



Philosophy Department

April 23, 1969

Dr. Joske Agassi  
18 Clark Lane  
Sudbury, Mass. 01776

My dear Joske,

Your new book arrived a short time ago, apparently delayed or else the first time it was sent out it didn't arrive. I have just read it with great enjoyment. It is, as it should be, very easy to read. Nonetheless I learnt a lot of interesting historical theories that one normally does not come across.

I have very little in the way of detailed criticism. I think the device of the conversation with Aaron comes off sufficiently for your purpose, although it is not really a dialogue: it enables you to put points of view across to a young mind. Various attitudinal features of great importance certainly come over, namely the greatness of great scientists, the greatness of their mistakes, their situations, their difficulties, the way they tackle them, also the reasons for problems and the significance of discoveries. I don't feel that the book could really be bettered. In a minute way this is not, of course, true. The odd passage could be smoothed out perhaps or clarified, but very few of them need any touching up. I thought, however, that the opening couple of pages were weak.

- I have two minor criticisms on points of substance.
- (1) On page 90 there is a very nice treatment of empty space showing that there has to be emptiness somewhere for movement to be possible (it might make things clearer to bring in here, instead of later, that this can be overcome by rotation). I would, however, suggest adding a lemma to show if the furniture filling up space were elastic it might seem that movement would be possible without empty space; but you can show that it is not so because an elastic body would necessarily be a solid with pores in it; in other words if space is not empty elasticity is impossible.
  - (2) On page 102 you were concerned with Aristotle's problem about dilution of wine. I fail to see why Aristotle could

handle this only by giving an atomistic theory. All he needed was a quantitative theory about essence. Maybe this is what you referred to in your sentence "so the essence of wine is that it is not too dilute" but this needs reformulation. (3) Towards the end of page 219 you credit Marconi with building the first radio. So far as I know Sir Oliver Lodge was the first to broadcast from one end of a tennis court to another. Marconi had nothing to do with the discovery of wireless, only with its improvement. Incidentally, if you are giving this piece of history I think it would be good to mention that electromagnetic waves were experimentally produced before Hertz by a man in the postoffice whose name I forget exactly, but it was something like Tillotson. The brass hats of the British Government who were present were naturally not impressed and he was discouraged and dropped the matter (I don't know where I read about this).

So much for the book as a whole. I come now to its import for your own life. As you know, I suggested in my last letter to you that you were pottering around too long without settling down to the really significant work that would be appropriate to you. Now apart from anything offensive there might be in suggesting what someone else should make his central problem, there is the intellectual difficulty that I could not in principle know the trend of your mind. But I have a practical suggestion which might be worth considering. I suggest continuing this sort of book though not mainly for its intrinsic educational value (I wish I had had the present one in time for my class this semester). What I have in mind is another volume written in similar dialogue form to a freshman-- or Aaron as a freshman--pitched on a slightly different plane. Then another volume or a later part of the previous volume doing the same for a graduate student, then for a young colleague, and then for senior colleagues (whether this would make one volume or three I cannot judge).

What I am leading up to is that over and above the rewriting of history you might in this way lead yourself into your own problem.

For I think it is perfectly possible for an outstanding person to have a problem and not be able to find out what it is.

Yours ever,



J. O. Wisdom

JOW/laj

P.S. Could you let me have a copy of your papers in Technology and Culture?

*I am moving to York - seems a very vital & fertile place. Am very pleased abt it.*