DON'T FENCE US IN: The liberating role of philosophy

Professor J.G. Donders

Inaugural Lecture

University of Nairobi
Taifa Hall
10th March 1977
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Professor Joseph Gerard DONDERS was born at Tilburg, The Netherlands, in 1929. He got his primary and secondary school education in his home-town. After the second world war he received an award for his resistance work as a schoolboy during the war.

He studied Philosophy and Theology in The Netherlands, Scotland and Italy. He obtained his B.A. in philosophy in 1958, M.A. in 1960 and Doctorate in Philosophy in 1962 with a thesis on the intelligibility of the evolution theory ("L'intelligibilité de L'évolution", Sint Michielsgestel, The Netherlands, 1962). From 1962 until 1970 he was lecturing in The Netherlands, mainly at the Institute for Philosophical and Theological Studies (GIT), a Faculty at the University of Tilburg. From 1967 till 1970 he made some study and lecture tours in Uganda, Tanzania and Burundi. He was appointed at the University of Nairobi as a visiting scholar in 1970. In 1974 he was appointed Professor and Chairman of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies.

In 1972 he was appointed Warden of Hall 1. At the moment he is the Warden of Hall 10 and 11 as well as acting as Warden of Hall 3. Professor Donders is the Secretary of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK), of which he is one of the co-founders. He is co-editor of "Africa, thought and practice". He is the chairman of the Council of Higher Studies in Religion in Kenya.

He was ordained as a priest in 1957, and in 1974 the Archbishop of Nairobi Cardinal Maurice Otunga asked him to take care of Saint Paul’s Catholic Chapel at the University of Nairobi main campus.

Professor Donders is the author of eight books on philosophical and religious issues in his mother tongue. He has published two booklets in English. ‘How to study’ (Uzima, Nairobi, 1976) gives the text of his lectures on this subject to the freshmen of the University of Nairobi. It was translated in Kiswahili 'Mbinu za kujitunza' (TMP, Tabora, 1976). ‘Expatriate Jesus’, a series of fourteen of his sermons in Saint Paul’s (Gazelle Books, Nairobi, 1975) became a local bestseller. A new series of 52 sermons will be published at the end of 1977 by Orbis Books, New York, under the title ‘Jesus a refugee in Africa’.

Professor Donders is unmarried. His hobbies are talking with people, reading, preparing and giving public lectures and doing his work.
DON'T FENCE US IN:  
_The liberating role of philosophy_

Mr. Chairman, Sir,  
ladies and gentlemen,  
some years ago my predecessor  
Bishop Stephen Charles Neill,  
dedicated his inaugural lecture  
as Professor of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies  
to the role of religious studies in this University  
under the title:  
‘and this should not be forgotten’.  
I think it therefore proper  
to dedicate my inaugural lecture  
to the role of philosophy in this University.

I would like to start,  
Mr. Chairman,  
by drawing your attention  
to the strange name  
given to the science  
I am responsible for,  
through my appointment  
at this University of Nairobi.  
That name is PHILOSOPHY.  
This name does not seem to indicate  
anything specific;  
and it does not even seem to be very positive  
in its content.  
It only means  
that one is  
a _philos_, that is a friend,  
of _Sophia_, that is wisdom:  
that one is eager to be wise;  
that one would like to be wise  
or something like that.

I think that there is sharp contrast  
between this type of science,  
and this type of approach,  
and the science  
and approach  
of all the other learned,  
and very often very learned departments  
at this Institute of learning.
Those Departments, do not say that they would love to know something about human anatomy, and history, about biology and government.

They say that they know. That is at least, Mr. Chairman, the impression they create, when calling their Departments the Departments of human anatomy, of economics, of history, of law, of government, of education, engineering, linguistics and so on.

Some Departments seem to express this apparent certainty about what they are doing and teaching, by adding to the object of their study and insight, that small Greek word logos, -logy. They speak about their subject, as about sociology, the knowledge of the intra-action in human groups, they speak about psychology, zoology, pharmacology, entomology, geology, sexology and even criminology.

Mr. Chairman, to a philosopher all this is highly astonishing. How can a man know, and how does a man know that he knows? In their justifications, in their articles and books, those scientists say, that they see, that they observe, that they measure objectively, that through their senses they have access to the things as they are. They maintain, that what they see is verifiable or falsifiable by everybody.

But, Mr. Chairman, are they not aware of the fact that the world around them, and that they themselves are changing under the influence of those so called objective observations? Do they not notice that whatever they do is based on suppositions, assumptions and theories, they formed themselves, when formulating their methods?

The great African scholar and philosopher Leopold Senghor, wrote once, that he wondered how anyone could maintain to know about an orange, a simple thing like an orange, after having cut it up, after having prepared it for use under a microscope, and after having analysed it in a way, that destroyed the orange completely during that process. They say that they see, but it seems very often, that they do not see at all, though they are looking.

May I give you two examples of this phenomenon, and let us take the examples from a scientific description of the thing that is nearest to us, our own human anatomy, our own human frame.

In 1628 William Harvey wrote a small booklet of about eighty pages
that would revolutionise our whole medical world:
Exercitatio anatomica de motu cordis
et sanguinis in animalibus.
In that booklet he compared
the heart
with a pump.
And as we all know
pumps make a noise,
they beat.
Therefore, our hearts beat too.
This is, I suppose, common knowledge to all of us,
we feel our own and each other's hearts beat
under certain circumstances.
We are all accustomed to count those beats
via our pulses.
But before William Harvey
and his comparison,
no physiologist
had ever heard the heart beat.
They did not even hear it beat
years after that discovery.
Seven years later
in 1635,
Emilio Parisano,
a Roman doctor living in Venice,
with a very extensive private clinic,
wrote a booklet:
De cordis et sanguinis motu ad Gulielmum Harveum,
and in that booklet
Parisano tried to ridicule
Harvey's argument,
writing:
'Who ever heard the heart beat.
Nobody overhere in Venice ever heard
a heart beat.
May be it is because we are deaf,
in which case we might be able to hear,
when Harvey would lend us his ear'

Why did they not hear?
Why had they never heard before?
And if such a mistake could be made,
accompanied with such a scientific certainty
on what is scientific certainty based?
It is then no longer only a question
of what we know,
but even of what we hear and see.

To give another,
my promised second example.
It is again taken from a description
of what is nearest to us:
our own human frame.
In 1538, about a century before Harvey’s book,
Andreas Vesalius wrote a book
Tabulae anatomicae sex.
He wrote his book,
or better he made those six anatomical graphs
after having opened the human body,
and he saw our liver as having five lobes.
How could he have seen five.
as there are only two.
Vesalius saw correctly
that our lower jaw
consists of ONE bone.
But all his colleagues
were very surprised
because up to then,
they had always observed
that our lower jaw consists out of two bones.
Mr. Chairman,
how is it possible
that one saw this
through all those centuries of human history,
with all its skulls
on battlefields,
in cemeteries, mortuaries
and at execution-places?

My co-patriot Antoni van Leeuwenhoek
who invented or perfected the microscope
looked through it at
that mystery of life
the human sperm,
and he saw,
he really saw,
because he made a drawing of it,
in that seed
a very small folded up
human being,
with its knees under its chin.
That little thing,
Mr. Chairman,
remained seen for centuries
though it most probably never had been there.
Why are we now so sure that we see it all?
I think, Mr. Chairman, that we all might agree
on the fact that a dog
and a flea on the back of that dog,
and a parasite in the stomach of that flea,
that a fish
and a beetle
see a different world
from the world we see,
although we all seem to be in that same world.
They do not see all we see,
maybe we do not see what they see,
but how can we be sure that we see all?
And further, Mr. Chairman, do we human beings all see the same?
Do you think that a pious clergyman,
an up-country tailor,
and a romantic young man,
see the same thing
when they visit a town like Nairobi,
that city in the sun, for the first time?
I doubt that very much, because when they have returned home, they will tell different stories to those who care to listen to them.
The tailor will say that Nairobi is unbelievably beautiful, because people overthere are well dressed, and tailors well paid.
The romantic young man will say that Nairobi is unbelievably beautiful, because he saw overthere so many nice young ladies.
And the pious clergyman in his turn will say that Nairobi is unbelievably beautiful, because there are overthere so many churches full with alleluiah singing faithful.

But let me come back to philosophy and philosophers.

A philosopher is a lover of wisdom.
I admit that nobody seems to know what wisdom is exactly supposed to mean.
And yet everybody knows how some among us are called wise, and how some of us are called unwise.

Together with Dr. Henry Odera a Senior Lecturer in our Department, we have been trying in cooperation with our first generation of philosophy students in the Department, to find out about that wisdom and about the wise men and women in this Republic of Kenya.
We have been trying to localise them in the East, the West, the North, the South and in the centre by asking the people of those regions, whom they considered to be wise.
A list was made, and thanks to a grant from the Deans’ Committee of this University, those wise people were visited.
They were asked not to answer questions but to air their views.

The significant thing about those people thus interviewed, Mr. Chairman, was, that though considered as wise by all the people around them, they themselves very often did NOT consider themselves as wise.

The sage Paul Mbuya from Karachuonyo location, a man as old as this century, told us that he knew that others thought him to be wise and a sage, because they continually came to ask him for his advise and for his ideas,
but he said, that he was rather amazed about all this, and he added that he himself would be rather hesitant to accept these titles wise and sage, because, he said, he did not know too many answers. He knew that he did not know.  

To come to the origin of this philosophical insight western philosophers most times refer to a Greek philosopher Socrates. Socrates, too, was very amazed, when a friend told him, that an oracle had informed him, that Socrates was the wisest man in his country. Socrates did not understand, until he understood, that the oracle knew, that he, Socrates, knew that he did not know. And all the others thought they knew.  

To know that, to come to that philosophical insight, we have not to refer to him: in this context of ours we could refer to Paul Mbuya. In other words, a philosopher does not know, although it is true, that he knows that he does not know, and although he knows as well, that the others do not really know either.  

Or perhaps that goes too far, and I should not go too far at an academic occasion like this, with this beautiful but strange professorial hat on my head.  

We do know something, we know a lot, we know every day more and more. But at the moment that we start to think that we really know, at that moment we are caught, we are fenced in. If that idea hits us, we are not only exaggerating, we are not only unwise, not to use the more unacademic word ‘stupid’, we become as well DANGEROUS. The feeding-ground on which imperialism, colonialism, totalitarianism and dictatorship are based is precisely that mentality in which one thinks that one has the answer to all questions. Because if someone thinks that he knows all, he will have no respect and no time for anyone else. There will not even be the possibility of communicating with others. A man, or a group or a system that knows all, is caught and imprisoned. It is at that moment that inquisition, purges and persecutions start, religiously, scientifically, artistically and politically.  

I think we all know to what kind of situation this leads and led in so many countries of this world. The underlying reason for all this is, I think, clear to all. If anyone is convinced that he knows all, that prejudice, because it cannot be anything but a prejudice will block in him any possible further progress,
it will close him to history and to reality. A scientist, a theologian, a politician, a believer, who knows and who knows that he knows will not ask any question any more. He will not accept any critical remark, he will not even be able to look around himself any more, and if he looks, he will not see, he will not hear, he will not touch.

If criticism is out, if any further question is forbidden, not only further human development is threatened, but even humanity itself is gone. Another Kenyan sage William Ayodo from Kabondo stated in his philosophical remarks on man, that man is different from other animals to the extent that he is capable to change, capable to be liberated capable to liberate himself.

May I return now, Mr. Chairman to Socrates. Socrates seems to have been aware of all this. He was not only aware of it as a philosopher but as well because he was the son of a mother who happened to be a midwife, and of a father who was a sculptor.

In both professions in midwivery and in sculpture-making change is necessary to be born, to be delivered. Socrates insistently and persistently tried to deliver people from the scientific and other myths they had formulated about themselves, about the world, and about the Gods.

I am using here the word MYTH intentionally, because I am convinced, and I will try to justify that conviction, that all human sciences are hardly anything but that. They are not myths in the sense that they are sacred tales although they even have something of that; they are not myths in the sense that they are untrue stories, though they have something of that too; but they seem to me to be myths because they try to explain things, to which we have no direct access, realities that remain mysteries to us.

So, Mr. Chairman, I do suggest that all sciences should be considered as consisting out of ‘myths’. They tell us stories. To illustrate my point I would like to give some examples.

My first example is the western classical scientific consideration of the material world around us. Mr. Chairman, may I point out that all the terms used in the last part of this statement world, material world, matter, world around us, call for philosophical questions. That whole idea of ‘matter’ in which there are in this world all kinds of things next to me is a HELLENIC look at reality.
that is rather new to mankind,
and I wonder
whether it is the point of view
of the majority of the people
in this world.
But let us overlook
that type of philosophical issues.

That surrounding material world,
with its strange noises, sounds,
smells, light-effects,
and all the other going-ons
inside and outside us
had to be explained.
It had to be explained
in one way or another
to allow us to survive in it.

As long as I cannot explain
a noise that I hear during the night,
I will not be able to sleep.
If I find the explanation of that noise
my fear will be over,
and I will know how to handle
that noise
in future.

Mankind had to explain its world,
but we do not seem to have
a direct access
to the world we want to explain.
That world is not our making,
it is a ‘given’,
it is a collection of ‘data’,
it is a mystery.

We cannot reach it
in our explanations
except via a detour.
We cannot understand it directly,
because we are part of it.
We cannot even take
distance
to have a good look at it,
we cannot escape it.
We are never only observers,
we are always participants,
we cannot even measure it
without influencing it.

We only can try to understand it
by saying things like:
‘let us suppose that . . . .’
or
‘let us do as if the material world
is composed out of things’,
the things the Greeks called ‘atoms’.
That theory,
or that tale,
that story,
is known to most of us.
It is rather old,
and in a way it is even
old fashioned
and overtaken by complementary theories,
but it is not older than about
2,500 years.
It is a Greek myth
about reality,
that apparently never had been thought of
before.

Why did the Greeks take the example
of ‘THINGS’
in their scientific explanation?
Why did they not say
instead of:
‘let us do as if reality
is composed out of things’;
something else,
like:
‘let us do as if reality
is composed out of persons’
or;
‘let us do as if reality is composed out of spirits’
Because that kind of scientific explanation
is given too,
that myth has very often been told
overhere in Africa.

When we try to find the reason
for this difference,
we must probably look
at the type of societies
that produced
those scientific explanations.
Both societies were facing the same problem,
_viz_. to explain the ins and outs
of the world in which they lived.
Both societies wanted to explain the regularities and the interactions they observed. Both societies could only do that via a detour, via examples or models.

The Greeks who started the atomic theory lived in towns. And when they looked for models of a regular behaviour pattern, they did not take 'persons', and they did not think in terms of 'spirits' as their older up-country colleagues did.

Why was this? Why the difference? Was it because the traditional social very regular interhuman behaviour pattern had already broken down in town? And did the up-country scientist take as his model 'personified spirits' because the interhuman relationships in his society were the best examples of regular behaviour?

Some philosophers of science, e.g. Robin Horton at Ife University in Nigeria think so. Those philosophers do not only say that the African 'spirits' theory can be compared to the western 'atom' theory, but as well that their scientific validity is equal.

They are both 'myths', or 'stories', they both function as explanations, they are both man-made items, they are both fruitful, and they are both harmful if misinterpreted. They are misinterpreted at the moment that one starts to overlook the fact that 'atoms' and 'spirits' are only 'stories' or 'myths'.

They become harmful at the moment that those atoms or spirits are considered as true and real. It does not make very much difference in that case whether man is sacrificing himself to a thing, a golden calf, or to a spirit, he is sacrificing himself and even his children.

At first sight we might be inclined to think that the Greek 'atom' approach has been more successful than the 'spirit' or 'person' approach. Is it not thanks to that approach that we have our cars and our concorde, our hotels and computers, our hair-straighteners and radiograms, our sophisticated hospital equipment and ball-pens? Is it not because of all this that we live comfortably and fine.

But who live comfortably and fine? Is this approach not as well the reason that nature is plundered, that human dwellings are polluted, that one third of mankind gets more than 85% of the world income. Didn't it even become obvious that this planet of ours would not be able to provide for all the iron and the water, the copper and the oil, those few, who seem to feel comfortably, need in order to do so?

The Greeks took things as models in their scientific theories.
Their world was composed of 'things'.
They danced around 'things'
and while this dance went on in the west,
the overlooked human relations
broke up
and human society
atomised over very lonely individuals,
who in their turn developed
the most outrageous weapons
that ever existed in human history.

I think that this 'development'
and I stress the word 'development'
because that is what this type of process
is often called,
is another myth,
another assumption,
that should be put
in question.

And I am of the opinion that that other scientific intuition,
more indigenous to this continent,
the intuition that this material world
should be seen in the light
of our interpersonal relations,
should be worked out very seriously.

Every criticism of society
is a criticism of its science,
and every criticism of science
is a criticism of the type of society it produced.

Speaking about our human society,
the philosopher in the tradition of Socrates
and Paul Mbuya
is confronted with another set of myths.
The stories and tales we use
to justify
the existing distribution of the world and its goods
over its human population,
and the maintenance of that order
by law.
Economics and law.
The Government of the United States of North America
is at the moment
trying to fight in its courts
a property right theory
that is different from the one
most of us would believe in.
Most probably they will loose the case.
The question is this:

The issue is that the children of the sellers
say that their forefathers
never sold their land,
because landownership
was to them a blasphemy,
a sacrilege and unthinkable.
Those Red Indians considered the earth
as their mother
and the land itself as
the skin of their mother.
It is obviously impossible
to own part of the skin of your mother,
and it is even more unthinkable that
it could be sold to a foreigner.

Heimot Tooyalaket, Chief Joseph, said:
'The earth was created with the assistance of the sun,
and it should be left as it was.
The country was made without demarcation-lines
and it is no man's business to divide it.
And Tashuka Witko, Crazy Horse, remarked:
'One does not sell the earth
on which people walk'.

When those people signed
those papers
they were thinking about something
totally different.
They were thinking of a peaceful co-existence
or something like that.
Land property rights
were in their mythology
inconceivable.
They did not sell.

Where does our actual property right myth
come from?
A French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau
described the origin of that myth
in 1754.
in the following way:
'The first man who,
having enclosed a piece of land,
bethought himself of saying:
'this is mine',
and found people simple enough
to believe him,
was the real founder of civil society'.

This story
was most firmly,
and maybe as well most naively,
believed in Britain.
Around 1690 John LOCKE wrote:
'The great and chief end of men
uniting in commonwealths,
and putting themselves under government
is the preservation of their property'.

Property rights were the reasons
of the organisation of the State,
they became the foundation of law and order.
This right overruled all,
and John Locke explained,
that anyone who catches a thief,
stealing even the smallest item
from his property,
may kill him on the spot.
In this myth
the State is nothing but
a 24-hour night- and day-watchman.
These stories were exported
with the Empire,
and while the Empire and its myth dissolved
in history,
this type of myths and stories
seem to live a longer life.

And the philosopher wonders,
where man's certainty comes from:
how does he know
that he knows.
What does he know about himself?
Who is he?

And here we come to the myths
man tells about himself.
One of the actually more generally accepted tales
is
that man is the result of an evolutionary process.

This theory is more often than not
explained within the context of another myth,
the one of 'progress'.

Mankind is on the move
towards a better,
a more just world.
A world that will be more comfortable
and more human.
This belief and this hope
are the driving-forces
behind much man is willing
to do and to suffer.

Mr. Chairman,
a philosopher will not deny
the validity of this kind
of built-in dynamism.
He will not deny the possibility of
this type of interpretation
of human history.

But, once more,
he will wonder,
where the certainty
that very often accompanies this myth
comes from.

Mr. Chairman,
is it not true
that in this world
the items that are called less developed,
such as stones and minerals
seem to be the most lasting
and in a sense
as well the most healthy.
The highest developed item:
man
seems as well to be the being
that has developed the greatest variety
of bodily and mental diseases.
And therefore,
Mr. Chairman,
would it not be possible
to come to a completely different
type of diagnosis
when speaking about
the evolutionary process?

A diagnosis in which the human being
is nothing
but an animal that got sick,
very sick.
An animal that became over-sensitive
and hyper-nervous.
And, Mr. Chairman,
 isn't that what we are telling each other
every day:

the world is getting worse,
the world is getting sick,
And when we speak in this context about the
world, the stones, the plants
and the animals are not that world:
it is man
and his influence.

It would be logical now,
If I would spend some considerations
on our myths
on sickness and health.
And indeed we are here confronted
with some of the most interesting myths
man has developed.
Time does not allow,
and people interested in these problems
might register with our Department.
Let me allow myself only some remarks.

In general mankind is inclined
to value health as a higher good
than sickness.

But why is it then
that we have developed in almost all human groups
such an awe and respect
for the sick ones amongst us.
The Romans called epilepsy
*morbus sacer, morbus divinus*,
the sacred, the divine disease.
The Greeks depended in all their decisions
on the oracle I mentioned in the beginning of this lecture,
and in as far as we know now about her,
she must have been a hysterical medium.
And Mr. Chairman,
isn't every man of genius
by definition abnormal,
and are abnormalities not called diseases?

And speaking about health and sickness
in a context that is nearer to us,
why is it

that a pregnant lady,
carrier of a new human life,
is supposed to queue up
at the 'health-clinic',
that is to say,
the place where the sick gather?
What is sickness,
what is health?

This might lead us to another group of theories
the ones on
'who are we?'
and on
'how are we to be'?

When the reformer John Calvin
came into power in the Swiss town of Geneva,
he forbade any entertainment in that town:
   no dancing,
   no singing,
   no theatre,
   no games,
   no reading of novels.

According to his idea
man was born to work
and to pray and nothing else:
*ora et labora*.

Work that up to then
had been generally considered
as something very unpleasant,
and as something very undignified,
as something not really meant for human beings,
as a curse and a punishment from God,
became suddenly something very sacred.
Aristotle had noted in his book 'Politika'
that work should only be done by slaves.

Cicero wrote that nothing good
or noble
can come out of a workshop.
Calvin's new interpretation
had definitely not very much to do
with the attitude of his great model
Jesus Christ either.
In as far as we know
Jesus never seems to have worked.
There is nothing about that
in as far as the reports on him tell.
He even convinced his disciples,
the twelve,
to give up their jobs to follow him. He even went so far as telling them: look at the birds, they don't sow and they don't harvest and yet they are fed by my Father.

Calvin sanctified labour and introduced in this world a whole new interpretation of man. Karl Marx in a sense followed this lead given by Calvin. Marx convinced his followers that man is different from an animal because he works, because he produces, man is HOMO FABER.

When Calvin wanted to introduce this new myth in Geneva, he only could do that by trying to overcome that other interpretation of human nature, that man is here to enjoy himself, to get as much pleasure out of life as possible,

dancing, eating, drinking, playing and loving as much as possible.

People caught in illegal love-affairs in Geneva were executed. Pleasure for the sake of pleasure was frowned upon, it was a waste of time, it costs money.

Both myths that of man as worker and that of man as a hedonist, are products of other societies than our modern one. Both myths would bring us nowadays in serious difficulties.

If human life is really meant to be a working life, where does modern man find that work?

The structural unemployment, that is unemployment that is due to the actual structure of society, makes it impossible to provide work for everybody. To ask everybody to work seems therefore to be impossible and unfair, And to say that those who have no work should not live, seems grossly unjust.

The working myth does not seem to hold, and should no longer be necessary.

If human life on the contrary is only meant to be fun, a similar problem seems to pose itself. How would we be able to organise this world in such a way that this supposed destiny of man is reached.

Our prevailing concept of man is most times a kind of combination of the two views mentioned. The difficulties inherent in those two theories are, of course, found again in the combination of the two. Besides another problem arises, the problem of what to do with that part of our time that cannot be filled with either work or pleasure, that part of our time in which we have nothing to do, and nothing to enjoy either. It is that new and modern problem of our so-called free time or leisure. A problem created by the theories on man’s nature mentioned.
Leisure becomes boredom, and boredom is terrible. It is so terrible because mankind is not accustomed to it, Boredom becomes frustration. A bored and frustrated child is capable of anything and even bored adults might start throwing stones.

That frustration, however, seems only to result from our belief in the work-myth and the fun-myth. Human life should be lived all of it, as it has been lived by mankind for so long.

But, of course, that is another myth the one of paradise lost and paradise to come. In all the foregoing considerations on who we are, on how we should be, on how we should divide this world amongst ourselves, on how society should be organised and so on, there was a critical element. Any criticism is based on a criterion, on a norm.

If I say: this is no good, I must have an idea of what, according to me, is good. When we criticise our society, our fellowmen in that society and ourselves, where do we get our criterion from? Mr. Chairman, we all say that justice is the first virtue of social institutions, just like truth is the first virtue of systems of thought. How do we know, where do we get it from?

This question is so baffling and the variety of philosophical, and religious answers to this question so great, that I only would like to indicate ONE ELEMENT that seems to be found in all those answers.

When trying to answer that question, "what should mankind be reaching for?" Most answers, if not all, and they are all in the form of myths, connect the state or situation we are heading for, with the state or situation, we are coming from. The Bible does this, Marx does it, Buddah did it and so on.

This element is as well clearly expressed in many an African tradition, when the child to be born is called after a family member who died. The end and the beginning are connected.

Where do we come from? Where do we go to? Let me try to illustrate my point. On the 17th of May 1838 a man died who had been ruling the whole of European politics for about thirty years. His name was Talleyrand. His mind had been a real mastermind. After his death some doctors came to embalm him. They emptied his belly from its bowels, they lifted his skull-cap and emptied his head too. They put the brains from that head in a pot. They forgot that pot with the brains that had concocted two successful revolutions,
and that had deceived twenty kings and queens.
They left the room.
The servant of Talleyrand
was the next one to come into that room,
he saw the pot,
and knowing what its content was,
he threw the whole lot
out of the window
in a street-gutter,
The man who noted all this down
in his diary two days after the death,

Victor Hugo,
finished the entry in his diary
with the Latin words
FINIS RERUM:
the end of the affair.

But Mr. Chairman,
when that servant
was throwing away
those brains from that pot
was he at that moment
throwing away
Talleyrand?
Is that gutter
where he went?
And if he went there
was that where he came from?
Who would believe such a story.

Mr. Chairman,
we human beings have become over-aware
of our possibilities
in shaping the future
and our destiny.
That future seems to be open
we can see and organise the world in different ways,
and yet there is one point
where we are not free,
where we had no control.

It is at that point
that each one of us
suddenly found himself in this world,
without having asked for it,
without having been asked about it.

We suddenly find ourselves
in this very strange land,
in this foreign existence,
a kind of refugee,
not knowing where we came from.

Did we bring our criteria
and the norms
with which we criticise
this world,
in which we live now,
from there?

Many think so.
But even that
remains a mystery.

Many think that it is a divine one.

Mr. Chairman,
ladies and gentlemen,
I am almost at the end of this lecture.
I think that many of you
might think
that I confused you,
like all philosophers seem to do.

It is not true.
A philosopher does not confuse,
he asks questions.

He asks questions where people
think they know.
And in that process
the philosopher tries
to point out
that what we know is not
SO sure,
that we should be fenced in
by that knowledge.
That means liberation,
and liberation means
to be introduced into a larger
and more spacious living-space
than the one we are accustomed to.

And that is, I admit,
rather confusing,
because we were not accustomed to it.
It might make us feel a bit dizzy.
And yet,
the philosopher only asked questions.
He wants to know what we mean.

I hope that
it became somehow clear
what role philosophers should play
in a University.
Again and again
they should put into question
the assumptions
we all work with
and live under,
And this is especially useful
and necessary
when different cultures
and therefore different
sets
of assumptions meet.

I have,
Mr. Chairman,
to correct an impression
I might have given,
I hope sufficiently playfully,
in the beginning of this lecture.
It is not true
that at this University
the Departments neglect
this very fundamental type
of research and questioning.
They bend over the philosophical issues
in the field of their learning.
It is therefore correct
that in practically all those Departments
the final degree
is a DOCTORATE IN PHILOSOPHY.
The Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
should, however, be organised
in such a way
that the Department of Philosophy
will be able to assist
more efficiently
in this fundamental research,
in this type of questioning.
Because this questioning
is the stepping-stone,
the foundation
and the backbone
of knowledge,
academic freedom,
tolerance
and hope.

Thank you.