I think to be true and give my reasons, but I leave the evaluation of these reasons perforce to the reader.

Because of human limitations, most philosophies and ideologies are one-sided and ignore other aspects of reality than the one that most interests them. A good rule in dialogue is to begin by finding out the principal concerns of the other parties. What do they especially fear? If one can then affirm that one also shares these concerns and fears, at least in part, then the other parties may be willing to do the same for one's own concerns and fears. Thus the gap in opinion may be lessened. For example, Protestants are concerned not to be seen "to rely on works righteousness," as they say, whereas Catholics are concerned not to be seen, as they say, "to rely on easy grace." If, therefore, at the beginning of an ecumenical dialogue, the Catholic party affirms reliance on faith in the Savior as the sole source of human righteousness, and Protestants affirm that they do not think faith is an excuse for moral irresponsibility, common ground is established.

While all partners in dialogue must be willing to expose their honest convictions to criticism, they need not grant that these convictions may be false. If, in fact, in the dialogue, the criticisms do expose the falsity of some convictions, those who hold these falsified opinions must face up to their dilemma. Either they must abandon some essential feature of their former worldview and undergo a conversion to what they now see to be truer, or they must break off the dialogue and remain committed, but in bad faith, to what they now know to be false. Thus someone who knows with certitude that the world is round can honestly dialogue with someone who believes it is flat without pretending that perhaps he may be proved wrong or holding that both opinions may be equally true.

Even skeptics who deny that the human mind can ever attain certitude about anything can dialogue with those who claim they know something with certitude, provided they do not demand that those who make this claim first admit they may be wrong. Nor may I demand that relativists in dialogue with me must abandon their relativism but only that they do not require me in advance to abandon my antirelativism. What is required for dialogue is nothing more than the willingness of each party to

expose its positions to criticism and to propose answers to these criticisms that are also open to criticism—in other words, to attempt to understand the other's views in the search for greater truth at all costs.

Thus, it facilitates multicultural dialogue for all partners to make as clear as possible the foundations of their views, “where they are coming from.” Yet some philosophers today attack what they call “foundationalism” on the grounds that what are claimed to be the basic principles of any system of thought or culture are not meaningful outside their context within that total system. These anti-foundationalists claim that all human thinking is historically embedded in such a way that there is no possibility of distinguishing fact from theory, principles from conclusions, truth about the physical environment from psychological projections.⁴³ But if this is true, then it is also impossible for one culture to find any common basis of discussion with another outside of purely pragmatic reasons.

Nevertheless, we need not give up so easily. It would indeed be folly to deny that many subjective factors hinder access to a reality that transcends human subjectivity. If genuinely scientific knowledge is to be in some small measure achieved, these factors need to be critically exposed and attempts made to overcome them. Anti-foundationalists themselves seek to provide a reasoned foundation for their own pragmatic, relativistic worldview. One can therefore dialogue with anti-foundationalists without first agreeing with their anti-foundationalism; and, for their part, anti-foundationalists must expose their anti-foundational convictions to criticism without requiring prior agreement from their dialogue partners. Moreover, each dialogue partner needs to make a careful examination of their foundational presuppositions, including even those that have led them into anti-foundationalism but have perhaps remained implicit and unexpressed.

Persons can be judged really “wise” only if, through reflection, they have become conscious not simply of what their worldview is but also of the bases on which it rests. Nor is anyone truly wise who is unable to enter into dialogue with those of different worldviews. The wise can dialogue fruitfully, because they have achieved a certain warranted confidence in what they think and why they think it, and can formulate this for others to consider. Moreover, it is important to the wise that their views be tested by exposure to other views and be open to the clarification, enrichment, or even correction that such exposure may bring. Finally, the truly wise know how important it is for their own sharing in the truth to share it with others. Yet this multicultural wisdom does not of itself exclude a relativist, neutralist, or anti-foundationalist conception of wisdom from dialogue. Socrates said, “I am wise only in that I know I am not wise”; similarly, it is open to relativists to say, “I am certain only that nothing is certain.” But they must be ready to hear and take seriously criticisms of their skepticism or relativism.

Thus one can distinguish three models of dialogue that have three quite different aims.⁴⁴ One form of dialogue aims at *conversion* and hence is rhetorical in mode, since it is aimed at the will as well as the intellect. In this long book I have attempted to avoid rhetoric even at the expense of appearing pedantic. A second model aims at *refutation* and hence is polemical in mode, since it strives to expose error. Though perhaps I have often failed, I have tried to be objective and fair. A third model aims at *reconciliation*, and its mode is analytic, since it aims to formulate basic assumptions held by the dialogue partners so that what is true in both positions may be recognized. This is, I believe, the model most appropriate to metaphysics, the search for human wisdom, and the model that we need to develop. That development is the aim of this book.

D. THE MODERN UNIVERSITY AS WISDOM'S HOME

These rather complicated conditions for interdisciplinary, multicultural dialogue, whether purely rational or based on some higher form of knowledge, or on both, are not likely to flourish in a culture unless supported by some form of institutionalization. The wisdom of the culture must be embodied in a shaman, a priestly caste, or a faculty of university professors, and in the social structures that support these sages. If different cultures are to dialogue with each other in an exchange or confrontation of their varied wisdom traditions, this dialogue is probably best centered in such an institutional setting. But where are we to look for institutionalized multicultural dialogue today? No doubt it occurs in many modes and many places, yet certainly the institution chiefly devoted to it is not the cave of the shaman or the temple of the priest but the modern university. Indeed it is in the university that multiculturalism and contextuality have posed important issues that are given painstaking discussion. It is there that leaders with the intellectual skills and freedom of thought to transcend their native cultures are being prepared for dialogue with others.

For example, in the United States, for Native, African, or Hispanic Americans to be truly wise and effective leaders for their own people, they must confront the pressures of a multicultural America as the complicated context in which their indigenous minority cultures must survive. Hence they must learn how to make use of these multicultural influences in a positive rather than destructive manner. Today, such indigenous leaders either need a university degree or the counsel of other university educated members of their minority. Only in this way can disadvantaged minorities learn to know the history of their own culture and its language, art, and legal rights sufficiently to defend and promote it effectively in midst of the dominant majority

culture. Hence, any form of wisdom today must become conscious of its multicultural context and make use of the resources of academia to achieve public success.

Yet how is a modern university, or any of our “think tanks,” to engage in or promote multicultural dialogue unless it has reflected on the foundations of its own unity as an institution? To do this it must achieve genuine interdisciplinarity. In a famous book, *The Two Cultures*, C. P. Snow showed how our universities are divided into two worlds, the world of the “hard” sciences and the world of the “soft” humanities, which have quite different notions of truth and method.⁴⁵ Since Snow’s book appeared, in both of these academic worlds “fields” and “departments” and even “interdisciplinary communities” have rapidly further divided and subdivided.

The very term “uni-versity” means many-looking-toward-one, and is related to the term “universe,” the whole of reality. Thus, the name no longer seems appropriate to such a fragmented modern institution whose unity is provided only by a financial administration and perhaps a sports team. The fragmented academy is, of course, the result of the energetic exploration of all kinds of knowledge, but how can it meet the fundamental yearning for wisdom on which each culture is based? Fortunately, recent concern for interdisciplinarity is having its effects. Yet these efforts are generally on a very small scale and lack any basic theory. If we are to make headway in overcoming this fragmentation of knowledge it is necessary first to realize that, though this problem has exploded in our time and must be confronted squarely in this twenty-first century, it was present at the very birth of the proto-universities and must be approached from that long historical perspective.

Although all the great civilizations have had schools of some type for their cultural leaders, these have generally been very different from the modern university. Schools for the preparation of priests, such as those of ancient Egypt and India, or the schools of meditation of the Buddhists, or the remarkable Confucian system of ethical education and testing for public office, served different purposes from our schools and so had different structures and programs.⁴⁶ Today it is chiefly in the modern university that there are to be found scholars who study and compare not only the great historic literate cultures but even the preliterate cultures and their contacts with the literate world. Thus, the wisdom resources of every culture today are most completely preserved, studied, and developed in universities.

Unfortunately, the modern university has sometimes itself been closed to all but the Enlightenment culture. Yet, inevitably, it is being forced to assimilate elements from other cultures that at first appeared quite alien to its ethos. Today, it is struggling to do this on a wider scale and more intentionally. As someone reared in that university culture, I cannot honestly claim to be free of its limitations. Yet my intention is to explore the modern university’s worldview (or worldviews held in tension) and how it can be put in effective dialogue with the worldviews of other cultures for

the sake of mutual enrichment. My hope is that, by doing this, if I have readers formed in other cultures, they will be able to find common links within the desire for wisdom that we all share as humans, links that will facilitate further dialogue.

Thus, to deal with multiculturalism in the university also requires that special attention be given to its interdisciplinarity. How can our universities, if they lack internal unity and common language, communicate with other cultures? To begin the search for an answer to this problem, the next chapter will consider some of the historical developments that account for the present condition of our universities and the decline of their former reliance on “metaphysics” as a unifying discipline.