

My Last Lecture

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University of South Carolina Euphradian Society

24 November 2014

If death is a removal from here to some other place, and if what we are told is true, that all the dead are there, what greater blessing could there be? ... I would like to spend my time there, as here, in examining and searching people's minds, to find out who is really wise among them, and who only thinks he is.

Apology, 41a-b

There was a knock at the door. Startled from his reverie, the Professor rose abruptly from his chair, scattering the two or three dozen tiny slips of paper which had been so neatly arranged on his desk, numbered each and marked with symbols strange, and nearly tripping over a stack of learned, and not-so-learned, tomes which formed a small mountain in the center of the room—"many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore", whose strange teachings he had always sought to remember.

He was puzzled—though not surprised—to find the passageway outside his study empty, when the knocking came again. This time the direction of the sound was clearer. The gentle tap, tap, tapping came from a large and ornately carved Wardrobe standing opposite his desk, a beautiful and imposing piece of mahogany, for many years used to house not clothes but ancient manuscripts.

As the Professor reached for the door of the Wardrobe, his eager expectation of magic worlds was rewarded. The door swung open of its own accord, or rather by the force of the hand which had pushed it from within, the hand—as he delightedly saw at once—of his beloved Socrates, who without an instant's pause gathered up the skirt of his *himation* and nimbly stepped over this most unusual threshold and into the Professor's room. The look of sheer benevolence on his Master's face, a look brimming with light and deeply rooted in "the peace which passeth all understanding", emboldened the Professor to be the first to speak.

“I am ... of course ... immensely honored,” he somewhat stumblingly managed. “But I don’t understand . . . That is to say, it’s unclear to me why . . . I mean ...”—and then words failed him completely.

“It’s alright,” Socrates spoke in a consoling tone, but with an unmistakably ironic twinkle in his eye. “I knew you’d be surprised. You’re wondering why, after all your years of reading and teaching people about ‘my’ ideas, I should have chosen just this moment to come and greet you in person. Aren’t you working on something rather especially important? It was thought perhaps I might be of some use.”

“Well, I don’t know how ‘especially important’ it is,” the Professor cautiously replied, “but I’ve been asked by a student organization—an undergraduate literary society, to be precise, which is “committed to fostering virtuous and eloquent leaders”—to give them a lecture, and I’m imagining it to be My Last Lecture. Unless I succeed in so incensing my audience that they take my life when I’ve finished, it won’t of course actually *be* my last lecture. But I’m nonetheless construing it so, and thus presenting what amounts to a professorial last will and testament, condensing whatever insights and advice I might have and offering them up as a final bequest. And I confess that I’m finding the approach considerably more difficult than I expected. I’m beginning to realize that the imagined finality of the task, or shall I say rather the finality of the imagined task, more than makes up for the fact that the talk is to be ‘relatively short and informal.’”

While the Professor was speaking, Socrates had been moving quite deliberately about the study, taking stock of the various books on the shelves, reverencing the icons on the walls, and flipping through the pages of a calendar he had noticed on the desk, this with the bemused expression of one who is no longer accustomed to the strictures of time. But now, taking advantage of a small cushion he had found in one corner of the room, he seated himself Buddha-like on the floor, with remarkable deftness for one his age. Himself now an icon, he seemed rooted to the earth, just as in Alcibiades’ account, his flowing garment hieratically settled around him. It was obvious he had heard everything the Professor said.

“‘My Last Lecture’,” Socrates pronounced the words slowly. “This does indeed present quite a challenge. It was doubtless for this reason my ticket was changed.”

“Your ticket?” queried the Professor.

“Yes, I was supposed to be going to Dharamsala to meet with the Dalai Lama. He’s been having some trouble, you know, walking the fine line between conversation and compromise in his dialogues with modern scientists. And then I was to journey on to Cairo to consult with the ‘*Ulama* at Al-Azhar. They’re much beset these days with the problem of how to explain—in a way which breaks through the media filters and challenges the western stereotypes—the enormous difference in traditional Islamic law between the life-giving death of the true Muslim martyr and the death-giving life of the terrorists. But orders were handed down late last night that my destination had changed, and so here I am in this very genial study of yours, ready and willing to help you think through your departing disquisition. What do you plan to talk about?”

“I’m delighted to see your final wish was granted, Socrates,” the Professor smiled, “and that you’ve been spending eternity, just as you’d hoped at your trial, in continued midwifery. As for what I plan to talk about, I’m afraid I’m quite stumped. Given the opportunity to put what I know—or what I *think* I *may* know—on the line, I’m not sure where to start. There’s so much one could say.”

“Hence,” said Socrates, “those many slips of paper I see arranged on your desk, numbered each and marked with symbols strange. Let’s try to bring some order to this muddle. Supposing you reduced all you’ve been pondering to its barest essentials, distilling it down into—say—three basic points, what would they be?”

“I hadn’t realized you were a Trinitarian, Socrates. Isn’t that a tad anachronistic of you?”

“Oh, I’ve kept up with my reading. But don’t be misled. I’m a Unitarian, too—and a Non-Dualist, for that matter, if we’re keeping track numerically. But you’re not answering my question.”

“Very well,” the Professor gathered himself. “I suppose the topics I would most like to touch on are these: Religion as Science, Death as Pure Gain, and Thinking as Act. As I’m sure you can see, in each case I have you to thank for what little I can say on these subjects.”

“Yes, I *do* see that,” Socrates responded, “but only because I see you from the inside out. I’m afraid those in your audience who are not yet blessed with my peculiar relation to space will require some assistance. So let’s try to elaborate. First of all:

Religion as Science. Would I be correct in assuming that when you use the word “science” you *don’t* mean ‘empirical knowledge of the material world’?”

“Of course”, the Professor said. “As you yourself taught me, ‘empirical knowledge’ is a contradiction in terms. Science means knowledge, and to *know* a thing is to have perfect certainty as to its existence and nature, something no amount of seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, or smelling could ever yield—enhanced though these senses might be by any number of expensive, federally-funded instruments. The world, or seeming world, of the senses, which appears to most people so substantial and solid, is but a whirling play of ever shifting energies, called into being by those senses, or rather by the expectations of minds which have misidentified themselves with their bodies and which have grown accustomed to depending on their eyes and ears and other physical organs to inform them about what they *think* is real. Isn’t this what you were getting at in your Allegory of the Cave and in the careful distinction you made there between opinion and knowledge?”

Quite transported by his own grandiloquent diction, the Professor had failed to notice, but for the last several seconds a force, at first just a ripple, had been spreading outward from the very center of Socrates’ belly, and it now broke like a tidal wave, shaking the old man’s body from top to bottom, as he boomed with laughter. “Did I say something wrong?” the Professor asked with dismay. “What’s so funny?”

“Two things,” the Master said, choking down another hearty laugh. “Two things, at least! First, I find it *most* amusing that you would credit me with a doctrine that sounds decidedly more Hindu or Buddhist than Greek. I can see why you’re always telling your students you’re not much of a scholar! Second, it’s decidedly comical to suppose that you could persuade anyone of the truth of these high-sounding notions in a single lecture. ‘Minds misidentified with their bodies’, indeed! Do you seriously believe anyone will have the slightest idea what you’re talking about?”

The Professor, shame-faced, was struggling inwardly, undecided as to whether he should defend himself or offer up a respectful concession. What came out was something of each. “You’re right of course, Socrates. It’s foolish to think I could say anything really valuable on this subject in so short a time, especially to so unprepared an audience. But I’ve spent my career trying to help people understand and gain access to the true Sources

of certainty, and if this is to be my valedictory address, it wouldn't make sense not to try, one final time, to shed a little light on the real meaning of knowledge. And besides, look at you, sitting there like a yogi! Is there really so great a difference between an Athenian Hindu and an Indian Platonist?"

"Relax, Professor." Socrates motioned kindly with his hand, beckoning his offended host to sit beside him. "What you say about the underlying unanimity between our far-flung traditions may be true. But even if it isn't, my disciple Plato was right to have implied—and you to have inferred—that the only genuine science, the only truly methodical way of ascertaining what's real, is embedded in the world's great religions. In fact this is what I was going to talk with the Dalai Lama about, for though he sits atop one of the subtlest and most magnificent metaphysical treasures in the world, even he sometimes forgets himself when endeavoring to meet the physicists and bio-feedback experts on their own turf and in their own terms.

"But *embedded* needs stressing. As you know very well, Professor, the transformative techniques of the Tibetan tradition, like those of every authentic religion, often lie buried under a mountain of manuscripts, archeological artifacts, social conventions, ritual practices, and devotional allegiances. And since the majority of self-styled experts in your field spend all their time surveying the mountain and wrangling over its age and size and composition, utterly oblivious to the treasures beneath, an academic audience is about the *last* group of people capable of distinguishing the Light from its refractions. If you tell them that Religion is Science, most will write you off as insane."

"Alright, so supposing I make it clear," the Professor brightened, "that what I have in mind is not *all* religion or religion *as such*, but the doctrines and contemplative methods of the great spiritual masters: Patanjali and Shankara among the Hindus, Ibn Arabi or Rumi in the case of Islam, and in Christianity a Maximus the Confessor or Meister Eckhart."

Socrates had the look of a proud alumnus just returned from a class reunion. "Oh yes, these are first rate scientists, to be sure—and good friends, I might add. But just reciting this rather odd list of names will hardly serve your purpose. Even the most sympathetic members of your audience could hardly be blamed for refusing to discard

what they've been taught about experimentation and evidence—to say nothing of the very nature of matter, time, and space—on the strength of a few hastily marshaled esoteric allusions. We're talking, after all, about a total transformation of consciousness, and thus the thorough uprooting of the belief nearly everyone has of being locked inside a bag of skin. People don't take lightly to having their most cherished convictions overturned. I've had some personal experience in that area, you know! Speaking of which, perhaps we should go on to the second of your points, something about death, if my ancient memory serves.”

Nodding agreement, the Professor turned to the books arrayed beside him, pulling a hefty and much-annotated volume from near the bottom of a stack and opening it to a page he had already marked.

“In assuming this *is* My Last Lecture,” he chose his words carefully, “I must also assume that I'm terminally ill, in fact nearly dead. As I've always told people, being a professor is for me a vocation and not just a job, and as long as I can hobble, or for that matter be wheeled or carried, into a college classroom, I'll want to teach. It is with me as it was for you with your *daemon*. There's an inner voice, and I cannot help but obey.”

“But if I'm dying,” the Professor continued, “what better moment to speak about the real meaning, the inward event, of death itself? Before you arrived, I was looking through Plato's record of your conversation with Phaedo and friends, and I thought my lecture might be a good place to quote a maxim of yours which I've been endeavoring to follow, however feebly, for many years: ‘Those who pursue philosophy aright study nothing but dying and being dead.’ You *did* say that, didn't you?”

“I *may* have.” Socrates appeared to have no interest in biographical or bibliographical details. “But you yourself know what it's like when students quote you out of context and years after the fact!”

The Master had taken the *Collected Dialogues* from the Professor's hands and was running his finger down the page. “Hmm.... Yes, just what I thought. I think you'd *also* do well to pay attention to context. I see here what I'm supposed to have said—it *is* a memorable little maxim, isn't it?—but now look how Plato goes on: ‘And Simmias laughed and said, “By Zeus, Socrates, I don't feel much like laughing just now, but you made me laugh. For I think the multitude, if they heard what you just said about

philosophers, would say you were quite right.... [They] would agree with you entirely in fact that philosophers desire death, and they would add that they deserve it!” I’m afraid, Professor, you’re going to find yourself confronting a flummoxed, if not laughing, multitude of your own if you pursue this topic. If a single lecture isn’t the right place for broaching the first of your forgotten truths—that of Religion as Science—it seems even less the proper venue for meditating on ... what did you call it? ‘Death as Pure Gain’? Your audience, I’m assuming, will be mostly undergraduates. I can assure you you’ll never persuade the young they’re anything short of immortal, even if you make them sit alone all night among the bones in a charnel house.”

“But that’s *not* the sort of death I had in mind,” the Professor objected sharply. He was becoming increasingly frustrated, increasingly concerned he would never get his lecture written, and he was therefore paying no attention to his manners. But then he caught himself. “I’m sorry,” he blushed. “I don’t mean to argue with you.”

“Well, why in Heaven’s name *not*?” the Master shot back. “What do you think good conversation *is*? Argument, Professor, argument! I think you’ve been to too many academic conferences and committee meetings. Does no one *struggle* for the Truth anymore?”

Taken completely aback by this response, the Professor tried to read the expression on Socrates’ face. What he saw, or thought he saw, was an uncanny—and unearthly—combination of fierceness and delight. The lines around the mouth and the set of the jaw were unmistakable signs of deep conviction, and something more than conviction: an implacable determination of will and intensity of intellection such as no mortal countenance had ever revealed to him. But there was at the same time a sparkling mirth and a look of joyous invitation in the eyes—a look that said, “Finally, you’re getting this. Don’t just sit back and listen. Fight with me!”

Bracing himself for what might come, and putting aside all thought of his impending deadline, the Professor took a deep breath and replied, “The death I’m talking about when I speak of Death as Pure Gain is *not* the death measured by the flat-line on an electroencephalograph—not a merely biological death. It’s the death that comes, or should come, *before* the body dies, a death into Life that puts an end to all ends, the death prescribed in that wonderful quatrain by Angelus Silesius:

Die thou before thou diest,
That so thou shalt not diest
When thou dost come to die;
Else thou diest utterly.

But *surely*, dear Teacher, it was this prior death you too had in mind in your maxim: ‘Those who pursue philosophy aright study nothing but dying and being dead.’”

“*You* may be sure what I meant, Professor, but all I’ve ever been certain of is my ignorance. Perhaps, however, if you help me we can together unravel the mystery of a death before death.”

“I’m happy to be of assistance, Socrates.”

“It is *I* who am the servant, my friend. This is your lecture, and the thoughts you are pregnant with are your own. But if the delivery is to be a successful one and the child fit enough to grow to manhood, you mustn’t just answer as you suppose I prefer. You must say what you really think.”

“I shall do my best to be honest.”

“Very good. Now, you say, or say that *I* said, or rather quote Plato as having *said* I said, that the best of lives, the philosophic and examined life, consists in a perpetual examination of death and dying.”

“Whether you said it or not, Socrates, this is what I believe.”

“Do you also believe that the examination of a thing requires or presupposes some participation in it, or is hearsay enough?”

“I’m not sure I follow you.”

“Consider then how one learns a language. Could I be said to have ‘studied’ English, let’s say, if I’d never heard this language pronounced, nor seen a printed English word, nor ever tried to speak or write in English?”

“I catch your drift, Socrates. No, the student of a language must in some way be involved in his subject if he expects to learn it. And may I compliment you, by the way, on your mastery of our tongue? Your diction is impeccable. Where did you pick up so large a vocabulary?”

The Master smiled. “I’ve had many good tutors. I used to make fairly regular stopovers in London, and Geoff and I would sometimes walk in the evening along the old

road toward Canterbury, chatting as we strolled, and Bill was often up for some lively banter after one of his plays at the Globe. Joining Lewis and his friends for a pint or two at the Bird and Baby also helped keep me fit. But we stray from the topic. Can you see what our examination of examination implies?”

“I believe so, Socrates. It implies that any true examination of death requires of the student that he in some way be *mortified*. Reading an obituary is not the study of death. Dissecting a cadaver is not the study of death. Even imagining oneself, like Tom Sawyer, at one’s own funeral is not the study of death. Only in dying is there a true study of death.”

“So then, Simmias and the others were right,” said Socrates, “and *I* was right when I told you you’d only be laughed at.”

“I don’t understand.” The Professor was confused. “Why would anyone laugh at this?”

“I myself *wouldn’t* laugh,” said the Master, though his eyes *were* laughing. “But it’s not very hard to see why others would do so when they hear you tell them, in that crisp and somewhat melodramatic style you so often affect in the classroom, that the only good philosopher is a dead one!”

“But that’s not what I’m saying!” came the desperate retort. “Or rather, yes, I’m saying that, but I don’t mean it. I mean I don’t mean that the maxim should be taken as you suggest!” The Professor was by now completely entangled in his words, and he looked as if he might begin to cry. His recent bravado notwithstanding, he wasn’t doing nearly as well with real Socratic dialogue as he might have imagined he would. Seeing his poor student’s predicament, the Teacher was all compassion.

“In the old days,” said Socrates, “when I was still in that state which the living call life and was obliged to ferret out my interlocutor’s thoughts through dialectic alone, we would have been obliged to take the long way round. But now that I’m no longer subject to Newtonian Laws—I’ve had words with Isaac about this, by the way—and can easily look out through your eyes, it might be better if I just slipped into your space for a moment or two and said for you what you’re trying to say, which is in any case what I’d planned to talk with the ‘*Ulama* about during our meetings in Cairo. It would do me good

to rehearse, and it will save you some time. I know you're anxious about your little talk, and we haven't yet gotten to the third and last of your three points."

The Professor shrugged his shoulders, feeling spent. All the short-lived fight had gone from him. "Fine," he sighed. "Whatever you think is best."

No sooner had he uttered these defeated words than his whole being began to reverberate, as if resonating to a pitch too deep for ears to hear. Where just the instant before he had felt drugged and drowsy, he was now fully awake—or rather Something more than he was fully awake within him. A blossoming lucidity unlike anything he had ever experienced had taken hold of his mind. It was dazzlingly bright and infinitely desirable. And now It, or He, or They began to speak.

"Pure gain indeed were death," the words were intoned like some mighty, magic spell, "were it a dying to all position and resistance, an unceasing ecstasy of love. To gain and guard himself doth man contend for place, a space of flesh to name his own. But pursuit of place is betrayal of Being, a quest for what is false and fabulous. He who 'counteth not equality with the Gods a thing to be grasped, but emptieth himself, taking the form of a servant'—such a one alone may surpass all boundary, discovering anew What he always is."

Something gently released him then, and the Professor felt as if he were falling, falling from a height beyond the sky, falling past the Nine Choirs of Angels, down past the stars and through the Seven Spheres of the Planets, falling down, down through the clouds until at last he slipped through the roof of his house and into the crumpled shape huddled on the floor of his study.

Socrates was ministering to him with those best of gifts, a bite of warm brownie and a sip of milk, when the Professor came to and realized where he was. "Here, my friend," the Master was speaking, and his affectionate smile was generosity itself. "This will help. You need to rest a minute."

It was in fact several minutes before the color began returning to the Professor's cheeks. Socrates, satisfied that his student was ready to proceed with their tutorial, put the plate of sweets aside and gently said, "I'm afraid we'd better get back to your lecture. Time is running out, and I need to be leaving you shortly."

“I ... didn’t ... suppose ... you would be ... affected ... by time.” As the Professor slowly and rather awkwardly pronounced these words, the very first of a newly tasted Life, they felt somehow strange in his mouth—“thick” or “sticky” were the only adjectives he could think of later—as if, having run along a beach, he now found himself knee deep in the surf and thus obliged, not yet having learned to swim, to force his legs forward against an unfamiliar pressure.

“Oh, I’m *not*,” said Socrates. “Not affected at all. For me time is no more. But it’s still immensely important to the people I’m sent to, and I mustn’t keep them waiting. You appear to me ready—if understandably reluctant—to continue our dialogue, so let’s try to push on. Tell me please about the third of your ‘basic points’. You said earlier you wished at least to touch on the topic of Thinking as Act. What exactly do you have in mind?”

“I don’t know ... *exactly*,” the Professor responded. He was regaining his footing in the world of syllables, and speech came a bit more easily now. “Or rather I do *know* exactly, but I don’t know exactly *how*, or whether it’s *I* or Someone *Else* who does the knowing.” He chuckled softly, well aware this sentence would seem preposterous to anyone but Socrates, but no longer particularly anxious as to whether his lecture would be well received. Even if only a handful of his audience could glimpse the rough outlines of what he hoped to convey, he would be content.

“If you’d like, however,” the Professor continued, “what I *can* tell you is what I *would* have said until just a few minutes ago. And perhaps it’s just as well to put the clock back, since no one is ever going to believe what just happened anyway.”

“That sounds like an excellent plan,” Socrates agreed, “and may I suggest you do your very best to keep things as simple as possible? Your poor auditors will have doubtless grown weary by the time you reach this concluding part of your presentation, and you owe it to them to be as straightforward and as brief as possible.”

“Alright I’ll try,” said the Professor, “but I’m warning you it’s not going to be easy. Because when I talk about Thinking as Act, I’m talking about the key to virtually everything else. To understand Thinking as Act is to see precisely the sense in which Religion is Science and why Death is Pure Gain. This is the fulcrum upon which the

other two topics must be precisely balanced. One wrong move here, and everything will come crashing down.”

The Professor lowered his eyes, pondering how best to proceed. It was clear to Socrates that his student had gained enough strength to make his way forward at least a few steps on his own, and the Master therefore remained searchingly silent.

“Everything has become so irremediably bottoms-up in the world of academia,” the Professor lamented. “The reductionists are everywhere, and the irony is that they seem utterly incapable of understanding how incoherent and self-contradictory their theories are. If what they say were true, it *wouldn't* be. The widespread acceptance of Darwinian evolutionism is but a case in point. Leaving aside whether this biological theorem is of any use in explaining the physical dimension of creatures, it's obviously of no use at all in explaining man's mind, or rather, if it *is* of use, there's no *mind* to explain.”

Socrates gently interrupted. “My dear Professor, I share your regrets, and I agree completely that reductionism has become a nearly universal problem, which any Last Lecture worth its salt should attempt to address. But the sand in my glass is running out, and so, I expect, will be the patience of your listeners, so you'd better get to the point.”

“Well, the point is this.” The Professor took a deep breath. “The evolutionists, and historicists, and behavioral psychologists, and socio-biologists—and all the other brands of nothing-butterists—so easily have their way in the academic arena because people are no longer able to think in the present tense. No, I shouldn't put it that way. To be honest, I have no idea whether man's powers were any greater in this respect in the past. Perhaps not—perhaps what I'm speaking of has been a common human disability from time immemorial. If Plato's descriptions of your encounters with the Sophists are even close to the mark, the sickness is an ancient one indeed.”

Socrates said nothing, but the silence seemed to betoken agreement.

“Nor of course do I mean to imply that they're haven't been, and aren't today, exceptions to the rule: *you're* clearly exceptional, and thanks to you *I* felt rather exceptional myself a few moments ago! But by and large what I say is undeniable. People seem incapable of a truly active mentation—of staying focused, by a deliberate act of

will, on what the poet Coleridge called ‘the mind’s self-experience in the act of thinking’. They’ve forgotten (if they ever knew) that ‘thinking’ is a *present active* participle.”

“It’s also a gerund, of course,” Socrates winked, “but I do see your point.” He was now speaking more as a coach or a trainer than as a master, and his voice was encouraging. “If however you really expect to enter into this rarified realm in your lecture, you must do at least two things. You need to make it much clearer than you have so far why the evolutionists and their ilk can’t explain the Act of Thinking, and you need to provide your listeners with at least a hint as to how they might become active thinkers themselves. It wouldn’t be fair to diagnose their malady and then leave them no hope.”

The Professor sighed, not for the first time in their conversation, but it was no longer out of exasperation or discouragement. It was simply that the full weight of the task he had set himself was more apparent than ever. Maybe he *had* bitten off too much. But at this point it was too late to turn back.

“It seems to me,” he chose his words carefully, “that if I could just get my audience to begin *looking at their looking*, I might be able to do what you ask and kill these two birds with a single stone. Or if even beginning this difficult process is too much to expect, and it probably is, I would at the very least like for them to understand that there *is* such a process—that special methods of training exist for precisely this purpose: methods capable of turning the energies of knowing back on themselves so as to awaken in the knower a perpetually active state of inner clarity. Since most of my listeners will doubtless be from Christian backgrounds, it might make sense to single out Hesychasm, with its ancient techniques for “guarding the heart”, as a prime example. But of course I won’t be able to go into details. There won’t be enough time. And besides, a public forum isn’t the appropriate setting.”

The Professor seemed to be gathering steam and continued in an increasingly self-confident voice.

“What perhaps I *can* do, however—at least for a few of my listeners—is to get them to see that even in its present, largely somnambulant form, their power of thinking simply *can’t* be accounted for by anything less alive, less conscious, less actual, less fully in the present than itself. Too many people, too many supposedly intelligent people, have been seduced by the great Reductionist Lie, in one or another of its Hydra-like forms.

Many have come to believe that the mind is nothing more than the brain and thinking merely a biochemical activity. But even those of a less materialist bent have been mesmerized by the claim that ideas are merely the conditioned effects of culture, or gender, or historical period, or political persuasion, or race, or tax bracket.

“More than anything else in my lecture, I’d like to help my audience understand concretely, deep down in their very bones, that *if* these and other such assertions were true, they’d be just as true for the people who make them as they are for the rest of us, from which it logically follows that the assertions themselves wouldn’t be worth taking seriously, insight of any kind into objective reality having been declared impossible. People need to be assisted in seeing that every declaration of truth, even the sophomorically incoherent assertion that ‘There is *no* truth’, necessarily presupposes a mind radically *free* from all biological determination and cultural conditioning. Every one of my books and all the articles I’ve ever written have included reminders of this essential principle, and anything purporting to resemble my parting shot to the world will have to return one final time to this immensely important issue. For it seems to me undeniable that ...”

The Professor stopped in mid-sentence. Socrates had said nothing, but he had suddenly risen to his feet, and the graceful alacrity of his movement was enough to remind his student that time was short. The expression in the Master’s eyes was as concentrated and attentive as ever, but the attention seemed somehow larger and more comprehensive now, and it was obvious that what he was attending *to* in the Professor’s study, however undividedly, was but a fragment of his total vision, only one tiny point within a vast plane of responsibilities.

“I suppose it’s in the nature of things,” Socrates wryly observed, “that a professor should be *professorial*, but you really do talk a lot, you know!”

Earlier in their dialogue the Professor would have been embarrassed by these teasing words. But he was happy to find that all he felt now was a desire to join in the fun. “I *can* be rather longwinded, *can’t* I?” he grinned. “But that’s how we academics get promoted and tenured, you know. The more printed, published, and peer-reviewed our pronouncements the better! But seriously, Socrates, I would be immeasurably grateful for any suggestions you have as to how I can be more succinct.”

“But wouldn’t that be self-defeating, my friend?” the Master replied. He paused for a moment before continuing, as if to give the Professor sufficient space in which to make this observation his own. “Whatever suggestions I could offer you couldn’t help but be less alive, less conscious, less actual, less fully in the present than your own active efforts to think, and if it’s this very *act* that you mean to stress in your lecture, then surely you ought to do so in a way that *exhibits* what you’re talking about.”

The Professor wished he were once again lifted up into that exhilarating and exalted state of wakefulness he had so recently, if very briefly, enjoyed. His mind seemed so sluggish now, so out of pace with itself, its energy divided, diverted, and distracted once again by a buzzing multitude of propositions and arguments. All he could do was look confused.

“You need to consider again, Professor, and with much greater care, what it means to say that ‘people need to be assisted in seeing’ these things.”

“I’m happy to reconsider *everything*,” the Professor replied. “You were the one who taught me, after all, that ‘dialectic is the science which proceeds by demolishing its own hypotheses’. But surely you of all people won’t disagree as to the need for assistance in this difficult task.”

“I don’t disagree in the slightest,” Socrates shook his head. “The question, however, is what *form* this assistance should take. You want me to tell you what to say so that you in turn can tell your listeners what to think. But I repeat, wouldn’t that be self-defeating?” The Master had begun moving toward the open door of the Wardrobe, and though his words remained as clear as crystal, his student had the curious sense that the pitch of his voice had begun descending toward an ever deeper register. “It was as if,” the Professor said later, “I were standing alongside a railway track, listening to the whistle of a speeding train as it passed away from me into the distance.”

“It’s a *very* poor teacher,” Socrates was saying, “who seeks to inject insight, as if it were some fluid in a hypodermic syringe. If you think you can activate your audience by doing something *for* them, or by giving something *to* them, or by *persuading* them to engage in some behavior, I’m afraid you’ll only perpetuate the Reductionist Lie, both in them and in you. Even if they believe you—in fact *especially* if they ‘believe’ you—all

you'll have succeeded in doing is attaching them to yet another *thought* as if it were *thinking*, as if a perfect passive participle were the present active."

Having offered this grammatical lesson, Socrates tightened the sash about his waste, made a small bow toward an icon of the Mother of God, embraced his disconcerted student in what was meant to be a comforting hug, and—bestowing a parting smile and an encouraging wink—stepped decisively over the threshold and into the Wardrobe.

"Yes, yes, I see what you're saying, Master," the Professor pleaded, "but ... but what am I supposed to *do* about it? What would *you* do in my place?"

"I wouldn't give a Last Lecture," said the emptiness where Socrates had been just an instant before. "I'd lead a First Discussion."

As the sound of these words trailed away—away into the distance, but also it seemed into the very depths of his heart—the Professor suddenly shook himself and blinked his eyes. "Lord, have mercy!" he exclaimed as he consulted his watch. "How very strange! I must have fallen asleep and been dreaming. Look at the time!" The day had nearly drawn to a close, and the hour of the lecture would soon be upon him. He must finalize his preparations, come what may.

Blinking again as he stared at the two or three dozen tiny slips of paper which had been so neatly arranged on his desk, numbered each and marked with symbols strange, he suddenly swept them aside—and then chuckled at himself for this uncharacteristic act of deliberate rashness. Time was short, but he knew he must begin again from scratch. Picking up his pen with one hand, he reached with the other for some fortification from the plate beside him. "My goodness, what's this?" he said, less surprised to find the brownie than to find it so warm. It seemed in fact to be fresh from the oven. "Where in the world," he wondered, "had *that* come from?"