

## APPENDIX 1. A METACONTEXT FOR RATIONALITY

### *1. Three Problems of Rationality*

There are three separate problems of rationality with which this book is concerned directly or indirectly. They are:

- (1) the problem of the (logical) limits of rationality;
- (2) the *demarcational* problem of rationality;
- (3) the problem of *the ecology of rationality*.

The first problem, that of the limits of rationality, is the chief problem treated in the body of the book, and is elaborated particularly in appendices 3, 4, 5, and 6. The second—the demarcational problem of rationality—is treated in appendix 2.

The third—that of the ecology of rationality—is the main subject of this first appendix; and is also treated in appendix 2, section 11. The solution to the first two problems contributes to, and indeed licenses, the broader problem-program of the ecology of rationality.

### *2. No Boat Goes to the Other Shore Which Is Safe and without Danger*

I have taught a doctrine similar to a raft—it is for crossing over, and not for carrying.

—THE BUDDHA  
*MAJJHIMA-NIKAYA I*

Several years ago, well after first publishing *The Retreat to Commitment*, there came to me a line of thinking which seems to be important, and which I would like to share with my readers. It is a line of thinking which preserves and enhances the argument of this book, and yet takes it to a new dimension.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See my book *Werner Erhard: The Transformation of a Man* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1978), chap. 10.

My line of thought has to do with what I call “*metacontext*”, and with my realization that rationality—although treated implicitly in this book as if it were a matter of *context* (“the rationalist identity”), should be treated metacontextually.

The terms I have just introduced will be foreign to most readers, and thus what I have said will have made no sense. Let me explain what I mean.

I can begin to do this best, I think, by speaking in terms of *ecology*, for the problem that will emerge is that of *the ecology of rationality*.

Ecology is, of course, the theory of the interrelationship between an organism and its environment, and has to do with survival. The pertinent part of the human environment, of course, contains people, plants, animals, and various things (objects, chemicals, and so on). It also contains certain ideas and patterns of thought which are every bit as real as the organisms, objects, and physical conditions of the environment. These ideas and patterns of thought are not all of a piece, but are of different sorts. They can be partially classified as follows:

- (a) *positions*—these include (1) a variety of descriptions, representations, or portrayals of the environment; and (2) a variety of recommended ways of behaving within the environment so represented;
- (b) a variety of *contexts* for these positions;
- (c) *criticisms* of and objections to various positions and contexts—these criticisms may themselves be positional or contextual;
- (d) various *contexts of contexts* or *metacontexts*.

The human *ecologic* is one in which people hold conflicting positions *in* conflicting contexts and *in terms of* conflicting metacontexts.

An example of a *position* could be a simple statement purporting to be true or right: e.g., “The human soul is immortal”, or “abortion is wrong”.

Similar-appearing positions may be embedded in quite different *contexts*. Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and humanism, for instance, provide different contexts for the position-statement, “The human soul is immortal”. Examples of contexts are belief systems, ideologies, traditions, institutions.<sup>2</sup> Such a context is not simply the sum of the positions it contains, but is also the framework and even the sensibility in which these positions are couched; and it weights positions with regard to importance and significance.

To illustrate how a sensibility casts a context over a statement, one might notice the way in which I, in the comfort of my study, reach out to the overflowing bowl of strawberries on my table, take and eat one as I read,

<sup>2</sup>Most Kuhnian paradigms are contexts in my sense; most Kuhnian paradigm shifts are contextual shifts in my sense. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

and comment in a self-satisfied way to myself, “This strawberry is so sweet”. And one might contrast this with the Zen sensibility of the doomed Samurai, trapped on a collapsing bridge over a deep ravine, who, savoring the moment, reaches out to pluck the strawberry growing wild on the steep bank and says, “This strawberry is so sweet”.

Many persons find personal identification or “identity” in the sense of this book—and in the sense of the psychologist and sociologist Erik H. Erikson—in contexts. They employ contexts to define themselves and their relations to others and to the world. Their allegiance is to the context; allegiance to particular positions sponsored within that context generally flows from allegiance to the context rather than vice versa. Thus, as an example, opposition to abortion (a position) is likely to flow from one’s Roman Catholicism (a context) rather than Roman Catholicism’s flowing from one’s opposition to abortion.

In the complicated world of ordinary practice, however, it is not always easy to tell a position from a context. Thus what one might have thought to be a position may act contextually, and vice versa. Some politician—or the notorious Vicar of Bray—may shift his party or his church for the sake of some position that has taken on a contextual character. If, for example, his political ambition sets the context for his life, the selection of a party may be a matter of position within that context. Within the justificationist metacontext (to be explained in a moment) such action almost always smacks of disloyalty.

Rationality—as embedding the search for knowledge and the critical attitude—can hardly be a matter of positions or contexts. There is nothing intrinsically rational about any particular position or context—including that particular context known as “rationalism” or “the rationalist identity” or “the rationalist tradition”. Positions and contexts may further or hinder the search for knowledge and the critical attitude. Rather, rationality would have to be a matter of the *context of contexts*, or the *metacontext*.

A metacontext differs from a context as understood here. A *metacontext has to do with how and why contexts are held*, subjectively and objectively. While there are endless positions and thousands of contexts, there are comparatively few metacontexts. (I believe, in fact, that there are exactly three: see below.)

Theory of rationality and ecology of rationality are thus metacontextual: they are theory about how and why to hold contexts and positions; and they depend in part on goals: e.g., is it one’s goal to justify or defend a particular position? or to attain a more adequate representation of the way in which things are?

People have, throughout history, differed fundamentally about how and why to hold contexts and positions; these differences, as we shall see, have a religious dimension. Yet what I call metacontext has hardly been noticed

and is rarely discussed—although without such a discussion one cannot characterize the nature of the most fundamental differences among men: *one cannot define the way in which they differ about the ways in which they differ.*

A few writers, however, have occasionally reached the metacontextual level. Robert Michels used to write that the humanist tradition possessed a myth of mission but lacked—and needed—a myth of origin. Such a myth of origin for the rationalist tradition, and also an idea of what metacontext represents, may be found by contrasting the development of ideas in the pre-Socratic schools of the Pythagoreans and the Ionians.<sup>3</sup> Among the Pythagoreans a *second-order tradition* was developed of defending, preserving, and passing on to others the doctrines of the founders of the school. This metacontextual second-order tradition had the effect of restricting development in the ideology; and of limiting changes to those that could be handled surreptitiously—as, say, a restatement of the master's real intentions, or as a correction of previous misinterpretations. For the master's teachings were assumed to be correct. Whereas among the Ionians, by contrast, one has the first recorded instance of widely different viewpoints being explicitly handed on, without dissent or schism, by the same school in successive generations. There a metacontextual second-order tradition was developed of criticizing and of trying to improve upon the doctrines of the master for the purpose of getting *closer* to the truth. Within this second school, the origins of the critical tradition may be located. Here a true history of ideas begins to develop, in which, along with the ideas of the leaders of the school, criticisms and changes are also taught, respected, and recorded.

Thus far, only three metacontexts have been developed. These are:

(1) The metacontext of true belief—or justification philosophy. This metacontext, in the Pythagorean tradition, aims to justify or defend positions and contexts: in Jacob Bronowski's words, "to honour and promote those who are right".<sup>4</sup>

(2) The oriental metacontext of nonattachment. This aims to detach from positions and contexts.

(3) The metacontext of fallibilism, or of pancritical rationalism. This aims to create and to improve positions and contexts.

As I have argued in this book, most Western philosophies—philosophies

<sup>3</sup>See James Luther Adams's comments on some of Michels's ideas in "Tillich's Concept of the Protestant Era", in *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 279. See K. R. Popper, "Back to the Pre-Socratics", Presidential Address, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1958–59; and "Towards a Rational Theory of Tradition", and "The Nature of Philosophical Problems and Their Roots in Science", reprinted in *Conjectures and Refutations*. See also n. 38 to chap. 10 of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. See also W. I. Matson, "Conford on the Birth of Metaphysics", *Review of Metaphysics*, 8, no. 3 (March 1955), pp. 443–54.

<sup>4</sup>J. Bronowski, *A Sense of the Future*, p. 4.

of science and epistemologies as much as philosophies of religion—are justificationist. That is, *they sponsor justificationist metacontexts of true belief.* This was true among the Pythagoreans, and it is just as true today. Such philosophies are concerned with how to justify, verify, confirm, make firmer, strengthen, validate, vindicate, make certain, show to be certain, make acceptable, probabilify, cause to survive, *defend* particular contexts and positions. Most such philosophies—again, philosophies of science as much as philosophies of religion—end up in commitment and in identification.

There is, I believe, a simple historical explanation for the entanglement of Western philosophy of science in this metacontext: Western science *might*, for instance, have developed in the Ionian tradition and have avoided justificationism. But it did not do this. Rather, *Western science grew up in debate with a justified-true-belief religion, Christianity.* Responding to a true-belief religion, Western science became, in its philosophy, a justified-true-belief science.

At the other extreme, there is the oriental metacontext of nonattachment. In most varieties—in Hinduism, Buddhism, and in the yogic tradition underlying both<sup>5</sup>—oriental philosophy opposes *attachment*: attachment to anything whatever: one's body, habits, wishes, lusts, cravings, aspirations, ideas, beliefs, ideologies, relationships, affiliations. Most Western accounts of oriental thought neglect ideas and beliefs, and concentrate on themes of nonattachment with regard to lust and ambition. But such emphasis stems from our Western distortion. From the oriental perspective, it is as important not to be attached to particular *beliefs* as it is not to be attached to particular *lusts and cravings*. As the Buddha says: "Even this view, which is so pure and so clear, if you cling to it, if you fondle it, if you treasure it, if you are attached to it, then you do not understand that the teaching is similar to a raft, which is for crossing over, and not for getting hold of."<sup>6</sup> Nonattachment is demanded with regard to "high spiritual attainments as well as pure views and ideas".<sup>7</sup>

In calling this metacontext "oriental", I do not wish to subscribe to the view that all orientals are alike, and that they differ completely from westerners—who are in turn all alike.<sup>8</sup> In taking care not to commit such a solecism, however, I also do not want to avoid marking this real, important, and deeply pervasive difference between those systems of thought that are associated with the West, and those that are associated with the East.

From this oriental perspective, the westerner erects positions and contexts

<sup>5</sup>See Georg Feuerstein, *The Essence of Yoga* (New York: The Grove Press, 1974), p. 25; and E. Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India* (London, 1962); and H. Beckh, *Buddha und seine Lehre* (Stuttgart, 1956), p. 138.

<sup>6</sup>*Majjhima-nikaya* (PTS edition), vol. 1, p. 260.

<sup>7</sup>Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), chap. 1.

<sup>8</sup>See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979).

—belief systems—for particularly ignoble ends, related to a kind of craving: the westerner commits himself to, identifies himself with, such systems in order to justify himself and invalidate others, to dominate and to avoid domination, to survive and make others fail to survive. By identifying with his positions, the westerner automatically becomes *positional*: he is oriented toward the perpetuation of his positions rather than toward the truth. He causes those positions and contexts with which he has identified to persist as part of his own combat for survival. This is seen as the source of that vaunted “hunger and thirst after righteousness” of which Western moralities speak fondly and which orientals (and a few others, such as Nietzsche) see as a kind of vampirism, sapping the strength of Western culture.

It is interesting and—so far as I can tell—hitherto unremarked that the oriental concept of *attachment* and the Western idea of *commitment* are closely similar. Both, in turn, resemble the idea of *addiction*. The dictionary defines an addict as one who has “given himself over” to a practice, a habit, a pursuit. Thus it is not surprising that Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., in explaining the force of his philosophical commitments or presuppositions, chooses the language of the addict: he calls these *Can't Helps!*<sup>9</sup> The chasm between the dominant trends of Eastern and Western thought is nowhere so evident as here: the metacontext of oriental philosophy sponsors nonattachment; the chief metacontext of Western philosophy sponsors attachment, commitment, addiction.

It is alien to an Eastern metacontext to see *any* position or context as a source of identification and commitment *in the Western sense*. Yet oriental writers—and some westerners<sup>10</sup>—sometimes speak of another, different sense of identity: “true identity” or True Self. True Self in this sense is *the context of all contexts* (including metacontexts). Beyond any individual, identification, form, process, context, position, or econiche, True Self is the matrix that gives rise to them. Not a position, True Self is the space in which all positionality in life occurs.

Within this Eastern metacontext, commitments, belief systems, ideologies, traditions, identifications, and so-called ultimate values provide contexts—often valuable contexts—for individual existence; but these do not determine who or what one is; nor does it make any sense to be attached to, identified with, or committed to such things. True Self, being the context of all contexts, is the context in which things such as commitments, identifications, ideologies, metacontexts, and so on emerge, flourish for a time, and then decline. Thus one is the matrix in which content is crystallized and process occurs, and is not any particular content or process,

<sup>9</sup>Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., “Natural Law”, in *Collected Legal Papers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1920), pp. 310–11. See the discussion of Holmes in Morton White, *Religion, Politics, and the Higher Learning* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), pp. 130–31.

<sup>10</sup>See my *Werner Erhard*, and Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1972).

not any individual form. Here there is a profound sense of the limitation inherent in form, and of the opportunity latent in lack of attachment to form: the capacity to take on any form—and to create form anew. Here identity as fixed identification is seen as a liability: the more fixed one's identity, the less experience of which one is capable, the less one *is*. The point is not *to lack* a position or context, but not to be positional: not to be attached or committed to whatever position and context one does have at any particular moment. To adapt Sartre's terminology: one may *have* a position or *do* a position, but may not *be* a position.<sup>11</sup>

Two Western writers, Hermann Hesse and Hermann Keyserling, found in such Eastern thought a “protean sensibility”, writing of the “supple individual” of infinitely polymorphous plasticity who, “in order to experience enough must expose himself a great deal”, and who “gains profundity from every metamorphosis”.<sup>12</sup> As Keyserling's protean figure—in the course of trying out different forms and experiences, different positions and contexts—discovers how limited each is, and how one is linked to another, he passes beyond the danger of placing an exaggerated value on any single form, phenomenon, position, or context. Personality and character, being forms, also imply limitation. “No developed individual”, Keyserling writes, “can reverence ‘personality’ as an ideal; he is beyond prejudices, principles and dogmas”. Such a supple individual, though perceived to be without character, may be as securely and firmly positive as any rigid individual.

This is not the confused and disordered state of one in the throes of “identity diffusion”. The Yogi says “neti, neti: I am not that” to all nature, until he becomes one with Parabrahma. After that, as Keyserling says, “no manifestation limits him any more, because now each one is an obedient means of expression to him . . . A God lives thus from the beginning, by virtue of his nature. Man slowly approaches the same condition by passing through the whole range of experience”.

On the other hand, such a godlike being may seem capricious—like Proteus, the Greek sea god, the “old man of the sea”, who not only had the power to assume any form he wished, but was also “as capricious as the sea itself”. One finds such capriciousness also in some Hindu accounts: the capriciousness, say, of credulity, which accepts all things, however contradictory, as vessels of the truth; which, regarding everything as holy, yet takes nothing seriously. *Within limits*. For to consider and discard another metaphor, the oriental approach does *not* commend the *chameleon*, that remarkable lizard with a greatly developed power to change the color of his skin. Lightning-change artistry is a superficial sort of suppleness, skin-deep, for which the chameleon's characteristic slow power of locomotion is itself a metaphor.

<sup>11</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1975), part 4.

<sup>12</sup>Hermann Keyserling, *Travel Diary of a Philosopher*; and Hermann Hesse, *My Belief*.

All this may remind one somewhat of ordinary Western scepticism, but it is hardly the same. Western scepticism, to be sure, also arches its brows at all attempts at knowing, all formulations, definitions, identifications—including any definition of its own position. But it is posed more as a position or context, not as a metacontext; and it is born out of the defeat of, and permeated by the spirit of, justificationism. It rejects attachments not out of a positive quest for nonattachment but out of reaction to the internal contradictions of the Western justificationist metacontext. Usually, Western scepticism is regretfully or resignedly nonattached, permeated by epistemological disappointment. None of the majesty of nonattachment appears in, say, Sextus Empiricus or Hume, as it does in the Eastern writers. Scepticism is a *defense* against uncertainty.

This Eastern way of thinking, and of approaching thinking, is, then, far removed from the metacontext of belief, identification, and commitment that one finds in most Western philosophies. It is less distant, but still *very* different, from the fallibilism of Xenophanes or of Popper, or of the pancritical rationalism presented in this book.

Such fallibilism—which provides a third metacontext—also allows for the fallibility, the distortion, of all forms, of all existing crystallizations in language, and yet maintains (unlike the oriental) that one may, through form, through language, come *closer* to the truth, measuring one's *progress* through . . . fallible criteria. Although the oriental is right to stress how language can mesmerize us and solidify and rigidify our positions, it is also language that *permits* one to dissociate from, to detach from, one's own positions and hypotheses: to make them into *objects*, not subjective states, not identified with ourselves: objects that then may be examined.

While rejecting the identification, commitment, and positionality into which Western justificationist philosophies are forced, fallibilists yet champion the *growth* of knowledge and of science and the "rational way of life" as leading in this direction. In the interaction between ourselves and our intellectual products, so the fallibilist maintains, we are most likely to transcend ourselves. Here there can be progress without commitment.

*Unlike* most oriental philosophies, which tend to be noncompetitive, and which are rarely interested in the growth of knowledge, fallibilism demands, and encourages competition for, a more adequate model or representation of the world. *Like* the oriental, the fallibilist gives no importance to "right belief", and searches for a pervasive condition of nonattachment to models and representations generally. For one must detach from, must *objectify* one's theories in order to improve them. The very asking of the fallibilist question—"Under what conditions would this theory be false?"—invites a psychological exercise in detachment and objectification, leading one to step outside the point of view shaped by that theory. While fallibilists, however, emphasize progress in knowledge and rationality, for the oriental the

apparentness of progress is illusory and the pursuit of it is a manifestation of addiction. The oriental and the fallibilist also seek detachment for different reasons: the oriental, to attain distance from all models of the world, and thereby to win freedom from illusion, and peace; the fallibilist, in order to further the growth of knowledge, to attain a more adequate model of the universe. The products which they seek differ.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. The Gnostic Texts

Jesus said, "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you".

—THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS<sup>14</sup>

"For whoever has not known himself has known nothing, but whoever has known himself has simultaneously achieved knowledge about the depth of all things".

—JESUS TO THOMAS.<sup>15</sup>

. . . who we were, and what we have become; where we were . . . whither we are hastening; from what we are being released; what birth is, and what is re-birth.

—THEODOTUS<sup>16</sup>

It is possible that all three metacontexts—the Western metacontext of justified true belief, the oriental metacontext of nonattachment, and the fallibilist metacontext—met, tangled, and parted ways forever in one

<sup>13</sup>Jagdish Hartiangadi objects to my discussion of metacontext, arguing that contexts and metacontexts should not be distinguished, and that only one natural context stands over and above the others: namely, evolution. We disagree here. Evolution is, from my point of view, not a context but part of the background circumstances or conditions in terms of which we operate, whether we know it or not, and no matter what our metacontext. It is no more a context than is gravity—which is another condition or circumstance. A knowledge of circumstances, or a theory of circumstances—such as the theory of gravity or the theory of evolution—may, once it is acquired, contextualize. So far, however, the theory of evolution has not fully been assimilated into any of the three metacontexts. It stands in opposition to the first two: it contradicts them. And while it is fully compatible with fallibilism, only a start has so far been made on integrating them. Hartiangadi also objects that my account makes metacontexts provide cultural casts for the preformation of its ideas. But the metacontext does not preform ideas, only the ways in which ideas are held. Thus it may affect to some extent the ways in which they change and develop; but it will not determine positive content. It functions in some respects similarly to what Hayek calls a "context of constraint".

<sup>14</sup>The Gospel of Thomas, in J. M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 126.

<sup>15</sup>The Book of Thomas the Contender, in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 189.

<sup>16</sup>Theodotus, cited in Clemens Alexandrinus, *Excerpta ex Theodoto*, 78.2.

paramount encounter that would have had to be discussed in the body of this book had it been written some years later than it was.

I have in mind the new debate about the nature of early Christianity that has arisen from the discovery of the Nag Hammadi papyri: the discovery, that is, of the so-called Gnostic gospels.<sup>17</sup> These early Christian documents, although discovered in 1945, did not become generally available to scholars until long after the first edition of this book. The story of this delay—described as a “persistent curse of political roadblocks, litigations, and, most of all, scholarly jealousies and ‘firstmanship’” which has “grown by now into a veritable *chronique scandaleuse* of contemporary academia”<sup>18</sup>—has been told elsewhere and is not our concern here.

The Nag Hammadi papyri, discovered in an earthenware jar in Upper Egypt in 1945, consist of some thirteen leather-bound papyrus books containing some fifty-two texts dating from the early centuries of the Christian era—some of them no later than A.D. 120–150, and *possibly* much older: possibly at least as early as, if not earlier than, the New Testament gospels. These Coptic translations of Greek originals contain a collection of Christian gospels previously unknown, as well as various texts attributed to followers of Jesus, and also poems, cosmological descriptions of the origins of the universe, magical works, and works of instruction in mystical practices.

These texts challenge fundamentally the picture of the historical Jesus and the conception of God that was presented by Schweitzer and championed by Barth and the neo-orthodox movement. As we have seen above (chapters 2 and 3), God is regarded by Barth and his followers as *wholly other* than man, and opposed to the conceptions, philosophies, and cultural creations of man. Man cannot, on this view, by seeking find out God; rather, he requires revelation and authority.

The Gnostic Christian texts, by contrast, go far beyond anything known in Protestant liberalism—in their individualism, and in their focus on self-knowledge as the starting point of the religious quest. As the Gnostic teacher Monoimus states: “Abandon the search for God and the creation and other matters of a similar sort. *Look for him by taking yourself as the starting point.* Learn who it is within you who makes everything his own . . . Learn the sources of sorrow, joy, love, hate . . .”<sup>19</sup>

More surprising, these Gnostic texts have a strong flavor of Buddhism and Hindu religion about them. In fact, there is some possibility that the Gnostic writers were influenced by Indian sources. The Gospel of Thomas,

<sup>17</sup>On this discovery and its interpretation, see Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979).

<sup>18</sup>See Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 2nd ed. rev. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), p. 290; and Pagels, p. xxv.

<sup>19</sup>See Hippolytus, *Refutationis omnium haeresium* 8.15.1–2.

one of the chief Gnostic writings, is named after that disciple who, according to tradition, travelled to India. And at the time when these Gnostic texts were written, Buddhist missionaries were active in Alexandria.

However the question of influence turns out, many of the Gnostic texts begin, as the Buddha did, in the recognition of the suffering of ordinary human existence: ordinary existence is one of oblivion or unconsciousness, of illusion. It is a nightmare. But there is a route out of, a release from, this suffering: through discipline, meditative and ascetic practices, and interior, spiritual search, one may come to *enlightenment*, an experience or state in which one recognizes who one really is, a state in which one enjoys self-knowledge. This self-understanding is the key also to the knowledge of existence, of God, and of the universe in which we live.

Although the Gnostic texts are quite distinctively Christian, they firmly reject the creeds, professions of faith, rituals, hierarchy, authority, and other marks of the orthodox churches. They deny the literal understanding of the virgin birth of Jesus, the real physical suffering of Jesus on the cross, and the bodily resurrection, as well as the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth. All this they see as naïve misunderstanding, as magical thinking, as “the faith of fools”. Those beliefs that they deny are precisely those that are most incredible, those that have required blind belief, irrational commitment, and conformity to authority to support them within orthodox Christianity. The Gnostics see these things, rather, in more symbolic and metaphorical terms. One attains resurrection, for instance, through the experience of enlightenment; and the Kingdom of God is already here on earth: it is a state of transformed consciousness. Jesus himself does not, as Schweitzer put it, “stand over against” man; rather, he is seen as a teacher or guide who leads men to greater self-understanding, in the course of which they themselves attain to a spiritual state comparable to his. As the Gospel of Philip puts it: “You saw the spirit, you became spirit. You saw Christ, you became Christ.”<sup>20</sup>

Although Elaine Pagels and other scholars have suggested that, provided the names were changed, the Buddha could have said what the Gospel of Thomas and other Gnostic writings attribute to Jesus,<sup>21</sup> there is nonetheless an important difference between Buddhism and these Gnostic texts—quite apart from names, dates, and historical references. This difference is especially important with regard to the oriental metacontext of which I wrote in the previous section. The Gnostic texts do not really participate in that metacontext. In particular, they do not advocate relativism or scepticism or indifference to all human formulations of the truth. On the contrary, there often seems to be in them a fallibilistic advocacy of progress toward the truth through the use of reason! While rejecting particular

<sup>20</sup>*Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 137.

<sup>21</sup>Pagels, p. xx.

claims, especially those of the orthodox church, the Gnostics nonetheless encouraged speculation and disputation and the “storming of the citadel of truth”. One can, they taught, go beyond, improve upon, even the teachings of the apostles, even the most hallowed tradition. Here, they contrast markedly with their orthodox, and deeply justificationist critics, such as Tertullian, who—referring to such Gnostic teachings—wrote: “We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquiring after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief.”<sup>22</sup>

The Gnostic writers inhabit an utterly different sensibility, an utterly different approach to religion. It is not simply a matter of difference in belief. Thus the Gnostic writer Silvanus, in his *Teachings*, sounds almost Socratic when he writes: “. . . a foolish man . . . goes the ways of the desire of every passion. He swims in the desires of life and has foundered . . . he is like a ship which the wind tosses to and fro, and like a loose horse which has no rider. For this [one] needed the rider, which is reason. . . . before everything else . . . know yourself. . . . The mind is the guide, but reason is the teacher. . . . Enlighten your mind . . . Light the lamp within you.”<sup>23</sup>

The Gnostic texts are complicated and difficult; scholars have only in the past decade begun the vast task of interpreting and comparing them; the themes on which I have just commented are not the only ones present in them. Thus I do not want to give the impression that there is one clear Gnostic teaching, or that scholars have settled what it is. Nor do I have the slightest wish to endorse that teaching, whatever it may be. Nonetheless, it is already evident that, had these texts been available when Schweitzer or Barth were writing, the story told in chapters 2 and 3 of this book would have been very different. The problem situation confronting Protestant liberals would have differed radically. These texts would inevitably have strengthened the position of Protestant liberalism against the attacks of the neo-orthodox. They might even have saved Protestant liberalism.

But the texts were *not* available then, and I do not mention them now in order to revive Protestant liberalism. I remind the reader only that there was once a moment when Christianity might have gone in a quite different direction, and that we can, through these texts, now for the first time savor that moment. “We find ourselves now in possession of a massive literature of ‘lost causes’ from those crucial five or so centuries, from the first century B.C. onward, in which the spiritual destiny of the Western world took shape: the voice of creeds and flights of thought which, part of that creative process, nourished by it and stimulating it, were to become obliterated in

<sup>22</sup>Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 7.

<sup>23</sup>*Teachings of Silvanus*, in *Nag Hammadi Library*, pp. 347–56.

the consolidation of official creeds that followed upon the turmoil of novelty and boundless vision.”<sup>24</sup>

When the orthodox church crushed Gnosticism, that opportunity for a different and undogmatic Christianity was lost forever. What was left, what is today generally considered as Christianity, represents in fact only a small selection of the available sources—those compatible and agreeable sources which could survive the book burning and the persecution of the heretics. Those who made that selection, the triumphant orthodox forces, wiped out the Gnostics, and attempted with quite amazing success—a success frustrated after 1600 years only by the accidental discovery of an earthenware jar in a mound of soft soil, next to a massive boulder—to wipe out all traces of their teachings. In doing so, a true-belief religion was entrenched in the West, with fateful consequences for our history.

The knowledge of this possibility—of this historical “might-have-been”—we owe to that unknown scholar, perhaps a monk from the nearby monastery of St. Pachomius, who buried those papyrus books in that earthenware jar at Nag Hammadi just as the orthodox authorities swept through the ancient world, destroying and burning such books, and making their possession a criminal offense.

#### 4. *An Econiche for Rationality*

The controversy just mentioned—that in which the Gnostics were defeated by the forces of orthodoxy—is one of thousands of possible illustrations of a simple truth: that it is much harder to institutionalize and to create a viable econiche for a program of unrelenting growth, development, and criticism than it is to create institutions and viable conditions for a self-perpetuating system of beliefs.

The main problem for the growth of rationality—and for the theory of rationality—as I see it, is therefore an ecological problem.

In a fallibilist metacontext, the ecological problem is to create the most lethal environment for positions, contexts, and metacontexts, in which the production of positions, contexts, and metacontexts yet thrives. Popper approached this understanding of the problem in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, where he wrote: “What characterizes the empirical method is its manner of exposing to falsification, in every conceivable way, the system to be tested. Its aim is not to save the lives of untenable systems but, on the contrary, to select the one which is by comparison the fittest, by exposing

<sup>24</sup>Hans Jonas, p. 290.



them all to the fiercest struggle for survival" (p. 42) and "a supreme rule is laid down which serves as a kind of norm for deciding upon the remaining rules . . . It is the rule which says that the other rules of scientific procedure must be designed in such a way that they do not protect any statement in science against falsification" (p. 54).

Popper extended his approach to apply not only to empirical science, but also to political institutions, in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, chapter 7, and in 1960, in "On the Sources of Knowledge and of Ignorance" (*Conjectures and Refutations*, p. 25), he advocated replacing traditional questions about the source of knowledge with the question: "How can we hope to detect and eliminate error?" In this book, I have stated the problem more generally: *How can our intellectual life and institutions be arranged so as to expose our beliefs, conjectures, policies, positions, source of ideas, traditions, and the like—whether or not they are justifiable—to maximum criticism, in order to counteract and eliminate as much intellectual error as possible?*

This formulation, while incomplete, captures something very good. What is good about it is that it sees the production of heightened rationality not individualistically, not as something that one does by oneself; it places the problem, ecologically, in a framework that contains not only the individual but also the institutions, policies, traditions, culture, and society in which he lives. For let us suppose that we have an individual who has achieved in himself that state of flexibility combined with keenness for the truth that we have referred to as "rationality" in this book. Such an individual will inevitably be frustrated if he tries to express himself in institutions which are formed under and function within the justificationist metacontext. Such institutions, and the traditions in terms of which they operate, will act to perpetuate themselves at whatever cost—and certainly at the expense of rationality: at the expense of those conditions for a rational environment which include truthfulness, criticism, full communication, acknowledgment and correction of error, and acknowledgment of contributions.<sup>25</sup>

This is presumably why so many of the saints in India are said to live in caves, separate from the institutions of mankind. If rationality is to be brought out of the cave, or out of the study, it must be embedded in institutions and traditions that work against positionality and self-justification, instead of just in individuals who have transcended positionality. If a rational individual is one who can tell the truth, a rational environment will be one in which the truth can be told.

The formulation italicized above is nonetheless incomplete in that it is stated too negatively in terms of the reduction of error. For an essential

<sup>25</sup>See my "A Place to Tell the Truth", *Graduate Review*, San Francisco, May 1978; and my *Werner Erhard*, pp. 214–21. See also my "Knowledge Is a Product Not Fully Known to Its Producer", in *The Political Economy of Freedom*, ed. Kurt Leube and A. Zlabinger (Munich, Philosophia Verlag, 1984).

requirement is the *fertility* of the econiche: the econiche must be one in which the creation of positions and contexts, and the development of rationality, are truly inspired. Clumsily applied eradication of error may also eradicate fertility. Criticism must be optimum rather than maximum, and must be deftly applied. Also, my initial formulation overemphasizes matters intellectual—such as beliefs, conjectures, ideas, and such like. Explicitly included for review should be not only aims, beliefs, conjectures, decisions, ideas, ideologies, policies, programs, and traditions, but even etiquette, manners and customs, and unconscious presuppositions and behavior patterns that may pollute the econiche and thereby diminish creativity, criticism, or both. The ecological problem of rationality is *how* this is to be done.

In the past, pursuit of this problem has been hindered by the claim that what it calls for *cannot* be done. This claim challenges the very possibility of any fallibilist metacontext in which it is assumed that one can make progress toward a more adequate and objective representation of the world. Instead, it asserts that, from a rational point of view, there can be no progress; that the choice between competing positions and contexts, whether scientific, mathematical, moral, religious, metaphysical, political, or other, is not reasoned but is arbitrary. If the argument of this book is sound, this claim has at last been refuted. We might now take some steps toward dealing with the question of *how*, assuming that the question of *whether* has now been resolved.