

Philosophy

(This is one of three essays on philosophy in this book, the other two being “The Object” and “Pictures and Reality”)

Summary of the Most Important Ideas In This Chapter

- There are two types of philosophy: one is the type that occurs in in-person, spoken dialogues on philosophical subjects, the other is the type that occurs in printed books and academic papers on philosophic subjects. I emphasize that these are two different types, not a single type presented in two different forms. Anyone who disagrees with this assertion need only spend time participating in spoken dialogues, and then comparing that experience with the experience of reading printed philosophy.

I far prefer dialogues. For me it is the only legitimate type. The reason why is given in the item below that discusses abstractions and isms.

- Written philosophy is literature. Therefore the only utterances or questions about a piece of written philosophy that are *not* legitimate, are those having to do with whether or not the philosophy is true or correct. The reason such utterances and questions are not legitimate is that there is no valid way to determine if a philosophy is correct.

Thus it *is* legitimate to say of a philosophy, “This is certainly not *my* view of the world”, or “I can’t agree with what this philosophy asserts about ...” or “It is clear to me that this philosophy is an attempt to justify the philosopher’s ignorance of science and mathematics”, or ...

It is *not* legitimate to say, e.g., “You understand my philosophy when you agree it is correct.”

Dispensing with utterances or questions having to do with whether a philosophy is correct, is analogous to bracketing in Husserl’s phenomenological analysis, namely, the “setting aside the question of the real existence of a contemplated object, as well as all other questions about the object’s physical or objective nature.”¹

- There are no valid philosophical arguments because there are no formal definitions of philosophical terms that all philosophers accept, and there are no formal logical rules governing philosophical reasoning, that all philosophers accept. Thus, it is *not* legitimate to say, e.g., “Prove to me that philosophical assertion *x* is true (or valid).” But it *is* legitimate to say, e.g., “Explain to me why you believe assertion *x*.”

- A philosophy — a book setting forth a philosophy — is a World.

- The proper task of students of philosophy is to try to view the World that the philosopher being studied sets forth, as the philosopher does, without concern for whether the philosophy is correct or not. Thus, for example, although the writings of Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Bergson are abysmal in their ignorance of the nature of mathematics, we can and should try to see how these philosophers arrived at the views they have on these subjects.

Viewing philosophy as literature does wonders for opening the minds of students and others to a greater appreciation of philosophy. Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, for example, is without question one of the literary masterpieces of the 20th century. It was a stroke of genius to invent various forms of Being – Being-there, Being-along-side-of, Being-towards-death, etc. – as a way of countering the Object-based mode of human existence that Heidegger despised. Lesser minds would have used language like “when we are simply living as conscious beings in the world,” “when we are using tools,” “when we are confronting the inevitability of our death”, etc. But the

1. “Bracketing (phenomenology)”, Wikipedia, Nov. 10, 2016

use of “Being” snatches these matters out of the Object ontology that otherwise we naturally place them in.

- Since written philosophy is literature, difficulty and obscurity in a philosophical work are not faults, they are what perspective is for a painter, namely, a means of creating the illusion of depth.

However, we can certainly criticize the quality of a piece of literature that sets forth a philosophy, just as we can criticize the quality of any literary work. Foucault, for example, wrote volumes of literature, most of which were of inferior quality. Consider, for example, *The Birth of the Clinic*. What he was attempting to say, could have been said much better, and in far fewer pages.

- There are two types of ontology: Object ontology, which is the one that prevails in the hard sciences and mathematics (and the law and in bureaucracies), and non-Object, which is the one that prevails in the liberal arts (outside of history).

- Contrary to the pompous assertions of the logical positivists in the early 20th century that statements that cannot be scientifically verified are “meaningless” or “nonsense”, the only meaningless or nonsensical sequences of words are those that are likely to emerge from a random selection of words from the dictionary.

In literature, “meaningless” or “nonsensical” sentences occur all the time! We can and do imagine ourselves into worlds that never existed — worlds in which unicorns exist, or where the golden mountain exists, or the world where Spirit and the Absolute exist, or ...

- Some philosophers try to convince us that there are better theories of truth than the correspondence theory, in which a statement is true if it corresponds to a state of affairs in the real world. Yet every philosophy consists of assertions, and every assertion comes with an implied prefix, namely, “I want you to believe that the following assertion is true”, in other words, corresponds to something that is real. Furthermore, these philosophers, if they are professors, assign homework and give exams, and these exams are graded in accordance with how well the student’s answers correspond to the content of the course. So, no matter what philosophers proclaim about alternate theories of truth, they rely on the correspondence theory.

- When I read John Passmore’s masterful scholarly work, *100 Years of Philosophy*¹, I can’t help feeling what a tedious, useless enterprise philosophy is — an enterprise that, above all, never makes any progress. “Idealism, yes!” “Idealism, no, Realism yes!” “Idealism, Realism, no, Natural Language yes!”, and on and on.

Of course, there are those in the academic community who say, in effect, that philosophers are like the blind men in the fable who are attempting to understand the shape of the elephant — that is of Reality, or the Ultimate Truth, or ... by touch. And each philosopher believes that, if he doesn’t have the whole truth, then he has a significant portion of it, and the only remaining problem is to get other philosophers to recognize and accept that.

If I ask myself, “What would make all these efforts legitimate?” the answer I can’t help arriving at is, “Getting rid of the abstractions — the isms!” I think of Nietzsche. No matter how little

1. Penguin Books, Baltimore, MD, 1972

respect we may have for doctrines like that of the superman, we can never accuse him of the kind of pomposity that prevails in modern philosophy.

And then I realize why I consider, and have always considered, the spoken in-person dialogue to be the only legitimate form of philosophy — it is because, in such circumstances, abstractions tend to be nipped in the bud. For example:

A: “I believe in Neo-Idealism.”

B: “Hold it a goddamn minute! What do you mean by ‘Neo-Idealism?’”

If someone says to him- or herself, or to a person in an in-person spoken dialogue, “I simply cannot believe that the world doesn’t exist unless it is being perceived. I firmly believe that there is a separate reality from us, one that will be there even if human beings and similar thinking beings cease to exist,” that is perfectly legitimate.

But now if the speaker goes on to say, “The belief I have expressed seems to me unquestionably true. I will call this belief Philosophical Realism,” that is not perfectly legitimate! The balloon of abstraction has been inflated! Other thinkers will now go chasing after this balloon, asking, “Is Realism really true? Can we prove it? What do we mean by Realism? Does it exist?”, etc.

So I assert that philosophy should be nothing more nor less than the setting forth of world views as first-person utterances. Of course, academic philosophers do not want philosophy reduced to merely the utterances of individuals. No! They want their discipline to have all the trappings of the disciplines of the important people like mathematicians and scientists, whose writings are full of big, unfamiliar words and texts that are almost impossible to understand and, most important of all, full of abstractions.

Nevertheless I assert that philosophy becomes a fundamentally dishonest enterprise as soon as the personal is removed (or pretends to be removed) and is replaced by abstractions. And it invites the criticism that it never makes any progress, because, being full of big, unfamiliar words and impossibly difficult texts and abstractions, it seems to be a discipline like mathematics and the sciences, which *do* make progress.

The desire of some people to inquire, outside of science, as to the nature of the world and of human experience in the world is perfectly natural and commendable and legitimate. But to make an ism out of what a person believes, and send the balloon of that ism into the heavens, is not legitimate.

I am a proponent of Philosophy in the First Person.

- Against Nietzsche
- Against Heidegger
- Against Wittgenstein
- Against Foucault

Truth

What Is Truth?

“I simply do not understand the great reputation that Truth has. But of course most people believe that the Truth will be in their favor — not everyday truths, perhaps, but certainly the Ultimate Truth. Personally, I have no reason to believe that. If we wanted to be honest with our kids, we would chisel above the doors of our high schools and colleges, ‘You shall know the Truth, and it shall destroy you.’” — S.f.

“No one very easily takes a doctrine as true merely because it makes one happy or virtuous. No one, that is, but the lovely ‘idealists,’ who yearn over the good, the true, and the beautiful and let every kind of colorful, clumsy, and good-natured desirability swim at random in their pool. Happiness and virtue are not arguments. But we like to forget — even sensible thinkers do — that things making for unhappiness or for evil are not counter-arguments, either. Something might be true, even though it is harmful and dangerous in the greatest degree; it might in fact belong to the basic make up of things that one should perish from its full recognition. Then the strength of a given thinker would be measured by the amount of ‘the truth’ that he could understand. Or, to say it more plainly, to what degree he would *need* to have it adulterated, shrouded, sweetened, dulled, falsified. But there can be no doubt that for the discovery of certain *parts* of the truth, evil and unhappy men are better suited and have a greater probability of obtaining success...” — Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil*, “First Article: About Philosophers’ Prejudices”, sect. 39, Henry Regnery Co., Chicago, Ill., 1955, pp. 44-45.

But what makes the “evil and unhappy men” so better suited to discover certain parts of the truth? What attracts them to just those truths that are unpleasant, depressing? Is it a rare and admirable strength or is it simply that such truths afford an opportunity for revenge against a world and a life they hate?

“La philosophie, qui nous promet de nous rendre heureux, nous trompe.” — French proverb. (“The philosophy which promises to make us happy deceives us.”)

In our time, the “lovely ‘idealists’” of which Nietzsche speaks include the New Age psychologists — those purveyors (e.g., Wayne Dyer, Deepak Chopra) of good feelings that PBS TV stations are fond of presenting when it is time to garner membership pledges from reluctant middle- and upper-middle-class audiences. That this highly educated, affluent segment of the population is so willing to be led down the garden path by these wishful thinkers, these hope pushers, should dispel any notion that a modern education teaches anything remotely resembling “critical thinking” except in the narrowest professional sense. For this group, the rule is simple: “If it makes me feel good, it must be true.”

What is truth? “...Oxford...In her spacious and quiet streets men walked and spoke as they had done in Newman’s day; her autumnal mists, her grey springtime, and the rare glory of her

summer days...when the chestnut was in flower and the bells rang out high and clear over her gables and cupolas, exhaled the soft vapours of a thousand years of learning.” — Waugh, Evelyn, *Brideshead Revisited*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1973, p. 21.

A computer science professor gives one of his colleagues a paper he has recently completed, and asks for the colleague’s opinion. The colleague spends several days trying to puzzle out the extremely difficult, obscure language in which the paper is written. Several times he says it’s too difficult, but the author urges him to keep trying. Eventually the colleague comes back and says, half joking, that all that the paper is doing for him is giving him a strange feeling that reminds him of graduate school: a kind of hot feeling in the pit of his stomach, plus severe depression. “I can practically see the way the bare trees were in November of that one semester when I couldn’t make any progress on my thesis. I can remember the yellow street lamps at night, the leaves blowing, the cold gray concrete, the wind, the sense of hopelessness.” To which the colleague responds, “Now you understand my paper.”

Theories of Truth in the Humanities

There was a sign over the door of Plato’s Academy: “Let no one enter here who is ignorant of geometry.” Or, in other words, since most of Greek mathematics was geometry, Let no one enter here who is ignorant of mathematics.

This sign was put up by a man who is not only regarded as one of the Western world’s greatest philosophers, but a man who was also a competent mathematician as well as being a literary artist of the highest order (“the dramatist who created Socrates”, G. B. Shaw called him). So at the very beginning of our philosophical tradition, the notion — the *fact* — that literary genius can exist side by side in a person who has a respect and love and talent for mathematics, was established.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, however, a strange *appropriation* of philosophy by the purely literary mind began to take place. Not only did it become acceptable for a philosopher to be ignorant of mathematics, this ignorance became, in some schools of philosophy, a mark of a philosopher’s *distinction*, because mathematics, along with the disciplines it supports, namely, science and technology, were the domain of the Enemy. The real thinker was in touch with “different” truths than those of the technical disciplines; he was on the side of “man”, and his whole task became that of proving that man is not a scientific object.

The results are before us in the extraordinary (and to some of us, baleful) influence of the Continental philosophers, who have managed to lead generations of humanities students (and professors) into believing that what feels like the truth to you, and what sufficiently important academics regard as the truth, *is* the truth. There are no independent criteria. Those who are in possession of the truth are those who have sufficient influence and fame, i.e., power.

This proliferation of truths is the ultimate demonstration (at least to some of us) of the intellectual bankruptcy of the whole enterprise — the enterprise that is the centuries-long failure in the humanities to distinguish between theory and knowledge on the one hand, and art on the other, and, even worse, the decade-after-decade academic in-breeding that eliminates all those who would question whether the modern house of cards that is the humanities, really deserves the awe that its practitioners demand. The great theoretician writes his (or her) ponderous, intimidating, incomprehensible sentences and if you ask him what he meant, or why he believes he is right, he tells you, “Oh, no, it’s not *that* kind of truth!” And yet, when they give exams, when they talk

among themselves, there is no doubt that these deep thinkers are in the assertion business like the rest of us. They want you to agree that what they say *is the case*, all the while insisting that “Ours is a different kind of truth! If you judge us to be wrong, then you do not understand our type of truth. But if you judge us to be right, then you do understand it! It’s really that simple!”

This from a group that prides itself on its ignorance of the two disciplines — physics and mathematics — whose standard of truth has opened the heavens, an ignorance that makes it impossible for me not to recall the well-known scene from *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* in which the leader (Reg) of the Peoples’ Front of Judea (arch-enemies of the rival Judean Peoples’ Front) tries to encourage the members of the Front in their proposed overthrow of the Roman oppressors, by asking what seems to him to be the fundamental question:

“Reg. ... *what have [the Romans] ever given us...?*

(Silence, then:)

Voice from rear: The aqueducts...

Reg.: What?

Voice: The aqueducts.

Reg.: Oh, yeah, yeah, they did give us that. That’s true.

Another voice: And the sanitation.

Stan: Oh, yeah, the sanitation, Reg. Remember what the city used to be like.

Reg.: I’ll grant you that the aqueducts and the sanitation are two things the Romans have done for us.

Another voice: And the roads...

Reg.: Well, obviously the roads, I mean, the roads go without saying, don’t they. But apart from the sanitation, the aqueducts and the roads...

Other voices: Irrigation...medicine...education...

Reg.: Yeah, all right, fair enough.

Voice: And the wine...

Another Voice: And public baths.

Stan: And it’s safe to walk in the streets at night, Reg. They certainly know how to keep order...

Reg.: All right: but apart from the sanitation, medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, the fresh water system and public health — *what have the Romans ever done for us?*”

If you make assertions — if you speak in the *assertoric mode* — if you use objective, scholarly, language and even if you don’t. *if you want people to agree with what you say*, if you give students homework and exams and grade the students’ responses, then whether you like it or not, what you say is ultimately subject to the same criterion of truth as scientists’ assertions are.

I think it is fair to say that virtually all written philosophy in the West has been in the assertoric mode. Three possible exceptions are Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and the later Wittgenstein. The styles in all three cases are aimed at prodding the reader, goading him or her into a new view of the world.

It is not a matter of sentence type: authors of fiction and personal essays use declarative sentences just as philosophers do, but we do not call these authors to account. The reason is that we

know that their intentions are different: to present a world, to voice an opinion. In neither case are they making claims about the world.

And it is not, of course, that the humanities should somehow “go over” to mathematics and the hard sciences, that they should make their own subjects more “like” these, that humanities professors should force themselves to love these intimidating subjects. Not at all. It is a question of the humanities coming to terms with what business they are in (Ryle’s crucially important, but largely ignored, idea).

One Particular Alternative Definition of Truth

Let us consider one twentieth century definition of truth that was presented with sufficient literary skill to seduce most of those who were attracted to so-called Continental philosophy. I am referring to Heidegger’s definition of truth as “uncovering” (*aletheia*) — “‘Being-true’ (‘truth’) means ‘Being-uncovering’”¹. But this is the definition of *artistic* “truth”. It is what we are referring to when we say of a portrait that the artist has “captured perfectly” the subject, meaning that the artist has not merely given us a physical likeness, but that he has revealed the personality of the subject as well. It is what jazz musicians were referring to when they said of the great alto saxophonist Charlie Parker, “Bird speaks the truth, man.” (“He tells it like it is!”)

Artistic truth is never precise. There is often disagreement, even among connoisseurs, as to whether a work has this kind of truth, and if it does, what exactly is being revealed. Furthermore there is no way of deciding who is right. The correspondence theory of truth, on the other hand, requires that we go to other people to confirm our claims. But no artist wants to go to others — not even other artists — to ask if he has succeeded. The idea of art-by-committee is repugnant to most artists. It makes the work of art into a mere object, the kind of entity that Heidegger devoted his entire professional life to combating. And in fact whenever we see a philosopher who has no interest in giving arguments for his views and yet, at the same time, a philosopher who is angry at those who disagree with him, we are seeing an artist who doesn’t know what business he is in.

The concept of artistic truth is part of the intellectual makeup of every good artist. If you were to say to such an artist, “You should not concern yourself with artistic truth, it is not a legitimate concept”, your words would be greeted with indifference, even annoyance, since the concept of artistic truth is central to the artistic endeavor. The trouble begins when the concept is removed from its legitimate context, and made into an academic subject in itself. Now it becomes job-security for professors because it makes interpretation the central business at hand, a business in which the “correct” interpretation is, in the last analysis, what those with the most prestige say it is. Period. (Hence if one could gain the most prestige, why then... So how does one go about gaining the most prestige?)²

We must ask: given Heidegger’s definition of truth, how did he decide in his courses if his students had understood him? On what basis did he decide if other philosophers in his field were right or wrong?

1. Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Harper & Row, N.Y., 1962, p. H. 220

2. See also Richard Rorty’s *The Mirror of Nature*, an extensive treatise on the subject of artistic truth.

“Many philosophers speak critically of the ‘correspondence theory’ of truth, but it always seemed to me, that except in logic and mathematics, no other theory had any chance of being right.” — Bertrand Russell¹

When First Opening a Philosophy Book

Philosophers would save their prospective readers an enormous amount of time if they simply made a practice of stating, at the beginning of their works, just how the world would be if their philosophy prevailed or were correct, e.g., what the typical day of a typical person would be like. (Consider how the world would be if the philosophy of Nietzsche or Heidegger prevailed.) Or, in other words, every philosophy book should begin by answering the question, “*What is this book for?*” (which is not, of course, a demand that the book have “practical” applications), and if the book doesn’t address that question, then *we* must address it. Academics with careers to promote may ask us to believe that, e.g., much of Foucault’s work was an attempt to get at the *truth* about the nature of certain institutions in the West, e.g., hospitals, prisons, but we who have the freedom to be more honest with ourselves know that fundamentally his work was an attempt at *consolation*, namely, the consolation that comes from finding an explanation for things that threaten us — and any explanation will do, just so long as it is convincing and (thereby) comforts us. But to be convincing in modern times means to be, or, rather, must seem to be, scientific, objective, scholarly, because that is the language that truth is expressed in. (If you have some understanding of the hard sciences, ask yourself how you would even pose the questions in statistical terms that Foucault addresses. What would constitute evidence for and against your thesis?)

When you pick up a book of philosophy, another question you should ask is, “*What ontology — Object-ive or non-Object-ive — does the style of this book imply?*”

I know of no philosopher who has made clear that he understood the difference between the two ontologies. Bertrand Russell’s greatest limitation was that, for him, there was only one ontology, namely, that of the Object. All philosophical sentences, as far as he was concerned, were attempting, or should be attempting, to do one job, namely, describe the world.

Over the years I have tried to find some indication of what Russell thought of Heidegger, but with no success. In *Wisdom of the West*, which Russell wrote in advanced old age, and which is not nearly as good as his *A History of Western Philosophy*, he devotes exactly one short paragraph, out of 313 pages, to Heidegger:

Highly eccentric in its terminology, his philosophy is extremely obscure. One cannot help suspecting that language is here running riot. An interesting point in his speculations is the insistence that nothingness is something positive. As with much else in Existentialism, this is a psychological observation made to pass for logic. (p. 303)

Russell seems to have had no idea of what Heidegger was doing, namely, fighting the Object ontology every step of the way. It was a stroke of genius for Heidegger to use all the categories of Being -- Being-there, Being-in-the-world, Being-alongside-of, Being-towards-death, ... — as a way of talking about aspects of human psychological experience without falling back on the stan-

1. *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell, 1903-1959*, Simon and Schuster, N.Y., 1961, p. 228.

standard Object ontology. A run-of-the-mill psychologist would have expressed these various kinds of Being as “states of mind”, or “types of experience”, which makes Objects out of them. Being... on the other hand takes them out of that ontology.

The main reason why Marxists find *irrelevant* all demands for scientific tests of their theory, is that their theory is not of the same ontology as scientific theories. The main reason why existentialist philosophers in the 20th century had no interest in the philosophical movement called “analysis” was that this philosophy imposed the Object ontology on all its subject matter.

The casual use of the word “model” is a sure sign of this lack of understanding, because the word immediately announces the assumption of the Object ontology.

Yet another question you should ask when you pick up a philosophy book is, “*Where does the infinitude lie?*” By “infinitude” I mean that which we cannot easily grasp, that which draws us on to further study, thought, struggle to understand, that which seems to have imponderable depth, even mystery. Nietzsche’s great aphorism — “Man would rather have the void for his purpose than be void of purpose” — should serve as a warning to every philosopher who is attracted to attempts to put an end to philosophy, or to reducing man to nothing but.... The mere fact of self-consciousness renders all such attempts futile. Furthermore, such philosophers should be ashamed of themselves for not admitting the hypocrisy of their enterprise: *they* are left with a very nice infinitude indeed, namely, their life work of demolishing this other infinitude (so little time, so much to undo!).

We might even *define* philosophy as the creation of infinitude where none existed before. The existentialists saved themselves from the death-in-life of a world that was nothing but facts and Objects (since existentialists were not scientists or mathematicians or engineers or businessmen¹), by adopting Husserl’s phenomenological analysis and description, and, in some cases, by going into the old, reliable trade of interpretation, for which there is always a need, always a future (“None of those others got it right. But *I* know how to get it right!”).

Another question is, “*What rules or guidelines does the philosopher use for deciding if someone understands his or her philosophy?*” If the question isn’t even discussed, then you may be wasting your time.

Another question is, “*What questions or assertions does the philosopher consider legitimate regarding his book?*” This seems to me a useful way of emerging from some of the endless discussions and arguments regarding some philosophical works. Questions and assertions whose legitimacy the philosopher should be willing to pronounce upon, include the following:

“[The philosopher] is right/wrong when he says *x* about *y*.”

1. The reader might be inclined to reply that the lives of these people are very much taken up with facts and Objects, and yet they do not experience the death-in-life of the existentialists. The reason is that these people, unlike existentialists and the vast majority of others in the humanities, are in the driver’s seat in relationship to facts and Objects.

“[The philosopher] agrees/disagrees with z regarding w .”

“The meaning of the passage u in [the philosopher’s] book t is ...”

Another question is, “*How would the philosopher have me behave after I have read and understood his book?*”

Another question is, “*What rules or guidelines does the philosopher use for comparing his philosophy with other philosophies, past, present, and future?*” If the question isn’t even discussed, you may be wasting your time.

Another question is, “*What criteria does the philosopher use for deciding if the philosophy is right or wrong, or if it is accomplishing what the philosopher wants it to accomplish?*” If the question isn’t even discussed, you may be wasting your time, because you are dealing with an artist who doesn’t know what business he is in. (On the other hand, there have been philosophers, e.g., Nietzsche, who were artists but who *did* know what business they were in.)

Ontology

As far as I know, Heidegger was the first to point out that to speak of “proof” in philosophy is to assign an ontology to the subjects which the proof concerns¹. (“Have you stopped beating your wife?”) Similarly, the style of a philosopher’s writing is in part his declaration of the nature of his subject (e.g., easy to understand, understandable only by the few).

Whatever the status of Wittgenstein’s philosophy in today’s academic culture, this philosophy is alive and well in the computer database industry. Or, to put it more accurately, one of his central ideas has been reinvented by programmers and computer scientists most of whom have never even heard of his name. In its modern form, this is the idea of the abstract data type, which first appeared among Artificial Intelligence researchers in the ‘70’s, and is now being applied in the latest database technology. An abstract data type is defined by the operations that can be performed on it, not by what it really “is”. Thus, something is a list if you can apply to it the operations of getting the first item, and getting the remaining items. Something is an alphanumeric string if it is a list consisting solely of letters and digits. An abstract data type implicitly excludes the same kind of “nonsense” that Wittgenstein brought to our attention. As one programmer put it, “Somehow, I don’t think you should be allowed to get the tangent of today’s date.”

1. Claire Ortiz Hill informs me that this idea is already present in Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*, which had a big impact on Heidegger’s thought.

The history of twentieth century philosophy in ten words: “The world is essentially mathematical!” “The world is essentially poetical!”

The year-in, year-out bad reputation of philosophy — the layman as well as the scientist and mathematician regarding it with derision — is not, as academic philosophers like to believe, merely an expression of the ignorance of those who do not know. It is of fundamental importance, because it reflects an intuitive insight among educated laymen that philosophers are attempting to claim what is not theirs, namely, the same kind of truth that the sciences and mathematics want to claim.

The ontological fallacy: if something is presented in objective language, then it is objective. If something looks like an object, then it is an object.

(I once asked a young professor of East Asian studies why she and in fact all academics were expected to write in the objective style. She replied, “Because it’s not supposed to sound like your opinion.” But suppose it is your opinion?)

Now, as at the beginning, **the proper domain of philosophy is the dialogue** — in-person conversation among intellectual equals about certain subjects that are not primarily scientific or mathematical. Consider how much better we would understand what Hegel *really* meant if (in addition to his written works) he had regularly engaged in recorded conversations with other philosophers of his time, both those who agreed and those who disagreed with him. These philosophers, we can safely assume, would have asked the questions that have occurred to readers ever since. They would not have hesitated to ask for further definitions of his technical terms, and examples thereof. They would have *reasoned* with him about his conclusions. Sadly, it is unlikely that Hegel would have allowed himself to participate in such exchanges:

“Like Kant, he did not like *symphilosophiein*; but also like Kant, he was fond of *confabulari* with those who he felt sure would not seduce him into the former.” (Erdmann, Johann Eduard, quoted in Kaufmann, Walter, *Hegel*, Doubleday and Company, 1965, Garden City, N.Y., p. 361.) Kaufmann explains in a footnote: “*Symphilosophiein*, a Greek word that the German romantics liked, means to philosophize together; *confabulari* means to chat together.”

Let us imagine Heidegger attempting to make the case he does in his *What Is a Thing?*¹, not in a lecture hall, but in a small meeting room or even a coffee shop, before a group of philosophers, scientists, mathematicians, and others, who wish to listen to and try to understand his ideas, but who are also allowed to ask questions and express disagreements as he proceeds. We can imagine the dialogue proceeding somewhat as follows. (I will omit quotation marks around portions of text quoted from the book.)

Heidegger: From the range of basic questions of metaphysics, I would like here to ask this one question: What is a thing? The question is quite old. What remains ever new about it is merely that it must be asked again and again.

1. Heidegger, Martin, *What Is a Thing?*, tr. Barton, Jr., W. B., and Deutsch, Vera, with analysis by Gendlin, Eugene T., Gateway Editions, Ltd., South Bend, Indiana, 1967. The book “represents the text of a lecture held in the winter semester, 1935-36, at the University of Freiburg. The lecture was entitled, ‘Basic Questions of Metaphysics.’” — p. vii.

Scientist with some knowledge of modern philosophy: Why must it be asked again and again?

Heidegger: We could immediately begin a lengthy discussion about the question, ‘What is a thing?’ before we have really posed it. In one respect this would even be justified, since philosophy always starts from an unfavorable position. This is not so with the sciences, for there is always a direct transition and entrance to them starting from everyday representations, beliefs, and thinking.

Scientist: Excuse me, Prof. Heidegger, but I think you are wrong in your last statement. The statement may have been true in previous centuries, but this is the 20th century, and since 1900, we have seen the discovery of two theories in physics that render the statement simply false. Neither in the case of the General Theory of Relativity nor in that of quantum mechanics can you say that there is a “direct transition and entrance to them starting from everyday representations.” Both theories were baffling initially even to many physicists. Quantum mechanics continues to be so. Niels Bohr said, “Anyone who is not shocked by quantum theory has not understood it.” What possible “direct transition and entrance from everyday representations” can you cite that led Heisenberg to the discovery of his Uncertainty Principle? — the idea that it is impossible to simultaneously measure, with arbitrary accuracy, the velocity and the position of a particle. What possible “direct transition and entrance from everyday representations” can you cite that led to the phenomenon in quantum mechanics of the superposition of states, in which, prior to measurement, a particle is in several mutually exclusive states *at the same time*. (In the famous explanatory example known as “Schrödinger’s Cat”, prior to opening the box containing the cat, “there is a radioactive sample that has both decayed and not decayed, a glass vessel of poison that is neither broken nor unbroken, and a cat that is both dead and alive, neither alive nor dead.”¹)

I don’t think any fair-minded reader can argue that the scientist in the above dialogue is being deliberately obtuse. And yet we can select virtually any page in Heidegger’s writings and imagine similar questions being raised by participants in an in-person dialogue with Heidegger.

But we must also ask why this man for whom the Greeks provided the basis on which all philosophical analysis — or at least interpretation — had to rest — why this man who clearly wanted nothing so much as to see the Greek view of the world re-instated, one way or the other, in the modern world — why this man was at the same time so clearly indifferent to reviving the central activity of so much of Greek philosophy, namely, the dialogue, the conversation between equals aimed at arriving at the truth.

My answer to this question is that the spoken dialogue has a way of “rounding” concepts as a result of their being passed from hand to hand, or rather, from mind to mind. The concepts become public. They no longer belong to the thinker who introduced them, they are handled first by this other thinker, then by that thinker, then by that third, in the group of participants in the dialogue. *And that is precisely what an artist finds repugnant.* No artist wants to go to others and ask, “Have I got this right? Do you *agree* with this?” No artist wants to pass his work around in unfinished form. The artist’s work of art is private when it is in the making. It comes from his very soul. His one and only task is to make it as right as he can in his own eyes.

“L’art c’est moi, la science c’est nous.” [Art is me, science is us.] — Claude Bernard²

1. Gribbin, John, *In search of Schrödinger’s Cat*, Bantam Books, N.Y., 1984, pp. 204-205.

2. quoted in Weissmann, Gerald, *Galileo’s Gout: Science in an Age of Endarkenment*, Bellevue Literary Press, N.Y., 2007, p. 68.

So it seems likely that Heidegger would have had nothing but disdain for the idea of participating in public dialogues. Of course, reputations and careers would fall if the idea of public dialogue were taken seriously. All those brown shingle houses in the best part of the university towns, all those academic sons and daughters already on the way to Harvard at age six, all that profound solemnity, all that prestige — gone. Well, I'm sorry. Either you're in the business of living the prestigious life, or you're in the business of pursuing the truth, regardless of where it may take you. Either you know what business you are in, or you don't. I dare any philosopher who is convinced that the proper domain of philosophy is academic books and papers (preferably books and papers that are difficult to understand) to allow himself to participate in a dialogue with others who have a genuine interest in philosophy, but who do not necessarily agree with his views. These others can be scientists, mathematicians, students and professors of the humanities — anyone who can honestly state that they have spent at least a few days studying and reflecting on the philosopher's basic ideas. I am available.

There is certainly a strong implication in Heidegger's philosophy that the categories of Being — Being-there, Being-against-one-another, Being-alone, Being-alongside, Being-already-alongside, Being-already-in, Being-the-basis, Being-in-itself, Being-in-the-world, Being-towards-the-ready-to-hand, Being-with, Being-toward-death, ... — that these categories are not scientific categories, i.e., do not have the same ontology as, e.g., classifications of plants or animals, or even of standard psychological classifications, e.g., neurotic, psychotic, manic-depressive, etc. But now suppose that a machine were invented that, when attached to a person, would at each moment give a reading, say, on a scale of 0 to 10, for each type of Being, the degree to which the person was in that state of Being at that time. We ask: would Heideggerians consider this machine desirable, and if not, why not? If not, surely they could not make the argument that the categories must be recognized by the person him- or herself, that that is one of the key aims of Heidegger's philosophy. Because it seems hard to imagine how the intellectual effort of keeping track of the degree to which one was in each category, could do anything but change the person's intellectual and emotional life completely. The machine, on the other hand, would not have this effect. As far as the person was concerned, it would make the categories not scientific at all (as experienced), and yet, given the record that the machine would keep, and make available...

Suppose someone were to create a table of philosophers as follows: each row would be devoted to a single philosopher, the philosophers being listed in chronological order, and the columns would be headed with philosophical categories: scholasticism, rationalism, idealism, materialism, logical positivism, ordinary language philosophy, existentialism, etc., and with subjects traditionally dealt with by philosophers: sense perception, reason, mind, God, Being, human existence, Nature, mathematics, science, art, psychology, religion, etc. The entry under the categories might be only a number in the range from 0 through 10, where 0 means "no characteristics of this category in the philosopher's work" and 10 means "the philosopher's work is exclusively devoted to this category". The entry under each of the other columns would be a concise indication of the philosopher's views on the subject in question, e.g., "Christian God exists", "No God exists", "No views expressed on God", etc.

What would be wrong with such a table? Clearly it might be of use to students, but it is in an important sense misleading, because it gets the ontologies wrong. That is, it implies that each philosopher in effect did no more than assign weights or make decisions about a fixed set of categories and subjects. In other words, that all philosophers worked with a fixed set of Objects. The

table would be the equivalent of the assertion that all the properties of words are contained in dictionaries and grammars, which poetry shows is simply not true.

Understanding Philosophy

Logical positivists would have met with far less opposition to their ideas (and far less attention from the intellectual world) if, instead of saying that assertions which are not, at least in principle, verifiable or refutable by experiment are “meaningless” or “nonsensical”, they had said what they meant, namely, that such assertions cannot contribute to knowledge, specifically, scientific knowledge. This would have saved considerable unnecessary effort and expenditure of time by thinkers in the humanities, not to mention by various poets, novelists, and other artists, who took “meaningless” or “nonsensical” to mean “without value”, or even “incomprehensible”.

In the history of human thought, a great step forward was taken with the discovery of mathematical proof; another great step forward was taken with the idea that the only statements which can lead to knowledge about the natural world are those whose truth or falsity can be verified (at least in principle), namely, by experiment. Now, considering the enormous amount of time and energy which has been spent on interpretation in philosophy — “What did the philosopher x really mean in his book y ?” — it is truly remarkable that philosophers have spent so little effort in attempting to answer the question, “How can the reader know that he has understood me?” or, perhaps better, “What criteria would I use to determine the level of the reader’s understanding of what I have said?” One answer might be simply a list of the examination questions which the philosopher has given to his students, along with a sample of student responses, and the philosopher’s grading of them. Another answer might be, “I determine a reader’s level of understanding by the way he or she discusses my philosophy in a personal conversation with me” (philosophy as language). I suspect that a third answer, usually not expressed, is, “The reader has understood me if he agrees that I am correct.”

It may be generally true, as Nietzsche said, that no philosopher wants to be understood, but it is equally true that no philosopher wants not to be understood in the wrong way.

How can we tell if two different explanations of a particular philosopher’s writings are the same? One way is to give a set of questions about the writings to readers of each explanation, and then see if the reader’s scores are sufficiently close. (But then, why not just give the readers the questions and the answers, and save them the trouble of reading the explanations?)

It is easy to give the benefit of the doubt to a philosopher whose writing is obscure, and to entertain the possibility that, behind the obscurity, lay profound insights which language is simply unable to convey. But if one is inclined to do this, one should also make it a practice to read what the philosopher has to say on subjects he knows little about.

“Dühring... in 1872, in his classic *Kritische Geschichte der allgemeinen Principien der Mechanik*, indulged in a polemic against Gauss, Cauchy, and others who would deny the absolute truth of geometry, and who would introduce into mathematics such figments of the imagination as imaginary numbers, non-Euclidean geometry, and limits! Marxian materialists will not grant

mathematics the independence of experience necessary for its proper development. Such denial makes impossible the concept of the derivative and the scientific description of motion in terms thereof. The mathematical infinity is, in accord with this view, a contradiction of the ‘tautology’ that the whole is greater than any of its parts...

“Idealists...wished to view the continuum, not in terms of the discreteness of Cantor and Dedekind, but as an unanalyzable concept in the form of a metaphysical reality which is intuitively perceived. The differential calculus was regarded as possessing a ‘positive’ meaning as the generator of the continuum, as opposed to the ‘negation’ of the limit concept. As Hegel expressed it, the derivative represented the ‘becoming’ of magnitudes, as opposed to the integral, or the ‘has become’.

“Materialistic and idealistic philosophies have both failed to appreciate the nature of mathematics, as accepted at the present time. Mathematics is neither a description of nature nor an explanation of its operation; it is not concerned with physical motion or with the metaphysical generation of quantities. It is merely the symbolic logic of possible relations...” — Boyer, Carl B., *The History of the Calculus and its Conceptual Development*, Dover Publications, Inc., N.Y., 1959, pp. 307-308.

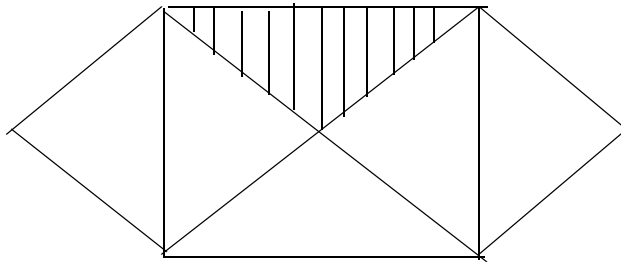
Anyone who has the slightest understanding and appreciation of mathematics — and I am not referring here to its applications but to the subject itself — to its beauty as revealed, say, in a proof as simple as that of the Pythagorean theorem, or in Euclid’s proof that the number of prime numbers is infinite, or in Cantor’s proof that there are at least two different infinities, one containing all the integers and fractions, the other, much bigger than the first, containing all the real numbers (numbers with a decimal point) — anyone with even this much understanding and appreciation of mathematics can only be shocked by the level of ignorance of the subject that is revealed in some writings of the greatest philosophers. For example, Hegel:

“In mathematical knowledge, insight is an event that is external to the matter; it follows that the true matter is changed by it. The means, construction and demonstration, contain true propositions; but at the same time it must be said the content is false. ... the triangle is dismembered and its parts are allotted to other figures which the construction brings into being alongside it. Only in the end one reconstitutes the triangle which really matters, but which during the procedure was lost from view and appeared only in pieces which belonged to other wholes. — Here, then, we also see the negativity of the content enter, which would just as much have to be called a falseness of the content as is the disappearance of the movement of the Concept of the thought that had been considered fixed.” — *Hegel: Texts and Commentary*, tr. and ed. by Kaufmann, Walter, Anchor Books, Garden City, N.Y., 1966, p. 64.

Or Schopenhauer:

“We are convinced that intuition is the primary source of all evidence, and the immediate or mediated reference to it alone is absolute truth, and that the nearest way to it is always the safest because every mediation through Concepts exposes us to many deceptions. When with this conviction we turn to *mathematics*, as it was set up as a science by Euclid and has on the whole remained to this day, we cannot help finding the way it pursues strange — indeed, perverted [*verkehrt*]... instead of thus granting a thorough insight into the essence of the triangle, he sets up a few disjointed, arbitrarily chosen propositions about the triangle and offers a logical reason for

them by way of a tortuous, logical proof ... Instead of an exhaustive knowledge of these spatial relations, one therefore receives merely a few ... results from them and is in the position of a person to whom the various effects of a complex machine are shown, while their inner relation and the works are kept from him. That what Euclid demonstrates is indeed that way, one has to admit, compelled by the principle of contradiction: but *why* things are that way, one is not told. One therefore has almost the uncomfortable feeling that attends a sleight of hand; and in fact most Euclidean proofs are strikingly similar to that. Almost always truth enters through the backdoor ... Often, as in the Pythagorean theorem, lines are drawn, one knows not why: afterwards it appears that they were nooses that are unexpectedly tightened and captivate the assent of the student who now has to admit, amazed, what in its inner context remains totally incomprehensible for him — so much so that he can study all of Euclid without gaining any insight into the laws of spatial relations; instead he would merely learn by heart a few of their results. This really empirical and unscientific knowledge is like that of a doctor who knows disease and remedy, but not their connection ... Just so, the Pythagorean theorem teaches us to know a *qualitas occulta* of the right-angled triangle: Euclid's stilted, crafty proof leaves us when it comes to the why, and the accompanying familiar simple figure offers at a single glance far more insight into the matter...than the proof:



In the case of unequal sides, too, it must be possible to achieve such intuitive conviction; indeed this must be so in the case of every possible geometrical truth if only because its discovery always was prompted by such an intuitive necessity and the proof was thought out only afterwards...” — Schopenhauer, Arthur, *The World as Will and Idea*, I, § 15, quoted in *Hegel: Texts and Commentary*, tr. and ed. by Kaufmann, Walter, Anchor Books, Garden City, N.Y., 1966, pp. 65, 67.

Further, even more embarrassing, examples can be found in *The Mathematical Manuscripts of Karl Marx*, tr. Aronson, C. and Meo, M. New Park Publications, London, 1983.

The physicist Richard Feynman once remarked on “the general dopiness”¹ of the people who study the humanities, including philosophy, and certainly the above examples bear him out.

The degree of blundering incomprehension that is evident in the above examples is on the level of the engineer who, upon reading the lines,

1. Lightman, Alan, “The One and Only”, review of Gleick, James, *Genius: The Life and Science of Richard Feynman*, Pantheon, in *The New York Review of Books*, Dec. 17, 1992, p. 34.

“Not all the water in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm off from an annointed king;”¹

announces that they are proof that Shakespeare is vastly overrated as a playwright, since he offers no scientific proof that such a quantity of water could not, in fact, remove all the balm from the flesh of a human being, king or not.

But the above quotes from Hegel and Schopenhauer make us realize the importance of understanding how the thinking of these and other philosophers, e.g., Heidegger, takes place in a single connected All — what I have elsewhere in this chapter called “the world without Objects”, a clumsy phrase, but the best I can come up with at present. This is the state that is often referred to by the words “spirit” and “spiritual” in non-religious contexts. Distinctions such as are the very essence of mathematics and hard science, are regarded as anathema. Everything is connected to everything else in this realm. Everything exists in a single “medium”. Objects — with boundaries, and distances between them — are the enemy. It is still a major, unanswered question how such philosophies should be studied and evaluated. My belief at present is that all we can do is try to immerse ourselves in them and experience the world as their creators did, while dispensing with all questions as to which parts of the philosophies are “correct”. Dispensing with utterances or questions having to do with whether a philosophy is correct, is analogous to bracketing in Husserl’s phenomenological analysis, namely, the “setting aside the question of the real existence of a contemplated object, as well as all other questions about the object’s physical or objective nature.”²

Having said that, I must also remind the reader to keep in mind the astounding fact that three men who are regarded as among the greatest philosophers of the Western world — Hegel, Marx, and Heidegger — had no concern for what many of us regard as one of the fundamental questions of any intellectual discipline: “*How do I know I’m right?*”

In any case, the *beginning* of all attempts to understand a difficult philosopher should be by having before one a list of *all* usages of each of the philosopher’s technical terms. That’s right, all usages of each term, with sufficient surrounding context, in all works, perhaps in chronological order. That is where it all must begin. Interpretation can only legitimately come after that, and not with this or that expert’s interpretation arrived at after years of doing essentially the same thing. Such a task would no doubt be tedious, but that is too bad. (The computer makes the task much easier.) We might begin with Hegel, say, or Heidegger.

You understand a philosopher when you can write like him (or her) — when you can philosophize in his or her style.

Why is it that with time philosophy books written in the past become harder to understand in a way that novels, personal letters, and treatises in mathematics and the hard sciences do not? One

1. Shakespeare, William, *Richard II*, III, ii, 54-55

2. “Bracketing (phenomenology)”, Wikipedia, Nov. 10, 2016

answer may be that elaborated elsewhere in this book, namely, that a philosophy is expressed in a language whose speakers rapidly die off, even though some of the ideas, or at least terminology, may live on in books on the history of philosophy. The reason why old philosophies seem vague, imprecise, “wrong”, to modern readers, may have little to do with their original lack of precision in a mathematical or scientific sense, but instead to do with the fact that the kind of language precision that comes with extensive usage — consider any highly articulate speaker and writer of a modern natural language — that such precision is simply no longer possible because the community of speakers has all but disappeared.

“Let us consider roughly, for a moment, the impression left upon us, on the one hand, by the literature of the fifteenth century, and on the other hand by its painting. Villon and Charles d’Orleans apart, most of the poets will appear superficial, monotonous, tiresome...The artists, on the other hand, are not only very great, like Van Eyck, Foucquet, or the unknown who painted ‘The Man with the Glass of Wine,’ but nearly all, even the mediocre ones, arrest our attention by each detail of their work and hold us by their originality and freshness. Yet their contemporaries admired the poets much more than the artists. Why was the flavor lost in the one case and preserved in the other?

“The explanation is that words and images have a totally different esthetic function. If the painter does nothing but render exactly, by means of line and colour, the external aspect of an object, he yet always adds to this purely formal reproduction something inexpressible. The poet, on the contrary, if he only aims at formulating anew an already expressed concept, or describing some visible reality, will exhaust the whole treasure of the ineffable. Unless rhythm or accent save it by their own charms, the effect of the poem will depend solely on the echo which the subject, the thought in itself, awakens in the soul of the hearer. A contemporary will be thrilled by the poet’s word, for the thought which the latter expresses also forms an integral part of his own life, and it will appear the more striking to him in so far as its form is more brilliant. A happy selection of terms will suffice to make the expression of it acceptable and charming to him. As soon, however, as this thought is worn out and no longer responds to the preoccupations of the soul of the period, nothing of value is left to the poem except its form.” — Huizinga, J., *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, Doubleday Anchor Books, N.Y., 1954, pp. 274-275.

I am far more interested in the sources of a philosopher’s ideas, no matter how simple or naive these sources might be, than I am in his elaborate development of those ideas. Thus I can’t help wondering if the whole of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* might not just be a long meditation on the Berkeleyan question whether the tree that falls in a forest makes a noise if there is no one to hear it.

Academic Philosophy

General Remarks

“Philosophy is just saying obvious things in a complicated way.” — anon.

A philosopher is someone who paints a picture of a house — a picture that other philosophers spend their lives studying, trying to decide if the house has three bedrooms or four and whether the attic is finished and how many bathrooms there are on the second floor.

Why is it that we often speak of “academic philosophy” but never of “academic physics”, “academic mathematics”?

“He is a professional philosopher.”

“A professional *what?*”

I don’t know if, as Nietzsche said, a married philosopher is a figure out of a comedy, but certainly an academic philosopher is who claims that his principal concern is the questioning of established values. Who are the extraordinary employers who are willing, year after year, to sign the paychecks and provide the raises and promotions for such an employee, especially if he does a good job?

You need a degree and a tenured position at a university in order to be a philosopher? You need someone to give you a hat and a badge before you can think? You are a mediocrity.

Part of the basic knowledge that *every* student of philosophy should have at his or her fingertips is a list of great philosophers who were not academics. The list includes Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume, Voltaire, Marx, Nietzsche at the peak of his powers, Bertrand Russell for most of his professional life, Camus, Sartre... (Why is this important fact mentioned, if at all, only in passing, in philosophy courses?)

One reason why philosophers’ writings on the meaning of life have so little appeal outside of academic circles at present (nineties) may be that this, of all subjects, is simply not one that can be dealt with in any important way by a group of sequestered professionals with guaranteed lifetime jobs. Indeed, the only place in which at least the urgency of the subject is being felt is among so-called ordinary people facing mid-life crises, and, of course, among the clientele of psychotherapists. There is more deep, painful, “questioning of basic assumptions” among the members of Alcoholics Anonymous than there is in all the philosophy departments in the U.S. at present.

“University philosophy, is, as a rule, mere juggling. Its real aim is to impart to the students, in the deepest ground of their thought, that tendency of mind which the ministry that appoints to the professorships regards as consistent with its views. ...the result...is that such philosophy of the chair cannot be regarded as serious philosophy, but as the mere jest of it. Moreover, it is at any rate just that such inspection or guidance should extend only to the philosophy of the chair, and not to the real philosophy that is in earnest. For if anything in the world is worth wishing for — so well worth wishing for that even the ignorant and dull herd in its more reflective moments would prize it more than silver and gold — it is that a ray of light should fall on the obscurity of our being, and that we should gain some explanation of our mysterious existence, in which nothing is clear but its misery and its vanity. But even if this is in itself attainable, it is made impossible by imposed and compulsory solutions.” — Schopenhauer, Arthur, Supplements to *The World As Will and Idea*, Chapter XVII, in *Schopenhauer: Selections*, ed. DeWitt H. Parker, The Modern Student’s Library, Charles Scribner’s Sons, N.Y., 1928.

It would be extremely interesting to take a poll of academic philosophers as to how they *wished* the reading public would regard philosophy. Would they like everyone to take a few undergraduate semesters of at least the history of philosophy? What about contemporary philosophy? What would they like this public to read, and how (if at all) would they like this public to apply it? How would these philosophers propose that this public find out what they should read? What if (as I suspect would be the case) the majority of those polled said that modern philosophy, like modern mathematics, is simply too abstract and technical for the untrained reader? What exactly would that mean? (I am excluding from consideration here those philosophies which are prototypes of new sciences, e.g., those dealing with some of the questions raised by artificial intelligence.)

“*Jahanbegloo*: Do you think philosophy can survive without philosophers?”

“[Isiah] *Berlin*: It depends what you call philosophers. Ordinary men with sufficient curiosity and capacity for understanding general ideas can, of course, philosophize. Herzen, for example, was not a professional philosopher, nor were Marx or Dostoevsky or Nietzsche, yet their ideas still have considerable philosophical importance. It depends on what you mean. Bodin was a lawyer. So was Bacon. They were not professors. Nor were Leibniz or Spinoza or Descartes or Hume. Berkeley was a Bishop. Before Christian Wolff I know of no professional professor of philosophy — perhaps Thomasiaus was one — Vico certainly was not, he taught rhetoric and law.

“*Jahanbegloo*: So you think philosophy can exist outside professional philosophy.”

“*Berlin*: Of course.” — Jahanbegloo, Ramin, “Philosophy and Life: An Interview”, *New York Review of Books*, May 28, 1992, pp. 50, 51.

To flourish in the university is to have a set of rules like the following for dismissing the ideas of individuals doing intellectual work outside the university:

1. When presented with a piece of writing by such an individual, first look for trivial mistakes — misspellings, grammatical errors, trivial factual errors — and use these as an excuse for not spending any more time on the work: “If he makes errors at *this* level, just think how faulty his ideas must be!”

2. Failing such evidence, look for deviations from the accepted writing style of your specialty, and use that as an excuse for not spending any more time on the work. (“If his style is faulty, just think how faulty his ideas must be!”)

3. Failing such evidence, find evidence that at least one idea in the work is not original, and use this as an argument that *all* ideas in the work are not original (and therefore not worth spending time on).

4. Failing such evidence, look for evidence that the author has not read everything in his subject area, because in this case it is obvious he can do no better than repeat an idea which one or more of his betters has already published.

5. Failing all the above, dismiss the work with the observation that only the weak want to be independent; the strong want to work inside institutions, where the criticism of eminent peers will prevent wishful thinking, personal prejudice, obsolete ideas, and logical errors (not to mention spelling errors) from reaching print.

We on the outside have a reply to at least this last argument, and it is: if you think that working independently is only for the weak, try it yourself! Take a year or two off, and attempt to make your living (full- or part-time) in the business world, say, as a programmer or technical writer or editor or as a word processor operator. (If you are as intelligent as the world believes you are, learning one of these trades should be easy.) You may use your own name in the business world, but you must use a pseudonym unknown in the academic field on any paper or book you submit for publication. Furthermore, you must keep your actual identity a secret in all communications with editors and publishers. You may publish your own work (under a pseudonym) if you wish. Try it!

We on the outside also have replies to rules 3 and 4 above, namely: make a model of what these arguments imply and see how absurd they are. List all the journals and books and, now, computer sources, that you regard as making up the “literature”. Make a reasonable estimate of the rate at which this material can be absorbed. You will come to the conclusion that either a philosopher must restrict him- or herself to ever smaller specialties, or else he or she must do what most academics do, namely, keep up with what’s important through informal communication with colleagues and with others one deems worthy of attention. In other words, arguments 3 and 4 boil down to, “If he doesn’t seem to be a member of the Club, he can’t possibly have anything worthwhile to say.” (Think of what that means in the light of the history of philosophy! Think of the cost of such a view!)

I go into a used book store and select a philosophy book “at random”: it is *An Invitation to Phenomenology: Studies in the Philosophy of Experience*, ed. by James M. Edie, a collection of papers many of which “were read at the first two annual meetings of the newly founded Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy...held at Northwestern University in 1962 and 1963.”

Now, I tell you that this is the work of clerks. If you ask me what is wrong with the Ph.D. process in this country, in particular as it applies to philosophy, this book is my answer. If this is the kind of thing Feynman had in mind when he referred to the general “dopiness” of those in the humanities, then I have to agree with him. What is wrong with these papers? Nothing is wrong with them, that’s the first problem. They are everywhere expressive of that gutless timidity and carefulness which characterizes the career academic in the humanities. I’d rather endure a lifetime of torture in industry than have to call these bureaucrats my *colleagues*.

Another thing that is wrong with these papers — but this is for sensitive ears only — is that they are “dialogue philosophy” dressed up in the wrong clothes, namely, the clothes of the formal academic paper. (Not all philosophy is dialogue philosophy: Nietzsche’s isn’t.) There is nothing wrong with the *subjects*: the phenomenology of painting, the nature of existentialism, the “philosophical anthropology” of William James, the phenomenology of approval, loneliness, and isolation: if you have the right kind of philosophical mind, you can talk for hours on such subjects and count them among the best hours of your life. The proper presentation of the discussion is, however, not an academic paper (Jesus!) but a recording, in video, sound or print, of the discussion itself. Every other form simply destroys the content.

“It was part of [Diderot’s] theory of knowledge, repudiating the mighty authority of Descartes, that truth emerges in the flash and friction of conversation, typically around a dinner table,

rather than in the detached soul of a solitary thinker sitting by a stove and interrogating his own mind. At least in the realm of natural philosophy and metaphysics, truth is a social construction.” — Hampshire, Stuart, “The Last Charmer”, *The New York Review of Books*, Mar. 4, 1993, p. 16.

I go to a lecture by a promising young academic philosopher. Her presentation is scholarly, well-reasoned, and her academic manners are impeccable. But no matter how hard I try, I can’t stop myself from thinking that what she is saying — what she is *asserting* — has no business being asserted. It is not that it is wrong, it is that it is pretending to be something it is not. It is pretending to be the same kind of thing as something, say, in medicine, or geology, or astronomy. Suddenly, at one point, she quotes Nietzsche (favorably), and for a brief moment, the exercise is no longer illegitimate. For a brief moment, we have gotten down to business. What happened? It wasn’t that Nietzsche’s quote gave some kind of “proof” which her arguments thus far lacked. All I can say is that for a moment, something different was going on that was legitimate.

A philosophy *lecture*? Maybe that is the problem right there. “The balloon I would like to inflate this evening looks like this.” [holds up flabby, uninflated balloon]. “Now, I’d like to begin by —” [blows into balloon a few times, then, pinching neck closed; holds up partially inflated balloon] “You can see that —” [indicates design on balloon with his finger] “Now if I —” [blows several more times into balloon, pinches neck again] “ — you can see that this part —” [traces with his finger] “ — is showing a distinct contrast to this other part —” [traces with his finger] “ — which, I hope to convince you, is a direct consequence of the [gives complicated technical term] as we experience it in this context. So now let me expand on —” [blows some more, etc.]

Imagine now that the same ideas that the above philosopher presented in her lecture had instead been presented at, say, a dinner party, or in a coffee shop. Here she would probably begin along the lines of, “You know, I’ve been thinking about something: consider the ...” As she proceeded, now and then a member of her group might politely interrupt with a question like, “Wait a minute, I want to be sure I’m understanding you. Are you saying that ...?” And the speaker would attempt to clarify the person’s understanding. At times, someone in her group might politely interrupt with a comment like, “Yes, but what about ... ?” or “Of course you are contradicting —’s idea that ...” And so it would go. Perhaps some members of the group would be convinced that the speaker was wrong in her idea, others would agree to it with qualifications, or accept it entirely. Regardless, I for one would not have the slightest inclination to call this exchange “illegitimate”. In fact, having participated in (a few) such discussions in my lifetime, I would call it invigorating and in fact one of the things that makes life worth living. Yet the speaker’s *ideas* are no different than what she attempted to present in the lecture hall. What *is* different?

I go to another philosophy lecture. Here the professor is describing his own views on the nature of language and the views of philosophers he disagrees with. I do *not* feel that the lecture is an illegitimate enterprise. Why?

The insight of insights for modern times might well be that, when philosophy turned away from the philosophical dialogue conducted in person, philosophy became an illegitimate enterprise, subject to the kind of scorn that we know only too well.

“Another form of recovery, in certain cases even more suited to me, is to *sound out idols*... There are more idols in the world than there are realities: that is *my* ‘evil eye’ for this world, that is also my ‘evil ear’... For once to pose questions here with a *hammer* and perhaps to receive for answer that famous hollow sound which speaks of inflated bowels...” — Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Twilight of the Idols, or, How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, Foreword, in *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, tr. R. J. Hollingdale, Penguin Books, N.Y., 1982, p. 21.

Probably the greatest single *disadvantage* of being an academic philosopher is that one must always produce *something new*. Certainly no graduate student can have the slightest hope of getting a Ph.D if s/he says, in so many words, “After examining all the published ideas on the problem of *x*, plus the following ideas of my own, which are, as far as I know, original, I think that idea *y*, which first appeared nearly a century ago, is still the best solution to the problem.” But the fundamental question for any thinker is not “How can I be original?” but “*What works?*” (often given poetic expression as “What is True?”).

A “new” book or paper in philosophy is usually just a new set of votes — a new set of weightings — for existing ideas.

I always have the impression that, in philosophy, it is considered bad taste to attempt to list, to categorize, ideas. I suppose the reason is that this would suggest that all that prose, all that explaining and slicing and yes-but-no and which-is-not-to-say and even-though-on-the-other hand, may not be necessary. What are, what have been, the major ideas of philosophy, expressed in the simplest, briefest language? In the list would probably be: the idea that it is possible to know the world purely by thought, the idea that this is not possible, the various ideas pertaining to empiricism, materialism, idealism, etc., the idea that man is fundamentally good, the idea that he is not, the idea that man is evolving to a higher form, the idea that he is not, the idea that analysis of language will enable us to solve philosophical problems, the idea that it will not... Of course there are intermediate ideas, and of course all these ideas are related in various ways (chronologically, or in terms of conceptual closeness, or in terms of nature of origin, or...) But surely such a schema should be universally available to all students of philosophy, so that they at least know the lay of the land, the coordinates of new ideas.

One way of answering the question, “What is philosophy?”, is by making a caricature of the philosopher, e.g., as a man who has read a lot of books, who is always calm, who chooses to possess little and to live by himself in order to be able to keep his thoughts concentrated on the ultimate things; or a professor who writes books that only a few others like him can understand, a man who knows things the rest of us cannot hope to know, a man who knows the *truth*, even though the less talented, less profound, either ignore him or stubbornly disagree with him.

Another way is by attempting to describe the behavior of successful academic philosophers, in particular, young promising ones. What distinguishes these philosophers from the others? What traits got them through graduate school? How often did they openly disagree with their mentors, graduate advisors, prominent members of the field? How easy is it to rewrite their central ideas in plain language without losing much of the content?

Another way is by observing the reaction, at least in the U.S., when someone reveals they are studying philosophy — the look that says, “This person needs to paint the world differently, this person is too weak to accept the world as it really is. This person needs a story to get them through life. This person needs to delude himself. This person isn’t smart enough to do physics or engineering or math.” Certainly one of the primary tasks of every student of philosophy is to come to terms with these reactions. People don’t have them when they hear that someone is studying a mathematical subject, or one of the hard sciences. Why? Is it just the way the average person “was raised”? Or is it that they lack understanding of the subject? A student of philosophy needs to be able to regard his subject from the side, peripherally, yes, even as the public regards it, because all this will help him understand what business he is really in.

In the same way that many psychological problems are solved as soon as the patient steps into the psychiatrist’s office, so are many philosophical problems solved as soon as the thinker finds compatible thinkers to talk to.

Doing philosophy in isolation is a much different proposition than doing it in the company of other, like-minded individuals. The timid souls in the universities, who would have you believe they have devoted their lives to abstract thought, never quite get around to telling you that what they really mean is abstract thought discussed with others whom they regard as equal — well, almost equal — to themselves. Abstract thought attempted in isolation, and especially when you know from experience that any attempt to communicate with Those Who Know will be met with the kind of withering contempt that only academics are capable of, is an entirely different matter.

Except when applied to Charles Peirce, the phrase “American philosopher” is a contradiction in terms. “It is ... beyond doubt that [Peirce] was one of the most original minds of the later nineteenth century, and certainly the greatest American thinker ever.” — Russell, Bertrand, *Wisdom of the West*, Fawcett Publications, Inc., Greenwich, Conn, 1964, p. 359. American philosophers are prestigious clerks, keepers of the archives, house dogs of the Establishment. Where is the modern (1990’s) American philosopher whose courage can match that of Russell, Camus, Sartre? What young American philosopher has the courage to work outside the university, or to question the training in servile obedience which is the lot of the typical graduate student?

“[In] the atmosphere of indignation and recrimination prevalent today...I face the fact that I shall lose much of my audience by taking Rousseau seriously...I could not, however, in good conscience prescribe such a course to a young professor who does not yet have tenure.” — Bloom, Allan, *Love and Friendship*, Simon and Schuster, 1993.

And why *is there* no bad conscience among these learned clerks who have never in their lives risked themselves? Who have never asked themselves why they need such big, heavy, expensive, stone buildings in which to do their work? Who have never been fired, much less fired for refusing to bow their head to the local tyrant. Who have never been unemployed — and particularly never been unemployed in early old age, when prospects for ever being re-employed grow dimmer with each day. The reason why most — no, *all*— American academic writing on existentialist philosophy is so contemptibly shallow is that the writers have never faced death in the fullest sense of the word: not only physical death, as Dostoevsky, Husserl, and all the French existentialists who lived through the Second World War faced it; but the death of all hope — death in the sense that the Calvinist faces it who realizes that he may not be among the chosen, no matter how hard he works or suffers in this life — death in the sense of knowing that no one will ever read what one has written — and even the lesser death of subjecting one’s life work to the merciless public criticism of the Enemy (as opposed to the cozy bunch of like-minded petty bureaucrats with whom one battles against this hostile world) — subjecting oneself to “that Enemy that is more powerful than death: humiliation”¹.

These clerks insist that we regard them as the brightest of the bright, yet not one is bright enough to recognize the importance, particularly in philosophy, of going it alone, of going into the desert with no one to tell them when, if ever, it will be time to return.

“What we didn’t like about the academy was the falseness: conservative people presenting themselves in Che Guevara suits, digging hard for career advantage while settling hearty congratulations all around for assigning radical authors to their students to read, thus threatening the established order.” — Barthelme, Frederick and Steven, *Double Down: Reflections on Gambling and Loss*, quoted in review by Alvarez, A., “High Rollers”, *The New York Review of Books*, Mar. 9, 2000, pp. 25-26.

“...that ‘desert’ into which strong, independent minds like to withdraw is very different from the image our pseudo-intellectuals have of it...And it is a foregone conclusion that mere mimes of the intellect could not endure it for a moment...A deliberate obscurity; a side-stepping of fame; a backing away from noise, adulation, accolades, influence; a modest position, a quotidian existence, something which hides more than it reveals, occasional intercourse with harmless and gay birds and beasts, the sight of which refreshes; a mountainside for company, not a blind one but one with lakes for eyes; sometimes even a room at a crowded inn where one is sure to be mistaken for somebody else and may securely speak to anyone: such is our desert, and believe me, it is lonely enough.” — Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Genealogy of Morals*, sect. VIII.

1. Wolfe, Tom, *Hooking Up*, Farrar Strous Giroux, N.Y., 2000, p. 169.

“There are many thoughts which have value for him who thinks them, but only a few of them possess the power of engaging the interest of a reader after they have been written down.

“Yet, all the same, only that possesses true value which you have thought in the first instance *for your own instruction*. Thinkers can be divided into those who think in the first instance for their own instruction and those who do so for the instruction of others. The former are genuine *thinkers for themselves* in both senses of the words: they are the true *philosophers*. They alone are in earnest. The pleasure and happiness of their existence consists in thinking. The latter are *sophists*: they want to appear as thinkers and seek their happiness in what they hope to get thereby from others.” — Schopenhauer, Arthur, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Vol.2, “On Thinking for Yourself”, sections 10, 11.

Whenever a professional philosopher urges you to put aside your material concerns and devote yourself to the higher things, run, don't walk to the nearest entrance, and put up a sign, “Warning: hypocrite at work!”. Because somehow these benign purveyors of wisdom always seem to forget to tell you the one thing they should above all tell you, namely, that, unlike you, they have a prestigious, reasonably well-paying, job from which, for all practical purposes, they can never be fired, and that such a state of affairs does wonders for one's peace of mind and serenity and willingness to give up material concerns.

Becoming an academic philosopher means, among other things, “learning how to write” philosophy. Which means learning how to write philosophy the way philosophy professors write it. Think of it! Never once prodding yourself, forcing yourself to write on your own terms, never once forcing yourself to write in accordance with your highest principles (and if you don't have any at the start, to develop them), to work and rework the expression of a philosophical thought until you can say, first and foremost to yourself, and only incidentally to others, “This is as close to expressing what I mean as I can make it.” It is an abomination to go to others and say, “Tell me how to express my thoughts”. Whole lifetimes spent wearing others' clothes, speaking others' language, thinking others' thoughts!

Question for philosophy graduate students: Suppose God appeared to you and said, I offer you a choice between the following two written pieces: one a stunningly original idea adequately expressed in less than a page, the other a minor variation on an old idea that will require a full journal paper to set it forth, a paper which I will give you and which I guarantee will be published in a prestigious journal. Which would you take?

Those who make the writing of their philosophical ideas their own, soon recognize the importance of learning to sum up the major ideas of the great philosophers in a page or two — exactly the kind of skill that the academy abhors, because it suggests that maybe those semester-long courses, not to mention those thick volumes and voluminous papers, may not be necessary! Far better to learn to expand a triviality into book length, than to learn to reduce an important work to a couple of pages, for these prestigious clerks have been able to convince themselves and, unfor-

unately, their students, that a two-page summary *is impossible*, and the only way to summarize a big book is with a bigger book!

Anyone who claims that philosophy should only — can only — be written in a certain language has an obligation to provide a simple means of looking up how one is to say what one wants to say, or of finding out quickly that it is not possible to say what one wants to say if that is the case. This is the crux of the matter, not a peripheral concern. If such a reference cannot be provided, that is an argument against the whole idea of a philosophical language.

“For we ourselves are chisel and statue, conquerors and conquered at the same time...

“This world lights up to itself only where or only inasmuch as it develops, procreates new forms. Places of stagnancy slip from consciousness...

“If this is granted it follows that consciousness and discord with one’s own self are inseparably linked up, even that they must, as it were, be proportional to each other. This sounds a paradox, but the wisest of all times and peoples have testified to confirm it. Men and women for whom this world was lit in an unusually bright light of awareness, and who by life and word have, more than others, formed and transformed that work of art which we call humanity, testify by speech and writing or even by their very lives that more than others have they been torn by the pangs of inner discord. Let this be a consolation to him who also suffers from it. Without it nothing enduring has ever been begotten.” — Schroedinger, Erwin, *Mind and Matter*, under “Ethics” in “The Physical Basis of Consciousness”.

And yet the truth may be, whether we outsiders like it or not, that philosophy at present *is* an academic enterprise, in fact a specialist enterprise, and that to work outside the academy is simply to be wasting one’s time pretending to be a philosopher. It may be that the most honest, the most constructive advice that can be given to anyone who wants to study philosophy and write down his thoughts with the hope of having others read them, is: get a PhD and then get an academic appointment. Otherwise you will be no different than a person who wants to practice law without attending law school and passing the bar exam. Your efforts will be that irrelevant and futile. It is true, of course, that there have been philosophers in the past who produced great work without being academics (e.g., Descartes and Hume). But that was then and this is now. A bitter man writing down philosophic thoughts that no one will read is not someone we should admire.

And yet, and yet ... some of us simply cannot respect the reduction of philosophy to a mere bureaucratic enterprise, or collection of fiercely competitive such enterprises, each confident that it is right and all the others are wrong, each seeking above all for its ranks Team Players who gladly accept as necessary the four-or-more-years ordeal of making a mountain out of a molehill that constitutes the PhD process, and who can be counted upon thereafter to above all defend the specialty (that is what being a philosopher means) and never to take risks outside of those approved by the specialty.

Any philosopher who does not, at least once a year, engage in a public debate on the subject of his philosophy, where the only requirement of participants is that they can demonstrate some knowledge of his philosophy, is not deserving of our respect.

A criticism made long ago of medieval scholasticism also applies to the modern form of scholasticism known as existentialism:

“Another error hath proceeded from too great a reverence, and a kind of adoration, of the mind and understanding of man; by means whereof men have withdrawn themselves too much from the contemplation of nature and the observations of experience, and have tumbled up and down in their own reasons and conceits. Upon these intellectualists, which are notwithstanding commonly taken for the most sublime and divine philosophers, Heraclitus gave a just censure, saying, ‘Men sought truth in their own little worlds, and not in the great and common world’; for they disdain to spell, and so by degrees to read, in the volume of God’s works; and contrariwise by continual meditation and agitation of wit do urge and as it were invoke their own spirits to divine and give oracles unto them, whereby they are deservedly deluded.” — Bacon, Francis, *The Proficiency and Advancement of Learning, Divine and Human*, quoted in Potter, George Reuben, *Elizabethan Verse and Prose*, Henry Holt and Company, N.Y., 1939, p. 542.

“I can’t believe...” is not an argument. Neither is, “I can’t imagine...” (We can’t imagine not being self-conscious, even though, of course, at times we are.)

“‘Error can be fertile,’ remarked the historian A.J.P. Taylor, ‘but perfection is always sterile’. Taken as a whole, the scientific endeavor is as open-ended as the expansion of the universe — which, I think, is what Bohr had in mind when on his deathbed he complained of the philosophers that they too often ‘have not that instinct that it is important to learn something, and that we must be prepared to learn.’” — Ferris, Timothy, *Coming of Age in the Milky Way*, Doubleday, N.Y., 1988, p. 386.

The Nature of Modern Academic Philosophy

Philosophy is no longer what it was in the past — an intellectual discipline pursued by individuals working outside the university or, if within the university, by individuals pursuing their own thought. Philosophy is now a collection of academic fiefdoms, each with its specific set of beliefs, morés, journals, group of universities in which it is predominant, each with its Enemies List. To be a philosopher in the modern world is to be a member of such a fiefdom. In the modern world, one can no more be an independent philosopher, pursuing the study of a branch of the subject on one’s own, than one can be an independent baseball player, pursuing the game on his own.

And when I speak of fiefdoms, I include all the bureaucratic complexities that are part of them. These are evident to the PhD candidate, who soon learns that what counts above all in philosophy is the obtaining of approval by those in authority, who in turn know that the longer the PhD process can be extended, the longer the thesis committee takes to finally reach a consensus about the endlessly-revised and rewritten thesis¹, the more that the candidate’s chances of success depend on his or her political and networking skills (meaning: the skills of pleasing the right peo-

ple), then the more prestigious the degree and the discipline that awards it. All this is no longer something that happens on the periphery of the subject of philosophy, it has become the very essence of it. And after the PhD is obtained, and the young philosopher somehow manages to wangle a tenure track and then somehow manages to publish the papers that will please in the quantity that will please so that, in fact, he is awarded tenure, the life of approval seeking continues with the editors of journals.

I am aware that this view will be rejected as merely the view of an outsider who does not, in fact, hold a tenured position in a philosophy department. But in reply I would simply ask for a list of independent philosophers whose writings are published by established philosophy journals. I would also urge the reader to read John Passmore's excellent book, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*¹, and see if he or she can avoid the impression that the various branches of philosophy are best compared to various languages, *sub-cultures*. (Every time I look into that book, I can't help thinking, "What a sorry discipline philosophy is!" The subject seems to me little more than a collection of efforts based on ignorance of the Liberal Arts Fallacy, which is: "x can be seen as y; therefore x is y!")

(Bureaucraticizations are also taking place in physics and mathematics. The days when a patent clerk could have any hope of having papers published in a reputable physics journal are long gone, as are the days when amateur mathematicians could have any hope of even entering into an exchange of correspondence with professionals, much less have papers published in reputable journals — this despite the fact that there was a time when some of the best of the best were amateurs (Descartes, Pascal, Fermat, Leibniz and Galois, to name only the most famous).)

Philosophy and Literature

[See also the chapter, "On Pictures and Reality".]

The only legitimate venue for philosophy is the in-person, spoken dialogue. (Of course, it is perfectly legitimate to read a written record of such a dialogue.) The criticisms of philosophy in this chapter apply only to written philosophy as it appears in books and academic papers.

Written philosophy is literature. Therefore the only utterances or questions about a piece of written philosophy that are not legitimate, are those having to do with whether or not the philosophy is correct. The reason such utterances and questions are not legitimate is that there is no valid way to determine if a philosophy is correct.

In physics it would be considered laughable if one were to say, "You should not judge my work by its mathematical content because I have no ability in mathematics," yet the equivalent is implied by those philosophers who ask us to dismiss their own lack of literary ability.

1. God help the poor candidate if his thesis advisor should happen to take a position at another university.
1. Penguin Books, Baltimore, Md., 1972

Philosophers with a background in science and mathematics are concerned to give definitions because that is how one proceeds in science and mathematics. The fundamentally literary philosophers do not have this concern because that is not how one proceeds in poetry, novels, short stories, plays, in short, literature. No poet begins by defining his terms. Hence the kind of infuriating behavior we find in Hegel, in Heidegger (e.g., in *Being and Time*)¹, in Sartre (e.g., in *Being and Nothingness*), and in Derrida. “If you are sufficiently literary you will understand the absence of definitions.” Of course the mathematical approach can be used by the literary philosopher, as was done by Spinoza, and with such skill that those without a grounding in science and mathematics believe that Spinoza’s proofs are valid. And some literary philosophers (e.g., Nietzsche) are so skilled, that you do in fact feel it would have destroyed the thing if he had provided definitions.

In this chapter, and in the chapters “The Object” and “Pictures and Reality”, I have argued that most philosophy is art pretending to be something it is not. I have also tried to call attention to the important difference between the non-Object-ive philosophies, e.g., those of Spinoza, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Marx, Bergson, Heidegger, and Sartre, and the Object philosophies, e.g., those of Hume, Kant, Russell.

In the non-Object-ive philosophies we are immersed in a single, all-is-one medium; there are no edges, no distances between the entities discussed (even when technical language is used, as in the case of Spinoza). This is one reason why, to a person with an understanding of science and mathematics, these philosophies seem “soft”. Concepts like the Absolute in Hegel, and Being in Heidegger, which are “everywhere”, are typical of the non-Object-ive philosophies.

But if we are to be students of philosophy, we must judge each philosophy on the terms that its proponents want it to be judged. We must not be like the engineers who dismiss poetry because “there are no *facts*.” Thus we must be prepared to heed the words of a philosopher who says, e.g., “You can’t understand my philosophy by studying it on a piecemeal basis: first this concept, then that concept, then this next concept. You have to keep reading and re-reading until you can grasp it as a whole.”

Definitions in Philosophy

When I was an undergraduate in the fifties, engineering students showed their contempt for all philosophical ideas with a devastating challenge: “*Define your terms!*” Many years later I realized (as, no doubt, others had done long before), that there is a reply which puts all such replies in their proper place: “*Define ‘Define your terms!’*”

“One cannot require that everything shall be defined, any more than one can require that a chemist shall decompose every substance. What is simple cannot be decomposed, and what is logically simple cannot have a proper definition...On the introduction of a logical name for something simple, a definition is not possible; there is nothing for it but to lead the reader, or hearer, by

1. I once asked a senior philosophy major who was taking a course in Heidegger under a world-renowned authority on Heidegger, if students ever asked the professor about the absence of definitions in Heidegger’s writings. She said, oh, yes, and he replied that Heidegger himself didn’t have a clear idea of what he meant by some of the terms; furthermore, sometimes the meanings he seems to have had in mind for a given term, contradict each other. I was amazed that (a) the student seemed perfectly willing to accept this reply of the professor’s, and (b) that the professor did not then and there explain why such a shortcoming in a major philosopher was not considered of fundamental importance among experts on his work.

means of hints, to understand the words as is intended.” — Frege, Gottlob, “On Concept and Object”, in *Gottlob Frege: Posthumous Writings*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Ill., 1979, p. 89. (These words were written before 1892 — decades before Wittgenstein built a career on an elaboration of the last sentence.)

Similarly, the assertion, “*That is not precise!*” was generally taken, in my undergraduate years, to be the criticism that was beyond all defense, and I can still remember the anguish I experienced at realizing the countless things in everyday life which I — through lack of sufficient intelligence and equipment and time — did not know precisely: the time of day, the distance to the sun and planets and stars, their physical properties, not to mention the physical properties of my own body and of the earth, not to mention the answers to all the lab problems and exam questions. I believed that *any* answer carried to, say, twenty decimal places, was inherently better than the same answer carried to only, say, three decimal places. This kind of nonsense has now been put into its proper place in the philosophical world by the idea that we should not assume that standards that are valid in one set of circumstances are necessarily valid in all circumstances (“Know what business you’re in!”); in the engineering world, hard times, competition and, in particular, inadequate resources have forced a re-examination of some of these unquestioned assumptions from the past, leading to the doctrine best expressed by one engineering manager as, “Good enough is perfect!”

B: If I can’t measure it, it isn’t real.

A: On the other hand, it must be real enough for you to determine that you can’t measure it.

C: All is illusion!

B: Including the truth of the statement, “All is illusion!”...?

Whether a definition in mathematics or the hard sciences is sufficiently precise, is determined by rules within those disciplines. In the humanities, a definition is sufficiently precise when a significant percentage of readers can decide to which category something belongs that was not enumerated in the definition itself, “significant” to be decided by the author.

“How should we explain to someone what a game is? I imagine that we should describe *games* to him, and we might add: ‘This *and similar things* are called “games”.’ And do we know any more about it ourselves? Is it only other people whom we cannot tell what a game is? — But this is not ignorance. We do not know the boundaries because none have been drawn. To repeat, we can draw a boundary — for a special purpose. Does it take that to make the concept usable? Not at all! (Except for that special purpose.)” — Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe, The Macmillan Company, N.Y., 1953, paragraph 69.

“Tonight ‘Spectrum’ examines the whole question of frothing and falling, coughing and calling, screaming and bawling, walling and stalling, galling and mauling, palling and hauling, trawling and squalling and zalling. Zalling? Is there a word zalling? If there is, what does it mean...if there isn’t what does it mean? Perhaps both. Maybe neither. What do I mean by the word mean? What do I mean by the word word, what do I mean by what do I mean, what do I mean by do, and

what do I do by mean? What do I do by do by do and what do I mean by wasting your time like this? Goodnight.” — Presenter, *The Complete Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, Episode 12, Vol. 1, Pantheon Books, N.Y., 1989, pp. 153-154.

“‘Vibroskomenopatof. Blaf blaf.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Then why do you say it?’

‘So that you shouldn’t understand.’

‘If it doesn’t mean anything, it doesn’t matter about not understanding it.’

‘But if it did mean something, anyhow you wouldn’t be able to understand.’” — Gide, André, conversation between nine-year old Boris and woman doctor taking care of him, in *The Counterfeiters*, Vintage Books, N.Y., 1973, p. 175.

Philosophical “Proofs”

A proof (outside the law courts) is what mathematicians say it is, no more, no less.

A verification (outside the law courts) is what physicists say it is, no more, no less.

All the rest is literature.

There are no valid arguments in philosophy, because there is no set of criteria that is agreed upon by all or most philosophers, as to what constitutes a valid argument.

Until such a set of criteria exists, there can never be a philosophy which is “correct”.

If whatever is, is good, or is the will of God or of History, then that includes the philosophy which sets forth this idea. (Proof by non-contradiction.)

Every once in a while I try again to see if there might not be a soft logic, a humanities logic, that might make it possible to reason about philosophical statements without the reasoning being undone by anyone who is so inclined. Take the assertion, “Nothing lies outside Infinite Intellect”. This is not nonsense, contrary to the pronouncements of the logical positivists, who were more interested in promoting their careers through reading new meanings into words and then being the custodians of those new meanings, than in expressing their ideas in the simplest language that would do the job. The above assertion is not a scientific (or mathematical) statement, but it is also not nonsense. Anyone beyond, say, their second year of college, even if they are not a philosophy major, has *some* idea of what the assertion means: “Supposedly there is nothing outside of this big-sounding thing that has something to do with thinking. Maybe the thing is God. Maybe it’s just God’s mind, whatever that is.”

But immediately we see how difficult it is to make inferences from the above assertion — inferences that cannot be disagreed with, cannot be “proven” wrong by the next academic paper or PhD thesis in the subject. We find ourselves asking, “What does ‘outside’ mean? Don’t we have to be outside Infinite Intellect in order to talk about it? If not, why not? And for that matter, what exactly is Infinite Intellect? And how do we know that nothing lies outside it?”

The philosophy student or professor will tell me I need to read more Spinoza and all these things will become clear. But I have read enough Spinoza to know that these things do not become clear (in the way that valid logical statements are clear). So I am forced, again, to concede that in the humanities, including philosophy, all there is, is interpretation, or, in other words, art.

Perhaps the academic philosopher will tell me that ultimately the purpose of interpretation is to experience the concepts of a great philosopher of the past, “as he did”. Our goal is, e.g., to “get inside Spinoza’s mind” and see what he *really* meant. But once again we must throw up our hands, because we have no criteria for knowing when we have gotten inside Spinoza’s mind and when we only think we have. And perhaps, but just perhaps, we might even have to begin to entertain the thought that there might be something to scientific thinking after all *when it comes to making assertions about the world, the universe, the nature of things*.

Interpretation is an activity that we accept as natural when it comes to works of art. (We would find it quite *unnatural* if someone were to start producing interpretations of mathematical theorems and proofs of the past — not rewritings of them for greater ease of understanding, which is frequently done, but interpretations of the sort: “It has long been assumed that in the ... Theorem Gauss was asserting [what the Theorem states]; however, this is only one interpretation of the Theorem, one that fails to take into account... In this paper I will offer a different interpretation...”)

Each generation produces new interpretations of the great works of art of the past. Some of these are produced by scholars, some, in the case of music, dance, theater, are produced by performing artists. No one, I think, can object to either of these activities. But when we come to philosophy, that is a different story, because there, interpretation is pretending to be something that it is not. If understanding the work of a philosopher were approached with the same goals as understanding a literary work — in other words, with the question of truth omitted — then the study of philosophy would be a legitimate activity.

Consider Searle’s book, *Mind: A Brief Introduction*¹. Surely no philosopher has ever tried harder to be clear, to use the simplest words possible, to support his views by rational arguments. (Surely this is photorealism in philosophy!) And yet those of us who know how difficult it can be to construct valid logical arguments even in a discipline (mathematics) in which the rules of inference are simple and unambiguous (*especially* in such a discipline!) — we simply cannot bring ourselves to believe the ultimate validity of the arguments that Searle presents. Certainly the arguments are plausible, certainly they use common sense where common sense seems appropriate. Yet even before the book became available, other philosophers, we can be sure, had already constructed equally valid-seeming arguments to prove that Searle is wrong. And so it goes, year after year, decade after decade, century after century, time out of mind.

Plausibility and common sense are not invariably guides to truth. Certainly the following statements have these two qualities:

The sum of an infinite number of numbers is always infinite.

A part of something can never have as many parts as, or be as large as, the whole.

It is impossible to break something down into smaller parts, then reassemble all of them in a

1. Oxford University Press, N.Y., 2004.

way that yields something of the same shape as the original, but much smaller in size.

If you break something down into smaller and smaller pieces, eventually you will wind up with a piece whose size is zero.

If something makes sense — is conceivable, is clearly visualizable and understandable— then it is true.

Yet all of the statements are false, as students of mathematics know.

I cannot conclude this sub-section without repeating what I have said elsewhere in this book, namely, that there are two alternatives to interpretation that *can* command the respect of thinking people, namely, (1) the systematic listing, with page references, of all occurrences of each philosophical term in a philosopher's works (in other words, the making of a concordance — possibly one that should also have references to the term as it appeared in the works of other philosophers whom the given philosopher probably read), this being about as far as we can go in the way of legitimate interpretation, and (2) the spoken philosophical dialogue, conducted in person, by qualified individuals ("qualified" meaning that the individuals have at least a demonstrated interest in philosophy). For those benighted souls who are still able to believe that the publication of papers in academic philosophy journals is equivalent to (2), I can only say, *Please, please, make the experiment*, and do so with the honesty that your profession demands. In particular, ask yourself if the Object-ive is present in such dialogues in the same way as it is in academic papers.

[Added later:] The more I ponder the question, How can we make argument in philosophy more rigorous?, the more I am drawn to the concordance as the answer. In fact, my position now is this: no written or spoken discussion of the meaning of a philosopher's works can properly take place without reference to a complete concordance of those works. By a "complete concordance" I mean one that includes uses of technical terms in letters and in reliable quotations from conversations. For each term, the list of phrases and sentences must be in chronological order, with, of course, the full reference being given. It is true that arguments will still develop over translations, but the advantages of the concordance will, I am convinced, far outweigh these.

Against Nietzsche

I once took a philosophy course from a professor who, so the story went, was the first woman in her family to have graduated from college, much less earned a Ph.D. Furthermore, she accomplished this in a time when a woman pursuing an advanced degree in *any* subject was regarded by the most intelligent, learned people in the land with, at best, suspicion, and, more usually, with outright contempt. But the old dear had struggled and eventually won her place among the chosen few, although the cost was all too evident in the way she handled ideas. I once mentioned Nietzsche to her, and she immediately gave the usual knee-jerk response of American philosophers of her day — that he was a talented, *literary* philosopher, "but, of course, he had no *system*." She had learned her lessons well from the prestigious bureaucrats who had held her future in their hands for so many years: what the Masters do not question, we do not question. She gave not the slightest indication that she had ever asked herself what a philosophical system really is, how it differs from other systems (mechanical systems, governmental systems, biological systems), why it was so crucial for a philosopher to *have* a system, and what the world was supposed to do with one.

“Nietzsche disparages philosophical systems from the side of him who invents them and from that of him who is influenced — ‘seduced’ — by them. He thinks the former should realize that no system can be ‘true’ because it must ultimately depend upon some unproven assumption originating in the personality of its maker. ‘In every philosophy there is a point at which the “conviction” of the philosopher steps upon the scene....’ (*Beyond Good and Evil* 8) and if this ‘conviction’ is the basis of a ‘system’ it vitiates the system. Refusal to question this conviction, assumption, is in a philosopher dishonesty: ‘the will to a system is a lack of integrity.’ ” — Hollingdale, R. J., Appendix A to *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ*, tr. Hollingdale, R. J., Penguin Books, N.Y., 1968, p. 188.

Part of a philosopher’s discipline must be to bring to the forefront the primary influences on the philosophers he or she admires most.

In the case of Nietzsche, we can begin with an author for whom he had particular respect, namely, La Rochefoucauld, and ask ourselves if the epigraph to the latter’s *Maxims* — “Nos vertus ne sont le plus souvent que des vices déguisés” (“Our virtues are usually only vices in disguise”) — doesn’t sum up most of the master’s paragraphs.

“The great epochs of our lives come when we gain the courage to rebaptize our evil as our best.” — Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil*, sect. 116.

The form of all Nietzsche’s later works, in which each idea is presented as an aphorism or in a self-contained paragraph or two, has an immediate precedent in Schopenhauer’s collection of essays, aphorisms and thoughts published toward the end of Schopenhauer’s life under the title *Parerga and Paralipomena*.

As far as the proclamation that God is dead is concerned, Hegel said it earlier, and so did Heine:

“Gestorben ist der Herrgott oben”

Dead is the Lord God above

— Heine, Heinrich, *Die Heimkehr (The Return Home)*, verse 39, published 1823-24.

Nietzsche’s praise of the military virtues in general and of the warrior mentality in particular still seems radical in a philosopher. We cannot believe, in this nuclear age, after the two World Wars, and the wars in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, that he meant us to take it at face value. And so we try to find a deeper meaning in it. But we must keep in mind that militarism was very much in the ascendancy in the various German states of the second half of the 19th century. Furthermore, Hegel was there before him: “Like Heraclitus, Hegel greatly values strife. He goes so far as to suggest that war is morally superior to peace. If nations have no enemies to fight against, they become morally weak and decadent.” — Russell, Bertrand, *Wisdom of the West*, Crescent Books, Inc., London, 1977, p. 248.

His teaching, “Become who you are!”, had already been set forth by Kierkegaard in 1849, when Nietzsche was five years old:

“The self is the conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude which relates itself to itself, whose task is to become itself... — Kierkegaard, Soren, *The Sickness unto Death*, Doubleday Anchor Books, N.Y., 1954, p. 162

“If on the contrary the self does not become itself, it is in despair, whether it knows it or not. — *ibid.*, p. 163.

“Sin is this: *before God, or with the conception of God, to be in despair at not willing to be oneself, or in despair at willing to be oneself.*”, *ibid.*, p. 208.

Nietzsche was by no means the first philosopher to set forth a scathing criticism of Christianity, though his was certainly the most psychologically insightful and profound: Voltaire devoted much of his career to the same effort more than a century earlier. Furthermore, anti-clericalism was very much in the air in Germany after 1870:

“... in 1870 it became part of the dogma of the Church that the pope, when he spoke *ex cathedra* on faith and morals, did so with infallible authority. There followed two decades in which anti-clericalism and priest-bating were more important in the politics of Germany, France, Italy and Spain than ever before.” — Roberts, J. M., *The Penguin History of the World*, Penguin Books, N.Y., 1995, p. 843.

Nor was Nietzsche the first philosopher gifted with extraordinary literary talent. Again, Voltaire was a predecessor and, it might be argued, had even greater literary gifts: consider his output of plays and poetry alone. Pascal was another predecessor, as, of course, was Plato.

Nor was the idea of glorifying great men, e.g., Napoleon and Goethe, original with Nietzsche. Thomas Carlyle, whom Nietzsche despised, built his concept of history on just such a view.

Nietzsche’s philosophical method in a nutshell: (1) base all criticisms of other philosophers on their personalities — their psychological types; (2) Don’t ask, “What is the meaning of *x*?” or “What is the nature of *x*?”, ask instead, “What did *x* evolve from?”. This method is based on an evolutionary view of ideas and morals, a view which also lay at the basis of much of Hegel’s thought, not to mention Marx’s. And, of course, we must remember that the supreme accomplishment of evolutionary thought, namely, Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species by Natural Selection*, was published in 1859, when Nietzsche was 15.

It can be argued that Nietzsche’s history-based method, at least as he applied it to Christianity, commits a fallacy. “It is called the genetic fallacy. It is the fallacy of assuming that a causal account that explains the genesis of a belief, that explains how the belief was acquired, thereby shows the belief to be false.” — Searle, John, *Mind: A Brief Introduction*, Oxford University Press, N.Y., 2004, p. 270.)

Part of a philosopher's discipline must also consist in his trying to get at the roots of the originality of the philosophers he admires most. In Nietzsche's case the clue may lie in the fact that we feel so little inclination to argue with him — or rather, that we feel that we miss his point if we begin arguing with him as we automatically do with other philosophers. You might reply that, if a philosopher tells us what we want to hear, it is natural that we feel little inclination to argue with him, whereas, if we dislike a philosopher, nothing pleases us more than finding examples of his errors. (Consider, e.g., scientists' delight in calling attention to Hegel's claim that there could not be nine planets as proof of what a colossal fool he was.)

But the reason we feel that arguing with Nietzsche somehow misses the point, is not necessarily due to the fact that we admire his thought. It is rather due to a recognition that he does not present "arguments". Consider the typical philosopher before him (and after): to himself ("in here") a melancholy, lonely, impecunious individual laboring under the burden of his learning and of the reputations of the thinkers of the past, living only to set forth his great theory, which only posterity will appreciate — a theory which explains the world "out there", including human suffering, right and wrong, good and evil. For Nietzsche, there was no "out there" out there. In particular, *he embraced his evil*, and in that phrase, I think, we get at the root of his genius.

And it goes without saying that another part of a philosopher's discipline must be to find out who are, and have been, the most fervent admirers of the philosophers he admires.

As a start, we must ask why Nietzsche has almost always been the favored philosopher of losers, outsiders, persons who are the opposite of the strong he admired. The assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, which brought on World War I, was carried out by a man strongly influenced by Nietzsche. Imagine, now, the CEO of a large corporation reading Nietzsche. It seems faintly ridiculous. We suspect something is wrong with such a person.

And although *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is a literary masterpiece, to believe at the start of the 21st century that a Superman will come along and save mankind — or, rather, triumph over mankind — is absurd — the all-too-obvious fantasy of a sickly outsider living in desperate loneliness with few readers for the works he was creating and that he knew were unique.

We must also study carefully those individuals and classes that were most admired by the philosophers we admire. For all Nietzsche's praise of aristocrats, as anyone knows who has read even a modicum of history and literature, aristocrats have been one of the least intelligent, least artistically talented, most reactionary classes that ever walked the face of the earth.

Next, we must not allow his extraordinary literary talent to divert us from calling into question his praise of war, especially in the light of the dreadful wars that have occurred since his death. The American Civil War, which was fought while he was still in his teens, was in itself an irrefutable counterargument to his claims for the virtues of war, as anyone knows who has studied the details of the battles and their aftermath, in particular, the fate of the wounded, or who has seen Ken Burns' documentary on the subject. The machine gun was invented (by R. J. Gatling) in 1862, so that during his working life, Nietzsche must have heard reports of its effectiveness, and must have known what that effectiveness meant for the future of heroism on the battlefield. War as Nietzsche imagined it may have occurred on rare occasions in the past, and may have occurred

in some air battles in the first and second world wars, and perhaps in a few isolated battles on the ground, but these are the exceptions to the terrible rule of trench warfare, the bombing of cities, and the mechanized slaughter we now take for granted.

That same literary talent, and his extraordinary psychological insight, blinded him to any understanding of what was going on in the rest of the Western world during his lifetime. I am referring to the extraordinary accomplishments of science and mathematics. I hope that at least one or two readers of these lines will recognize the shocking ignorance that had to underlay Nietzsche's well-known claim, "There are no facts, only interpretations." And how exactly is the theory of gravity an "interpretation"? How exactly were all the chemical facts that had been discovered by Nietzsche's time merely "interpretations"? How was thermodynamics an "interpretation"? And Maxwell's equations? And the astonishing discoveries of mathematics in Nietzsche's time? (For example, Cantor's demonstration that there are exactly the same number of fractions as there are integers, and that there is not one, but in fact *an infinity of infinities*.)

At one point he refers to himself as a "scientifically trained man"¹, but this is an almost laughable attempt to bum a ride with the sciences by a man whose training was in classical philology — a respectable scholarly discipline but not a science. In his teens, the one subject that he was not good at was mathematics. His criticisms of scientists, like Heidegger's later on, were all based on what he perceived as the psychological inferiority of the scientific mind:

"There are truths which are best recognized by mediocre intellects because they are most suited to them; there are truths which possess charm and seductive powers for mediocre spirits only. We come to this somewhat unpleasant conclusion when we see the intellect of respectable but mediocre Englishmen (I name Darwin...

"...a certain narrowness, barrenness and diligent carefulness, in short, something British, may be well disposed to scientific discoveries of the Darwinian type."²

But it was precisely that diligent carefulness that enabled Darwin to make his monumentally important discoveries, and a thinker who doesn't recognize that cannot be taken seriously on the subject of science. It was only by diligent carefulness and exhausting, year-in year-out manual calculations (no computers, no calculating machines) that enabled Kepler to discover his monumentally important laws governing the orbiting of the planets.

If Nietzsche were to return to life, and I were allowed to say just one thing to him, it would be, "*Psychology isn't everything!*"

What I have called earlier in this essay the "*appropriation* of philosophy by the purely literary mind" has never been more in evidence than in the case of Nietzsche. And, of course, it still flourishes, witness the virtuoso literary performances of, e.g., Derrida and Foucault in the late 20th century, men who wanted to be regarded as deep thinkers, despite — or, rather, because of! — their appalling ignorance of the towering accomplishments of science and mathematics during their time. Truly, philosophy is a game for losers.

1. *Beyond Good and Evil*, Sixth Article, 204.

2. *ibid.*, Eighth Article, 253.

Next, we need to take a close look at his criticism of Socrates as being decadent:

“Socrates, tough, barefoot, indifferent to cold and heat, brave in battle, a husband and a father, capable of great feats of drinking, always in public, happy to talk with anyone; and Nietzsche, constantly bundled up against the cold, celibate but syphilitic, unable to cope with even a single glass of wine, permanently sickly, racked with migraines, shy and reclusive. Some of that, indeed, is perhaps irrelevant to Nietzsche’s philosophy. More relevant, and more deeply unattractive, is the figure of the neurasthenic professor relishing (from a distance) the thought of violence, writing ‘What is good, do you ask? To be brave is good!’ and ‘Thou goest to women? Forget not thy whip!’ — and then, when he sees a cab horse being beaten in the street, flinging his arms round its neck and bursting into tears. Such a person, Nehamas suggests, is perhaps not well advised to call Socrates decadent.” — Griffin, Jasper, “Plato’s Grand Design”, review of Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*, in *The New York Review of Books*, May 6, 1999, p. 42.

Finally, we must raise the question of the organization of Nietzsche’s works. It should strike you as absolutely astounding that no philosopher has seen fit to publish a reorganization of Nietzsche’s most significant utterances *by topic* — e.g., a representative sample of what he said on war, a representative sample of what he said on slave morality, a representative sample of what he said on Christianity, on socialism, on science, on women, etc., with the utterances under each topic being arranged *chronologically*. At the very least, by now someone should have published a complete index to all his works — not merely an index of *words*, as humanities professors always conceive of indexes, but one that would enable the reader to locate all the passages relating to each of the important *topics* he concerned himself with. This, of course, would deprive his utterances of much of the literary value they possess by virtue of their location in his works, but, sooner or later — if we want to be honest with ourselves — we must look at what is left when we *remove* the literary value.

Exercise: rewrite any of Nietzsche’s ideas in the style of a modern academic philosopher. What do we learn?

Against Heidegger

Heidegger in the Academy

The reason we should have no great admiration for Heideggerians in the academy is that by now they should know better than to keep up the old con game with their students: assigning the great man’s works without making clear, first, what business he really was in (namely, the business of creating literary works of art), second, without making sure the students confront the essence of Heidegger’s message, namely, that mankind would be better off living in the pre-technological, non-Object-ive world of the past, and then, third, making sure the students understand what he had in mind by this, namely, the world exemplified by the hand-carved, rural, German village living in its traditions.

“Heidegger delivered his lectures dressed in south German folk costume: a loden [coarse woollen cloth] jacket and knickerbockers. This tolerable eccentricity was meant to emphasize the Germanness and ‘folkish authenticity’ of his approach. Here was a man whose tradition was grounded in the time-honored traditions of the land. During vacations he would retire to the mountains of the Black Forest, living in an Alpine chalet which he had built for himself. (Not literally: all the building work was supervised by his wife, Elfride, in between looking after their two children.) Here amidst plain but far from primitive domesticity, surrounded by the timeless world of unspoiled nature, he would reflect upon the nature of being — high above the shallow corruptions of modern life.” — Strathern, Paul, *Heidegger in 90 Minutes*, Ivan R. Dee, Chicago, 2002, p. 34.

No thinker with integrity can ask his or her students to read the works of such a man without forcing the students to confront the fundamental question which these works force us to answer, namely that, regardless of how desirable such a world might be, what chance is there to achieve it for the overwhelming majority of mankind, even for the majority of educated Western mankind, even for the majority of college professors? How can we respect a thinker who says, in effect, “There is another way of being in the world, one which would make your life more meaningful, but there is little or no chance that you can achieve it except in isolated moments of your life, even though I happen to have been able to achieve it from my thirties onward.” Whether we like it or not, we live in an Object-ridden world, and it is the business of every thinker not only to confront that fact, but to become a citizen of that world, even if only a part-time citizen, by understanding from experience the sources of its almost irresistible intellectual appeal to so many of the best minds of this age and of past ages.

Historical Context of “Being and Time”

Being and Time — this articulation of a vast feeling — is without question one of the great literary works of the 20th century, but to introduce students to this work without also introducing them to what was going on in Germany at the time the book was written, namely, the 1920s, is irresponsible.

“The cleavage within the [Weimar] constitution [in the 1920s] might not have mattered so much had it not reflected a much deeper division in German society, and indeed in German minds. I call this the East-West division, and it is one of the central themes of modern times, in so far as they have been influenced by Germany’s destiny. The principal characteristic of the pre-war German regime of princes, generals and landowners, the law-professors who endowed it with academic legitimacy, and the Lutheran pastors who gave it moral authority, was illiberalism. The ruling caste hated the West with passionate loathing, both for its liberal ideas and for the gross materialism and lack of spirituality which (in their view) those ideas embodied. They wanted to keep Germany ‘pure’ of the West, and this was one motive for their plans to resume the medieval conquest and settlement of the East, carving out a continental empire for Germany which would make her independent of the Anglo-Saxon world system. These Easterners drew a fundamental distinction between ‘civilization’, which they defined as rootless, cosmopolitan, immoral, un-German, Western, materialistic and racially defiled; and ‘culture’, which was pure, national, German, spiritual and authentic. Civilization pulled Germany to the West, culture to the East. The real Germany was not part of international civilization but a national race-culture of its own. When Germany responded to the pull of the West, it met disaster; when it pursued its destiny in the East, it fulfilled itself.” — Johnson, Paul, *Modern Times*, Harper and Row, Publishers, N. Y., 1985, p. 111.

“The modern German nation was, in one sense, the creation of Prussian militarism. In another, it was the national expression of the German romantic movement, with its stress upon the *Volk*, its mythology and its natural setting in the German landscape, especially its dark, mysterious forests. The German *Volk* movement dated from Napoleonic times and was burning ‘alien’ and ‘foreign’ books, which corrupted ‘*Volk* culture’, as early as 1817. Indeed it was from the *Volk* movement that Marx took his concept of ‘alienation’ in industrial capitalism. A *Volk* had a soul, which was derived from its natural habitat. As the historical novelist Otto Gemlin put it, in an article in *Die Tat*, organ of the Volk-romantic movement, ‘For each people and each race, the countryside becomes its own peculiar landscape.’ If the landscape was destroyed, or the *Volk* divorced from it, the soul dies.” — Johnson, Paul, *Modern Times: The World from the Twenties to the Eighties*, Harper and Row, Publishers, N.Y., 1985, p. 118.

And in view of Heidegger’s widely-known sympathies for Nazism:

“The tragedy of modern Germany is an object-lesson in the dangers of allowing academic life to become politicized and professors to proclaim their ‘commitment’. Whether the bias is to the Left or Right the results are equally disastrous for in either case the wells of truth are poisoned. The universities and especially the professoriate were overwhelmingly on the side of *Kultur*. The jurists and the teachers of German literature and language were stridently national. The historians were the worst of the lot. Heinrich von Treitschke had written of Germany’s appointment with destiny and warned the Jews not to get in the way of the ‘young nation’.” *ibid*, p. 126.

The fact that Heidegger’s culture of choice was ancient Greece (an ancient Greece that never existed except in his metaphysical fantasies), and not medieval Germany, is irrelevant: the important point is that ancient Greece (in Heidegger’s mind) was imbued with the metaphysical experience of the world that the modern world had long since forsaken. (After Sept. 11, 2001, it is important to study, and compare, radical Islam (perhaps all of Islam) with the Easterners, the *Kultur* fanatics, of the Weimar Republic. Both are examples of hatred of the modern world, and both have many similarities.)

It is also irresponsible to suggest that Heidegger was some kind of an original among 20th century philosophers in his hatred of the modern world. In the same year, 1927, that *Being and Time* was first published, René Guénon’s *The Crisis of the Modern World*, appeared. “Guénon’s argument was that the 20th-century West represented the final stage of a final age, the apotheosis of worldly decadence, in which materialism was emphasized over the spirit, individuality over community. The Renaissance, he proposes, was not a rebirth but a death; science, rationality and humanism were products of delusion. A cure — or at any rate, a refuge — could be found in the primordial truths that underlay all religions before modernity’s distortions. Guénon scorned democracy; he believed in a hierarchical religious elite and saw himself as one of the elect.” — Rothstein, Edward, “Those Who Were Inspired To Hate the Modern World”, review of Sedgwick, Mark, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the 20th Century*, *The New York Times*, July 10, 2004, pp. A17, A19.

There were other like-minded thinkers. For example, in 1934 Julius Evola’s *Revolt Against the Modern World*, appeared. The Romanian religious scholar Mircea Eliade published similar views around the same time. — *ibid*.

It is irresponsible not to point out to students who are about to read *Being and Time* that in the 1920s, when the book was written, the subject of time, as re-interpreted by Einstein, was very

much “in the air” not only in physics, but in other intellectual circles as well, particularly in Europe:

“Psychologist Jean Piaget made the investigation of the ‘intuitive’ time concept in the child into an important research area. Einstein’s time coordination began serving as a model — and soon *the* model — for a new era of scientific philosophy. Gathering in the Austrian capital to found a new antimetaphysical philosophy, the physicists, sociologists, and philosophers of the Vienna Circle hailed synchronized clock simultaneity as the paradigm of a proper, verifiable, scientific concept. Elsewhere in Europe and in the United States, other self-consciously modern philosophers (as well as physicists) joined in hailing signal exchange simultaneity as an example of properly grounded knowledge that would stand proof against idle metaphysical speculation.” — Galison, Peter, *Einstein’s Clocks, Poincare’s Maps*, W. W. Norton & Company, N.Y., 2003, p. 25.

So it should not be surprising that a philosopher who hated the modern world that physics and the other hard sciences had created, and insisted on the importance of metaphysics in philosophy, should attempt to counter this new, scientific interpretation of time, with a very un-scientific interpretation of his own.

Heidegger’s Immersion in the World Without Objects

If it is irresponsible to introduce students to *Being and Time* without also introducing them to what was going on in Germany when the book was written, it is equally irresponsible not to introduce them to the poetry of Hölderlin, the one poet whom Heidegger clearly admired above all others, and whose lines he often quotes in his later critical works. (An excellent selection of the poetry is *Hymns and Fragments by Friedrich Hölderlin*, tr. and intro. by Richard Sieburth, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1984. The poems are presented in side-by-side German/English format.) Reading — experiencing — Hölderlin’s poetry is probably the fastest way to gain an understanding of the World that Heidegger is attempting to express in his works. It is difficult to find a term that describes this World: “the poetic world” is entirely too general; “a world in which everything is alive” is again too general, encompassing as it does all worlds of primitive man. The “poetic sea” or “poetic ocean” are possibilities¹, but the least imprecise term I have been able to come up with so far is simply “the world without Objects”, because this term suggests the feeling, always present in Hölderlin’s poetry (and in other poetry, of course, e.g., that of Yeats) — the feeling that all things are simultaneously immersed in the same living something (and I don’t intend any reference to God here)². It is the world that Hegel described:

:
“From his early interest in mysticism [Hegel] retained a belief in the unreality of separateness; the world, in his view, was not a collection of hard units, whether atoms or souls, each completely self-subsistent. The apparent self-subsistence of finite things appeared to him to be an illusion; nothing, he held, is ultimately and completely real except the whole.”³

1. At present, I do not know to what extent what I am referring to is related to Freud’s “oceanic feeling”.

2. Perhaps a case can be made that philosophies that are expressions of a world without Objects — and these philosophies inevitably rely on interpretation as a primary intellectual activity — are also philosophies that lead most readily to totalitarian states — states in which the individual is *immersed* in a single All (the State) and in which the only intellectual activity is interpretation (by those on top): if the activities of the individual or group *x* are deemed to be against the State, that is all that is necessary to condemn those individuals or groups. Consider, e.g., Marxism, and Heidegger’s Nazi sympathies.

3. Russell, Bertrand, *A History of Western Philosophy*, Simon and Schuster, N.Y., 1945, p. 731.

This World is emphatically not the world we in the 20th and 21st centuries live in: the world of scientific and technical and commercial Objects, in which each Object is separated from all the others, with “nothing in between”. In this other World of Hölderlin and Heidegger, there is *always* “something in between”. (We can sense this world in documentaries about primitive peoples, in which, e.g., the making of tools, houses, boats, and the using of them is “all one” — is a seamless process, as opposed to one in which the making and using of these Objects are separate activities, typically carried out by people who don’t know each other, people who are not immersed in the same seamless All as the members of the tribe.)

Like Heidegger, Hölderlin yearned for ancient Greece — a world in which Heidegger claimed that the question of the meaning of Being stimulated the researches of Plato and Aristotle¹. “Being” is a term that immerses us in the World I have been referring to. Being is everywhere, Being encompasses all, Being is a sea in which there are no separate Objects. Hölderlin’s “The Only One”, and “The Migration” immerse us in Being, and might have been written by Heidegger himself:

“Was ist es, das
An die alten seeligen Küsten
Mich fesselt, dass ich mehr noch
Sie liebe, als mein Vaterland?”

“What is it that
Binds me to these ancient
Blessed shores, that I love
Them more than my country?”

— *Hymns and Fragments by Friedrich Hölderlin*,
tr. and intro. by Richard Sieburth, Princeton
University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1984, p. 83.

In “The Migration” we have:

“...pflegt
Der Inseln, die mit Wein bekränzt,
Voll tönten von Gesang; noch andere wohnten
Am Tayget, am vielgepriesnen Himettos,
Die blühten zuletzt; doch von
Parnassos Quell bis zu des Tmolos
Goldglänzenden Bächen erklang,
Ein ewiges Lied; so rauschten
Damals die Wälder und all
Die Saitenspiele zusamt
Vom himmlischer Milde gerühret.”

1. Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Harper & Row, N.Y., 1962, p. H. 2.

“Tilled islands, garlanded with vines
Resounding with song; and others dwelt
By Taygetos, by fabled Hymettos,
And were the last to flower, and yet from
The springs of Patmos to Tmolos’
Gold-glimmering brooks, one everlasting
Hymn rang forth; and the forests
All rustled, every lyre
In unison
At heaven’s gentle touch.”

ibid., pp. 64-65.

Finally, it is irresponsible to introduce students to the works of a man whose entire philosophy was a critique of the culture that science, mathematics, technology had made of the modern world, without pointing out that nothing in his education gave him any background in any of these subjects:

“Heidegger was born in rural Messkirch, Germany. Raised a Roman Catholic, he was the son of the sexton of the village church. His family could not afford to send him to university, so he entered a Jesuit seminary. After studying theology at the University of Freiburg from 1909 to 1911, he switched to philosophy. Heidegger completed his doctoral thesis on psychologism in 1914, and in 1916 finished his *venia legendi*¹ with a thesis on Duns Scotus.”²

Heidegger and the Scientific World

This expert on the nature of the technical had never in his schooling been required to know what it was like to work a mathematics problem, or conduct an experiment in physics or chemistry, or build a simple electronic circuit, or simply take data.

Throughout his writings, we find the most appalling ignorance of the nature — and facts — of science and mathematics.

I have already mentioned, in the dialogue in the section, “Ontology”, Heidegger’s view of the sciences, “in which there is always a direct transition and entrance to them starting out from everyday representation, beliefs, and thinking.”³ — a 19th-century view that was outmoded already in the early years of the 20th century, and certainly by the time of the lectures (1935-36) in which this assertion occurs.

Here is what he says about Galileo’s legendary experiment with falling bodies..

“Galileo did his experiment at the leaning tower in the town of Pisa, where he was professor of mathematics, in order to prove his statement. In it bodies of different weights did not arrive at precisely the same time after having fallen from the tower, but the difference in time was slight. In spite of these differences and therefore really against the evidence of experience, Galileo upheld

1. process of obtaining a certificate allowing him to teach a specific academic subject

2. “Martin Heidegger”, Wikipedia, April, 2009.

3. Heidegger, Martin, *What Is a Thing?*, Gateway Editions, Ltd., South Bend, Indiana, 1967, p. 90

his proposition. The witnesses to this experiment, however, became really perplexed by the experiment and Galileo's upholding his view. They persisted the more obstinately in their former view. By reason of this experiment the opposition toward Galileo increased to such an extent that he had to give up his professorship and leave Pisa."¹

I challenge the reader to find any biography of Galileo, or any history of science, that accords with this text. The following is representative of the standard account:

"A biography by Galileo's pupil Vincenzo Viviani stated that Galileo had dropped balls of the same material, but different masses, from the Leaning Tower of Pisa to demonstrate that their time of descent was independent of their mass. This was contrary to what Aristotle had taught: that heavy objects fall faster than lighter ones, in direct proportion to weight. While this story has been retold in popular accounts, there is no account by Galileo himself of such an experiment, and it is generally accepted by historians that it was at most a thought experiment which did not actually take place. An exception is Drake, who argues that the experiment did take place, more or less as Viviani described it. The experiment described was actually performed by Simon Stevin (commonly known as Stevinus) although the building used was actually the church tower in Delft in 1568."²

He appears not even to have a grasp of the nature of the calculus: He writes of:

"...the founding of the infinitesimal calculus by Newton, the simultaneous founding of the differential calculus by Leibniz..."³

Newton and Leibniz discovered the same subject, which is sometimes called "the infinitesimal calculus" (no longer a preferred term), sometimes "the differential calculus", sometimes "the differential and integral calculus", and sometimes just "the calculus". In any case they did not discover two different subjects, as Heidegger seems to believe.

He wants his readers to believe that the Greek concept of learning as recollection, and the Greek concepts of mathematics and number, are still the correct ones, completely ignoring progress by mathematicians and logicians in the 19th and early 20th centuries in understanding the nature of number, and completely ignoring modern psychological studies of how people perceive instances of "number".

"The [Greek letters] *mathemata*, the mathematical, is that 'about' things which we already know. Therefore we do not first get it out of things, but, in a certain way, we bring it already with us. From this we can now understand why, for instance, number is something mathematical. We see three chairs and say that there are three. What 'three' is the three chairs do not tell us, nor three apples, three cats, nor any other three things. Moreover, we can count three things only if we already know 'three.' In thus grasping the number three as such, we only expressly recognize something which, in some way, we already have. This recognition is genuine learning. The num-

1. Heidegger, Martin, *ibid.*, p. 1

2. "Galileo Galilei", Wikipedia, Sept. 16, 2012

3. Heidegger, *ibid.*, p. 94.

ber is something in the proper sense learnable, a [Greek letters] *mathema*, i.e., something mathematical. Things do not help us to grasp ‘three’ as such, i.e., ‘threeness’. ‘Three’ — what exactly is it? It is the number in the natural series of numbers that stands in third place. In ‘third’? It is only the third number because it is the three. And ‘place’ — where do places come from? ‘Three’ is not the third number, but the first number. ‘One’ isn’t really the first number. For instance, we have before us one load of bread and one knife, this one and, in addition, another one. When we take both together we say, ‘both of these,’ the one and the other, but we do not say ‘these two’, or $1 + 1$. Only when we add a cup to the bread and the knife do we say ‘all.’ Now we take them as a sum, i.e., as a whole and so and so many. Only when we perceive it from the third is the former one the first, the former other the second, so that one and two arise, and ‘and’ becomes ‘plus,’ and there arises the possibility of places and of a series. What we now take cognizance of is not created from any of the things. We take what we ourselves somehow already have. What must be understood as mathematical is what we can learn in this way.”¹

The intelligent reader — that is, the reader who resents being deceived — will recognize that Heidegger is merging several distinct matters: one is the Greek concept of learning as recollection. It is, of course, perfectly legitimate to try to understand this concept, to try to experience it as the Greeks did. Another is the Greek meaning of terms beginning with the stem “math”. A third is the Greek concept of number. It is perfectly legitimate to try to understand this concept, try to experience it as the Greeks might have in the case of three objects. A fourth matter is the implied assertion that the Greek concepts that Heidegger claims to have presented to us, are correct today!

Readers with a background in mathematics, science, *and* literature surely cannot help noticing that Heidegger’s criticism of science and mathematics is often made from the standpoint that these subjects are *schools of literature*, and that therefore they are subject to literary analysis, i.e., interpretation.

In at least one important case, it is clear that Heidegger was embarrassingly ignorant of recent progress in philosophy of language, since, like Meinong, he explained phrases like “the present king of France” and “the golden mountain”, which seem to refer to things that do not exist, by saying that the things occupy a special realm of non-existent objects. But Russell had demolished this idea in his 1905 essay, “On Denoting”, with his Theory of Descriptions (see below under “Against Wittgenstein” on page 369).

(Yet it must be pointed out that, *literarily*, a realm of non-existent objects has a definite appeal. It is certainly not nonsense if “nonsense” is taken to mean “incapable of giving rise to concepts”. It has the same kind of appeal as most philosophical ideas, e.g., pantheism, and the thing-in-itself, and the Absolute, and the notion that there cannot be individual truths, only one truth about the universe as a whole, and the various philosophical concepts of time, and the nature of Being, and numerous others.)

1. Heidegger, *ibid.*, p. 74.

I wonder how many philosophy professors teaching Heidegger spend any class time on his late essay, “ ‘... Poetically Man Dwells...’ ”¹ and, in particular, point out to their students how bizarre it is for a world-famous philosopher in 1951 to make a case for the desirability of living poetically on this earth. Surely even he must have known that the goal is hopeless for all but a handful of poets and philosophers. So why set it forth without admitting this?

The phrase in the title is from a late poem of Hölderlin’s — “In lieblicher Bläue...” [In lovely blue...] and contains the lines

“...Voll Verdienst
doch dichterisch, wohnet der Mensch auf dieser Erde.”

[Well deserving, yet poetically,
Man dwells on this earth.]²

Why does this philosopher who on the one hand has made a career out of explaining the true nature of the technological world, say so little about the attractions of this world at least for those who created it, namely, scientists, mathematicians, engineers? We have to wonder if Heidegger had the vaguest idea of what drove Einstein — the great beauty that special relativity, not to mention general relativity, revealed about the universe. We have to wonder if Heidegger had the vaguest idea of the pleasure that those with an interest in auto mechanics derive from working with machines — the sensual pleasure they experience. We have to wonder if Heidegger could even conceive of the excitement a mathematician feels in tackling an unsolved problem, the vast universe of numbers and infinities of numbers spread out before him, the wealth of possible approaches to the problem, the knowledge that all but perhaps one or two will be dead ends, and then the stroke of intuition, the conviction that *this* is the way, like a message from the gods.

Heidegger and Interpretation

If I were a philosophy professor, one of the early warnings I would give my students would be: *Beware of those whose method is interpretation!*, because the inevitable outcome is tyranny except when it is carried out by artists who are perfectly willing and able to disagree with each other, the whole enterprise being aimed at improving each other’s work. In an academic environment, a subject or doctrine based on interpretation is doomed to stagnancy: those expounding the currently most impressive interpretation gain power and are able to exclude all dissenters because there is no basis on which to call the interpretation of those in power, wrong. “If you don’t agree with me, it is because you don’t understand me.” “If people as important as we are say *x* can and *should be* seen as *y*, then *x is y!*” The history of psychoanalysis is a notorious example.

1. “ ‘...dichterisch wohnet der Mensch...’ — in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*. Heidegger’s account: ‘Lecture, given on October 6th, 1951, at “Buhlershöhe”’; printed in the first number of *Akzente, Zeitschrift für Dichtung* (edited by W. Höllerer and Hans Bender), No. 1, 1954, pp. 57 ff.” — Hofstadter, Albert, tr., Heidegger, Martin, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Harper Colophon Books, New York, 1975, p. xxv.

2. *ibid.*, p. 249.

“Everything wrong with modern society would be explained no longer by the mode of production but by the mode of discourse.” — Gross, Paul R., Levitt, Norman, *Higher Superstition*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Md., 1998, p. 76.

But anyone can be “against” interpretation. The next question is, What is the alternative?, for the disciplines we are concerned with are certainly not *nothing* — are certainly not to be dismissed out of hand. I see no other way to answer this question except, at least in the case of difficult philosophers like Hegel and Heidegger, to take a page out of Wittgenstein’s book and list, for each technical term, all the phrases — all the contexts — in which the term appears, with, of course, page references, including the title of the work and the date of its writing (and the age of the author at the time). Tedious indeed the making of such a concordance, but *nothing less will do*. Now at least we can all begin at the same place. Now at least we can have a basis for comparing and judging different previous interpretations. Now at least we have a means of legitimately challenging the tyrants.

Heidegger’s Language

Finally, we must not allow ourselves to be seduced by Heidegger’s language¹. What can be a more important, a more profound, subject than the “being of beings”? Surely if we don’t understand the *being* of beings we cannot possibly understand anything else about them. And yet I say that to speak of the being of beings is to do nothing more than call attention to self-consciousness, in the same way that the question, “Why is there something rather than nothing at all?”, is not a question but a call to awareness of self-consciousness. (The meaning of the question is: “Self-consciousness exists!”) There is not: self-consciousness, and the World, and this matter of the being of beings. Without the being of beings, there is no self-consciousness.

But we cannot conclude this criticism without addressing the question, “What should Heidegger have done instead?” Given his obvious desire to present a World (a World that he wants us to believe is the world we actually experience) the best answer I can give at present is: he should have presented his philosophy as the words of a philosopher in a fictional narrative, or even a fictional dialogue. At the least, this would have forced him to describe, however minimally, the world in which his philosopher character was living — a matter of fundamental importance to his philosophy.

Try to imagine a scientifically-literate Heidegger. So far I am unable to, one reason being that I cannot imagine such a person being so profoundly opposed to the modern technological world. Which prompts me again to say that existentialism was a philosophy for have-nots, for verbose know-nothings whose natural home was the humanities because they couldn’t understand, and therefore condemned, science and mathematics.

Heidegger’s Definition of “Truth”

See the section, “One Particular Alternative Definition of Truth” on page 325.

1. An analysis of Heidegger’s writing style is given in the chapter, “The Object”, in this book.

A Few Things We Can Respect in Heidegger's Writings

Did Heidegger do anything at all that we can respect? I ask the question even though he is the one philosopher I utterly despise (I don't despise Hegel, I merely regard him as a pompous fool). The answer is yes.

First of all, *Being and Time* is unquestionably a great *literary* work.

Second of all, we must admire the genius of his using *Being* as his weapon against the Object-ridden modern world. Lesser minds produce long tracts lamenting our obsession with machines, our believing that science holds the answer to all questions, etc. But these tracts are just rants against the Object written from firmly within the Object ontology. Being and all its varieties in *Being and Time*, and everything that Heidegger says about them, lie indisputably outside that ontology. The word "Being" removes the distance — the separation — that would otherwise occur as in standard psychological texts: "When we are in the state ... then we tend to experience... although this can sometimes be overcome by ..."

Third, I can't help respecting the reason for his rejection of Kant's call for a proof of the existence of the world outside of us:

"Kant calls it a 'scandal of philosophy and of human reason in general' that there is still no cogent proof for the 'Dasein of Things outside of us' which will do away with any skepticism...

"The 'scandal of philosophy' is not that this proof has yet to be given, but that *such proofs are expected and attempted again and again...* If Dasein is understood correctly, it defies such proofs, because, in its Being, it already *is* what subsequent proofs deem necessary to demonstrate for it."¹

Fourth, the following sentence has always seemed to me strikingly insightful:

"Dasein is an entity which in each case I myself am."²

Finally, I must admire the psychological insight contained in the observation:

"When, for instance, a man wears a pair of spectacles which are so close to him distantly that they are 'sitting on his nose', they are environmentally more remote from him than the picture on the opposite wall."³

An Authority on Heidegger

I spoke at the start of this section about Heideggerians in the academy. Certainly one of them is Hubert Dreyfus of the University of California at Berkeley, a man recognized as a world authority on Heidegger. Whenever I hear the phrase "world authority on Heidegger", I cannot help asking myself what exactly it means. There will never be a permanent resolution of what Heidegger "really" meant (there is no end to interpretation). So it can mean only that Dreyfus has read more of Heidegger more often than almost anyone else, and spent many years lecturing on what he has read. So what? Take away interpretation and all you have is scholarship. Worthy of respect, but no more.

And yet, in 2000 a series of books was published subtitled "Essays in Honor of Hubert L. Dreyfus"⁴. The cover of at least one of them, namely, of Vol. 2, contains a photograph that I have always found reprehensible. There, sitting in a dark green convertible, possibly a Volkswagen, is

1. Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Harper & Row, N.Y., 1962, p. H. 203, 205.

2. *ibid.*, , H. 53.

3. *ibid.*, p. H. 107.

4. *Heidegger, Coping, and Cognitive Science*, Essays in Honor of Hubert L. Dreyfus, ed. Mark Wrathall and Jeff Malpas, Vol 2 , The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2000.

a beaming Prof. Dreyfus, and next to him, just visible under the sun visor, is a face that looks very much like that of Heidegger himself, his Hitler moustache¹ clearly visible. So the American Jewish professor is apparently delighted to be sitting next to a German former Nazi whose obscurities and ignorance of the pillars of the modern world, science and mathematics, have provided the two of them with fame and lifetime employment.

Reading Russell After Reading Heidegger

I think that I can legitimately describe myself as a lover of literature, including poetry. But I can also legitimately describe myself as a student of computer science, mathematics and physics (the last at the undergraduate level only), and can say that I understand why certain ideas in these latter subjects are called “beautiful”. Nevertheless, I have spent far more time in my life reading literature than I have in studying technical subjects.

I mention these things to discourage readers from thinking, in response to what I am about to say, “Oh, he is just a technical type who has no appreciation of the liberal arts.” I feel I can enter into the Worlds of Heidegger and Russell even though they are antitheses of each other.

Sometimes, after struggling for several days with a few pages of Heidegger, I open up a book by Russell: perhaps the *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*, perhaps *Principles of Mathematics*, perhaps the *History of Western Philosophy*, or other works. Inevitably, I find myself asking the question: “Which of these two philosophers do I believe can in any sense be regarded as pointing toward the future of philosophy?” Or, in more metaphorical terms, “Which of these two philosophers do I feel is more ‘grown up’?” And even though I am quite sure that Russell never experienced the kind of anguish that lay at the bottom of 20th century existentialism — the realization that one is living in a world without meaning or purpose — I still reply that for me it is Russell who points to the future. When I read him, I feel: “Now we are in the daylight, now we are reading the words of a man who lives in a world that we all live in, whether we like it or not: a world in which there are external objects separate from ourselves, and laws that govern these objects — laws that are not human-centered, that do not arise from a poetical view of the world.”

Of his own philosophical school, Russell says, “It offers intellectual delights to those who value them, but it does not attempt to flatter human conceit as most philosophies do. If it is dry and technical, it lays the blame on the universe, which has chosen to work in a mathematical way rather than as poets or mystics might have desired.”² Elsewhere, he speaks of mysticism as “a lazy man’s philosophy”. I feel that the same can be said of Heidegger’s thought, even though I am sure that many, perhaps most, Heidegger experts would strongly deny that he is a mystic. Nevertheless, when I consider his fundamental anti-technological viewpoint, I can well imagine the fury that must have been aroused in him when he read sentences of Russell’s like, “We may regard a human being as an instrument, which makes various responses to various stimuli.”³ (If he read others of Russell’s works, he would know that Russell was by no means a cold, heartless mechanist.) And when I consider Heidegger’s attempt to make the poetic mode the mode for experiencing the world as he felt it should be experienced, I feel that ultimately, this is the

1. Is it possible to believe, after viewing photographs of Heidegger taken in the 1930s and ‘40s, that he was not attempting to look like the Führer?

2. Russell, Bertrand, “Philosophy in the Twentieth Century”, in *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*, Simon and Schuster, N.Y., 1961, p. 274, quoted from Russell, Bertrand, *Sceptical Essays*, Allen & Unwin, N.Y.: W. W. Norton, 1928.

3. Russell, Bertrand, “Truth and Falsehood” in *The Analysis of Mind*, The Macmillan Co., N.Y., 1921.

approach of a man who believes that if you don't like the world, then you should refuse to face it on its own terms — you should hide from it, go into yourself and create a fantasy world that soothes your feelings — and for me that is basically a lazy man's approach.

Against Wittgenstein

Dear Prof. Wittgenstein:

I am writing this after reading an excellent book about you and Karl Popper called *Wittgenstein's Poker*¹. It uses, as a point of departure for portraits of you and Popper, the famous incident in 1946 when, during a talk at Cambridge given by Popper, you allegedly threatened him with a fire poker.

I'm afraid that the picture of you that emerges in the book is one that further lowers my estimation of you. I would like, in this letter, to tell you why.

The Famous Poker Incident

You will recall that Popper had been invited to give a talk titled “Are There Philosophical Problems?” at the Oct. 25, 1946 meeting of the Moral Science Club, which was held in room H3 of the Gibbs Building of Cambridge University.² The title in itself must have wrangled you, since the second half of your career had been built on the conviction that there are no philosophical problems, only language puzzles that need to be solved. In any case, during the lecture, as usual, you began interrupting, and at one point challenged Popper to give an example of a moral rule. At the time you had been nervously playing with a poker from the fireplace. When Popper replied, “Not to threaten visiting lecturers with pokers,” you threw the poker down and stormed out of the room.

Your Anger at Anyone Who Disagreed With You

Such outbursts were not unusual with you, though the record does not show any others involving pokers. Peter Gray-Lucas, who was present at the meeting, said that you were acting in your “usual grotesquely arrogant, self-opinionated, rude and boorish manner.”³ You couldn't tolerate anyone disagreeing with you. And yet you did most of your philosophizing on a person-to-person basis, since after the publication, in your twenties, of your *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, you published very little during your lifetime. So one would think you would have developed a more effective way of getting across your ideas. You once said, “Reading the Socratic dialogues, one has the feeling: what a frightful waste of time.”⁴ I'm sure you meant that it was a waste of time because poor Socrates did not know about your method of linguistic analysis. Nevertheless, I have to say that I admire him infinitely more than you for the way he carried on his dialogues: always in a civil manner, always with patience and a sense of humor. And although you managed to achieve, at least as of now, a form of immortality, so did he, and I am confident that his will last far longer.

1. Edmonds, David, and Eidinow, John, *Wittgenstein's Poker*, HarperCollins Publishers, N.Y., 2002

2. *ibid.*, p. 1

3. *ibid.*, p. 18.

4. *ibid.*, p. 30

The Con of “What Does It Mean to Say...?”

In American English, we use the word “con” to denote the kind of activity carried on by what you in England call a “confidence trickster”. I will now describe several of the cons you practiced.

To begin with, it is clear from the book, and from the two books of yours that I have read, namely, the *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations* that your no. 1 goal was to be seen as the leading philosophical genius of your time. That means being the man in charge. One sure way of doing this is by always challenging your listeners to explain what they mean.

“On the afternoon of 25 October [1946] an Indian student, Kanti Shah, took notes. What did it mean, [you] wanted to know, to speak to oneself? ‘Is this something fainter than speaking? Is it like comparing $2 + 2 = 4$ on dirty paper with $2 + 2 = 4$ on clean paper?’”¹

I’ll tell you what my response would have been if you had asked me that question — but only if I had been there as an independent person, not a graduate student, because graduate students dared not say the wrong thing in your presence. My response would have been, “What does it mean to ask, ‘What does it mean to speak to oneself?’”

I can assure you that I know what *I* mean when I say things like, “I spend a lot of time speaking (I usually say talking) to myself,” and “You often see street people in Berkeley talking to themselves.” I have absolutely no reason to believe that people I know who use the phrase are in any sense confused as to its meaning, or are using it for the wrong reasons.

Of course, you will probably reply that that doesn’t mean that they know what they mean when they use the phrase. To which I repeat my question, “What does it mean to ask, ‘What does it mean to speak to oneself?’”, and I add that what you want is not an answer but to be the arbiter in such matters, the one in charge who decides the correct answer. Well, I’m sorry: the only answer I could accept as correct would be one that was accepted by a majority of scientists, and if no scientific answer were possible at the time, then you would be wasting your listeners’s time.

Sometimes you could be downright creepy in your drive always to be in charge.

“In August 1925 J. M. Keynes [the great economist] and his new wife, Lydia Lopokova, were a fortnight into their honeymoon in Sussex when Wittgenstein arrived for a short visit. Keynes’s biographer, Robert Skidelsky, tells the tale: ‘Lydia remarked to Wittgenstein, no doubt brightly, “What a beautiful tree.” Wittgenstein glared at her. “What do you mean?” Lydia burst into tears.’”² Did you really expect Keynes and his wife to have said afterward, “My God, all our lives we have used that expression, but now, thanks to Wittgenstein, we realize we didn’t know what we were talking about!”?

Another example of your cons: “If a lion could talk, we couldn’t understand him.” “...which seemed at once impenetrable and profound.”³ Well, let’s see if we can take some of the mystery out of it. I think that what you were trying to do was give your listeners yet another “proof” that there is no universal language, that linguistic groups make up their own rules and have their own conventions. But you have made an assertion and therefore we have a right to analyze it.

First of all, I think that experts in the behavior of lions would agree that lions are consistent in the sounds they make about events in their lives: hunger, fear, anger, contentment, mating and others. To put it more precisely: I think that if a recording of one of these types of sounds were played, with no accompanying image of the lion making the sound, then in a majority of cases,

1. *ibid.*, p. 8.

2. *ibid.*, p. 194.

3. *ibid.*, p. 234

these experts could identify the associated activity. So if lions could talk, the meaning of their utterances would not be mysterious at all, unless, as a result of having developed speech, they had far more complex things to say than what they did before they had speech. But if that was what you were trying to get your listeners to see, then your aphorism should have been, “If lions developed speech, we couldn’t understand them.” To which I would have to reply, “Why not? — if we knew something about how they lived?”

So let us assume that you were postulating a lion who has simply developed the capacity to express in words what he now expresses in growls and other sounds. If the words he used were in a language that no present-day human knows — as are many of mankind’s lost languages — then you would be correct, but so what? Of course, you have ruled out private languages¹, so we need not consider a lone lion who has developed the capacity to express himself in words known to no one else, not even other lions.

Your Hypocrisy

Underlying the above examples, and many other aspects of your character, is an appalling hypocrisy. Let’s begin with your loathing of Cambridge. You were a professional philosopher, receiving a paycheck from one of the world’s great universities. Yet you said, “Everything about the place repels me. The stiffness, the artificiality, the self-satisfaction of the people. The university atmosphere nauseates me.”² The authors then say that you “constantly considered giving up [your] university chair.” So why didn’t you? There is no evidence in the book that there wasn’t enough money left from your family fortune so that you could have supported yourself outside the university, as Spinoza did, and Hume, and Nietzsche in his later years.

“Despising professional philosophers, Wittgenstein was in favor of his students abandoning the subject. The aptitude of the student meant nothing to him: he counseled one of his most brilliant students, Yorick Smythies, to work with his hands, even though Smythies was so ill-coordinated that he had difficulty in tying his shoelaces. Manual work was good for the brain, Wittgenstein told him.”³ More No but Yes. Why continue to teach a subject that you so despised?

And then your bullying methods as a teacher:

“Wittgenstein attracted disciples rather than students... Wittgenstein’s successor as Professor of Philosophy, Georg Henrik von Wright, recorded, ‘Wittgenstein himself thought that his influence as a teacher was, on the whole, harmful to the development of independent minds in his disciples. I am afraid that he was right. To learn from Wittgenstein without coming to adopt his forms of expression and catchwords and even to imitate his tone of voice, his mien and gestures was almost impossible.’”⁴

“Wittgenstein certainly intimidated the students, and the dons complained that his habit of interrupting speakers was also very discourteous to visiting lecturers.”⁵

“...Wittgenstein... tended to make his students feel useless.”⁶

1. “Since language is governed by rules, it is also essentially public; it is embedded in our practice, in our ‘forms of life’. Rules have to be interpreted; there has to be a consensus on what is permissible and what is not. Thus the idea of a private language — a language that only person can understand — is incoherent.” Edmonds and Eidinow’s summary of Wittgenstein’s view. *ibid.*, p. 230

2. *ibid.*, p. 263

3. *ibid.*, p. 189

4. *ibid.*, pp. 30-31

5. *ibid.*, p. 37

At the meeting where the poker incident took place, those in attendance included “...the students, many of them Wittgenstein acolytes who walked and talked, dressed and debated like simulacra of their professor.”¹

You knew damn well that the students couldn’t challenge you openly and honestly — not if they wanted to get their PhDs. I can draw no other conclusion except that you felt the best thing was for you to train followers — not individuals who could think for themselves, and if necessary challenge some of your views. But what first-rate thinker wants to create a bunch of epigones?

On the other hand, “[Wittgenstein’s colleagues at Cambridge] had no disciples — and would probably have been deeply embarrassed to have attracted any. On Cambridge and on philosophy they left little mark — but that is the fate of most philosophy dons. In public they exemplified the manners and deportment of English gentlemen — a world away from the loud Viennese expressiveness of both Wittgenstein and Popper. They valued highly the principle of tolerance; in debate, they believed in trying to see things from the other person’s point of view. They spoke in courteous, measured tones, rarely raising their voices in anger (though many of their students regarded such civilized attributes as stultifying).”²

“Whatever the social and cultural differences between Wittgenstein and Popper, one similarity of character made it inevitable that H3 would see a raging confrontation: their sheer awfulness to others in discussion and debate.”³

I tell you honestly: if the choice were between those often boring dons who nevertheless would give me a chance to have my say, and loudmouth bullies like you, I would take the first any day.

Your callous attitude toward students wasn’t limited to those at Cambridge. In 1920, at the age of 30, believing you had exhausted your philosophical possibilities, you took up a post as a schoolteacher in rural Trattenbach, in lower Austria. “As Wittgenstein’s primary-school pupils would have testified, he was not slow to lash out at a head or an ear — sometimes making them bleed.”⁴ In 1926, you were taken to court over your treatment of one pupil (the Haidbauer case).⁵ During this time, you complained to Bertrand Russell that the people of Trattenbach “were uniquely despicable”⁶. But Russell refused to believe you.

I ask you a simple question: if you hated the students that much, why did you continue teaching them?

A Blunder In Your Theory of Language

John Passmore, in his excellent book, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, quotes you as saying,

“ ‘The meaning of “slab”, then, does not consist in the object it names, but in the way it is used in language.’ Passmore continues, “If the actual slab — the physical object — were part of the meaning of ‘slab’, Wittgenstein argues, we ought to be able to say things like: ‘I broke part of the meaning of the word “slab”’, ‘I laid a hundred parts of the meaning of the word “slab” today.’ Such statements are obvious nonsense.”

6. *ibid.*, p. 177

1. *ibid.*, p. 57

2. *ibid.*, pp. 62-63

3. *ibid.* p. 175

4. *ibid.*, p. 203

5. *ibid.*, p. 299

6. *ibid.*, p. 203

They are nonsense, but not for the reason that you believe. The meaning of the word “slab” is: *any element in the set of all slabs*, just as the meaning of the word “two” in the question, “What is the number two?” — is the set of all pairs (as had been established by Russell et al. in the early 20th century — see paragraph at end of this sub-section). Your examples are nonsense because you don’t recognize this. “I broke part of an element (instance) of the meaning of the word ‘slab’” is a perfectly legitimate sentence, as is “I laid a hundred elements (instances) of the meaning of the word ‘slab’ today.”

Your “The meaning is the use” expresses a brilliant idea. But that is not what we are talking about here.

(In his *A History of Western Philosophy* Russell demolishes Bergson's naïve definition of “number”. Russell explains that “number” as in “What is number?”, is a plurality of pluralities of pluralities. Thus, e.g., a pair of things is a plurality. The number two is a plurality of pluralities because it is the set of all pairs. “Number” (all the numbers, or at least, all the positive integers) is a plurality of pluralities of pluralities.)

The Con of Your Theory That Philosophical Problems Are Merely Language Puzzles

Your main theme during the second part of your career — the period that was dubbed “Wittgenstein II” — was that there are no philosophical problems, just the bewitchment of language. The aim of philosophy was “to disentangle ourselves from our self-enveloped confusion — ‘to show the fly the way out of the fly bottle.’ When we engage in philosophy, we puzzle about things that ordinarily do not concern us.”¹ “...Wittgenstein II conceived philosophy as a sort of linguistic therapy, a parallel to the approach of his sister’s friend Sigmund Freud. ‘The philosopher’s treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness.’”²

Yet nowhere in your work have I come across what any real thinker— say, Russell — would have done whose main purpose was not to perpetuate the myth of his genius, but instead to do, as simply as possible, what he claimed was most important to do. In your case, this would mean to set forth a list of all the main philosophical problems over the ages, and show how each in turn was a bewitchment of language. How long would a list of all the main philosophical problems be? A few pages? How many additional pages would you need to at least outline the bewitchment of language in each case? A total of ten more? Twenty more? End of story! But you didn’t want an end of the story, because that would have left you without a way to keep the spotlight on yourself, a way to keep the adulation, the mystique going. “A simple lucidity seemed always close at hand, never achieved.”³ You did the same thing that Heidegger did: you set up a goal that was impossible to achieve, but that placed you in the position of Chief Striver for that achievement, and chief and only judge as to progress toward the achievement. In Heidegger’s case, it was the goal of understanding the meaning of Being; in your case, it was the goal of understanding, and overcoming, the bewitchment of language. And I’ll tell you this: the last thing in the world that either of you wanted was the achievement of those goals. In the finite and empty world of the early 20th century, both of you wanted, above all, *infinite*.

1. *ibid.*, pp. 230-231

2. *ibid.*, p. 231

3. from Iris Murdoch’s novel *The Philosopher’s Pupil*, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 188.

Let us look at how Russell proceeded to present a solution to a major problem having to do with language — a solution he considered one of his greatest accomplishments.

By a “description” I mean a phrase such as “The present President of the United States,” in which a person or thing is designated, not by name, but by some property which is supposed or known to be peculiar to him or it. Such phrases had given a lot of trouble. Suppose I say “The golden mountain does not exist,” and suppose you ask “What is it that does not exist?” It would see that, if I say, “It is the golden mountain,” I am attributing some sort of existence to it. Obviously I am not making the same statement as if I said, “The round square does not exist.” This seemed to imply that the golden mountain is one thing and the round square is another, although neither exists. The theory of descriptions was designed to meet this and other difficulties.

According to this theory, when a statement containing a phrase of the form “the-so-and-so” is rightly analysed, the phrase “the-so-and-so” disappears. For example, take the statement “Scott was the author of *Waverly*.” The theory interprets this statement as saying:

“One and only one man wrote *Waverly*, and that man was Scott.” Or, more fully:

“There is an entity *c* such that the statement ‘*x* wrote *Waverly*’ is true if *x* is *c* and false otherwise; moreover *c* is Scott.”

The first part of this, before the word “moreover,” is defined as meaning: “The author of *Waverly* exists (or existed or will exist).” Thus “The golden mountain does not exist” means:

“There is no entity *c* such that ‘*x* is golden and mountainous’ is true when *x* is *c*, but not otherwise.”

With this definition the puzzle as to what is meant when we say “The golden mountain does not exist” disappears.¹

Now that is how a linguistic puzzle should be solved. First of all, he makes clear what the puzzle is. Then: no mystification, no Zen-like aphorisms that are greater puzzles than the ones they are supposed to be clearing up. Nothing but the cold, clear light of logic. A brilliant piece of work set forth openly, in the plainest language possible, with not the slightest suggestion that the real business at hand is to maintain an aura of genius around Russell.

Incidentally, I am sorry to have to tell you but I am confident that any moderately intelligent thinker who is so inclined can learn to philosophize as you do in the *Investigations*. It is just a matter of bringing together contexts that are not normally found together — roses with teeth, lions that can talk — and then saying, in so many words, “See how strange language is!” It is the old academic con of showing that what people take for granted is actually not to be taken for granted at all.

A philosophy that puts *words* at the center of things and, in particular, which attempts to reduce philosophical thought to the study of appropriate and inappropriate contexts for the use of words, runs the risk of tolerating all manner of outrageousness. You said:

“It isn’t sensible to be furious even at Hitler; how much less so at God.”²

To which Steven Weinberg rightly replied, “...anyone, even Wittgenstein, who is not ‘furious’ at Hitler should not be taken as a moral authority on any issue.”³

1. Russell, Bertrand, *A History of Western Philosophy*, Simon and Schuster, N.Y., 1945, p. 831.

2. Wittgenstein’s journal, *Culture and Value*, quoted in a letter by Edward T. Oakes, S.J., in a letter in *The New York Review of Books*, Jan. 20, 2000, p. 64.

I sometimes try to imagine a world full of Wittgensteins, all playing the language game of the *Investigations*. The one thing we can say about such a world is that it would be an exceedingly strange — an exceedingly uncomfortable world. Nothing certain. Nothing ever established. The truth always out of reach.

I sometimes wonder how your works would read if they were put inside of quotation marks.

The Con of Your Insistence on Precision

“A key to comprehending what drove Wittgenstein is to see him as living a passion for exactitude in all things: a thing was either exact or it was not, and if it was not, it was literally too painful to endure.”¹

This kind of obsession was old even in your day. It is fundamentally no different from that of people like the schoolmaster Thomas Gradgrind in Dickens’s *Hard Times*: “In this life, we want nothing but Facts, sir; nothing but Facts!”²

And it is very effective for maintaining oneself in a position of control and being feared, as I know from experience dealing with engineers who had milder versions of your obsession. People who are unsure of themselves in technical and especially mathematical matters, when confronted by such demands, hate themselves for their imprecision and say to themselves, “How stupid I am. How brilliant he is.” (Strange, I seem to recall a passage somewhere in your writings where you pointed out how absurd it would be if, e.g., someone were to ask, “Have you seen my book?” and a person were to reply, “It is 3.294 meters from the center of the south doorway to the living room,” instead of simply doing what most people would do, namely, saying, “It’s on the coffee table in the living room.” But I can’t seem to find the passage.)

I tell you honestly: if you had gone into one of your tirades over my lack of exactitude where exactitude was not really required, I would have been very unphilosophical in my reply. I would have said, “Fuck you.”

How Nietzsche Might Have Analyzed You

You prided yourself on not reading modern philosophers. If you had, you would have been forced to see how powerless your ideas were in the face of the literary drive of thinkers like Heidegger. It is simply not believable that Heidegger would have given up his quest for the meaning of Being when you told him that he was trapped by a bewitchment of language, and that the way to free himself was, e.g., by looking at the way “Being” is used in the language.

In fact, the only readings of yours that are mentioned in *Wittgenstein’s Poker* are: “hard-boiled detective magazines...”, and “Sterne, Dickens, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Gottfried Keller. He admired Agatha Christie and P. G. Wodehouse... St. Augustine’s *Confessions* was also on his bookshelf, and William James too. He could discuss Kierkegaard and Cardinal Newman, was familiar with Moliere, Eliot, and Rilke, and recommended Faraday’s *The Chemical History of a Candle* as an illustration of fine popular science. Yet, as Engelmann explained, ‘He did indeed enjoy reading good detective stories, while he considered it a waste of time to read mediocre philosophical reflections.’”³

3. *ibid.*, p. 65

1. Edmonds, David, and Eidinow, John, *Wittgenstein’s Poker*, HarperCollins Publishers, N.Y., 2002, p. 198

2. Chapter 1

3. *ibid.* 197

I don't know if you read Nietzsche but I am certain that if he had read *you*, and the book I have been quoting from, he would not have been kind in his analysis of you — and, as I'm sure you know, he was one of the greatest psychologists who ever lived. Furthermore, being a literary artist of the first order, he would have *written* his analysis and thus saved himself the annoyance of being constantly interrupted by you in a person-to-person encounter. His paragraph would probably have begun, “The Jewish genius —” and then he would have pointed out that the Jews had to seize every opportunity that was open to them in an oppressive world. But to be merely competent meant to be on the same level with other competent persons in a field. To be a genius, on the other hand, meant to be unique and irreplaceable. And so time and again we see Jewish thinkers not merely excelling in a field, but re-inventing it and making it their own. Marx, Freud, Einstein, yourself, are a few examples that come to mind. Of course, it is not only Jews who do this. Heidegger certainly is an example.

Nietzsche would have pointed out that you came from a family that was used to being on top. “By the end of the nineteenth century the Wittgensteins had taken their place among the Austrian superrich, second only to the Vienna branch of the Rothschild family. The prime force in his country's steel cartel, able to bend the price of steel at will, Karl Wittgenstein [your father] was a business genius. It was said that, if he had been German, Bismarck would have brought him into the management of the economy.”¹

And so, Nietzsche would have said, you made it your business to be on top in your own career, and you did this by always being the maverick, always disagreeing with others, always insisting on the correctness of views that, looked at dispassionately, were mostly eccentricities.

The source of your arrogance and bullying Nietzsche would almost certainly have placed in your father. “His father was impossible to please and could be tyrannical toward his children — his sons particularly, though his daughters did not escape his tongue and his arbitrary decision. In front of her, he referred to his daughter Helene as ‘the ugly one’. They were scared of but captivated by him. [Exactly as your students and colleagues and friends were of you.]

“Three of Wittgenstein's brothers committed suicide: two, Hans and Rudolph, as young men under obdurate pressure from their father to abandon music as a career and follow him into industry.”²

Nietzsche would have not been duped by your mystique. He would instead have pointed out some of the ways you maintained it. One was the use of declarations made without surrounding comment — the *Tractatus* is the best example of this, but there are many others in the *Investigations* — so that the reader has the impression that what is being said is so profound that it is beyond elaboration or the possibility of discussion — like the utterances of a Zen master. He would have made the same point about the questions you posed without giving any indication of how you wanted them answered.

It is important that you not be allowed to get away with this con. Let us review a little history: around 1902, Russell discovered a major flaw in set theory. It came to be known as “Russell's Paradox” and it asked if the set of all sets that do not contain themselves, contains itself. Well, by definition, if it did contain itself, then it didn't. And if it didn't contain itself, then it did. Russell's solution to the Paradox, which he first set forth in 1903, was his so-called “Theory of Types”, which said that we must think in terms of levels. At level 1 are statements about individuals — the statements of the propositional calculus. No other statements are allowed. At level 2, only

1. *ibid.* 81

2. *ibid.*, p. 195

statements about level 1 statements are allowed. At level 3 only statements about level 2 statements are allowed, and so on.

You adopted this idea with not a mention, much less discussion, of its source. The *Tractatus* is an attempt to restrict statements to one level. (“7. What we cannot speak about we must consign to silence.”) (I am not at all saying it is a level in Russell’s hierarchy.) The trouble is, statements of the form, “All there is, is ...”, “All we can speak about is ...”, always carry with them an implied rejoinder. For example, when someone says, “All there is, is sensory perception,” we must always reply, “Well, you’re forgetting one thing. There is also the statement, ‘All there is, is sensory perception.’” So in addition to all the things we cannot speak about, is your statement that we cannot speak about them.

Let us consider your famous dictum, “The meaning is the use.” This is another attempt at limiting what can be talked about. You are saying in effect that the correct reply to “What is the meaning of x ?” can be nothing more than a list of all the usages of x . (Presumably your obnoxious demanding of other people what they meant by some of the things they said, for example, “What a beautiful tree!”, was a way of attempting to force them to realize that there was no answer to your question, that they must simply start looking at all the usages of the word or phrase.)

It is worth pointing out in passing that when children learn a language, they follow your dictum! Children learn what words and phrases mean by applying them in various circumstances and being corrected. They do not learn the terms of grammar until they are much older and can already speak the language quite well — in other words, they do not learn the terms of grammar until they have virtually no use for them (unless they are planning to become grammarians).

Finally Nietzsche would have pointed to your reputation as a loner (you needed to retreat to a barren beach in Norway in order to find the solitude you needed — the whole of England didn’t contain enough emptiness to satisfy you!), your reputation as a man who often thought of suicide, and as a repressed homosexual (if you had been a family man, you wouldn’t be half as famous as you are). These were all the additional ingredients that were necessary, along with your tyranny and the obscurity of your teachings and posthumously-published writing, to create the genius myth you craved.

What Did You Accomplish?

According to the authors of the book I have been quoting from, your “reputation among twentieth-century philosophers is...unsurpassed. His characterization as a genius is unchallenged; he has joined the philosophical canon. A poll of professional philosophers in 1998 put him fifth in a list of those who had made the most important contributions so the subject, after Aristotle, Plato, Kant, and Nietzsche and ahead of Hume and Descartes.”¹ Personally, I don’t consider these poll results a reflection of your genius as much as they are a reflection of the dimness of the professional philosophy community.

For me, on the basis of several readings of the *Tractatus* and of *Philosophical Investigations*, I certainly think the *Tractatus* was an important contribution to the question to what degree logical languages can describe the world. Your statement (paragraph 4.01 of the *Tractatus*), “A proposition is a picture of reality” is deservedly famous and respected, as is (paragraph 7) “What we cannot speak about we must consign to silence.” Similarly for “The meaning is the use” from the *Investigations*, and your showing that things that come under a given generic heading, like

1. *ibid.*, p. 292

“game”, do not necessarily have one property in common. As for the rest, it was another demonstration of how a philosopher can become captivated by a core discipline. Other philosophers have had different core disciplines: Marx, economics; Nietzsche, psychology; Descartes, mathematics; Pascal, Christianity; Heidegger, poetry.

But the *Tractatus* was also a virtuoso performance in the use of logical language for literary purposes. Because the truth is that, despite the impression it gives that here, at last, the truth has descended from the austere realm of pure logic to explain the nature of the world to us, the main feature of the *Tractatus* is that it creates a world.

I try to imagine you, with or without this book, standing in a room with, say, a dozen other professors — philosophers from various schools of philosophy, physicists and other scientists, perhaps even one or two humanities professors — and presenting these ideas. Suppose the professors were allowed to ask questions during the presentation, and let us imagine that a tape and/or video recording was made of the proceedings. Is it possible that under these circumstances you would have been able to maintain the role of divine law giver which the book, read privately, enables you to do?

A new form of philosophical mystification says to the world, “This clears up the problems left by the old forms. If you do not agree to this, then you have not understood me.” It is worthwhile to compare your “We do not understand...” with a scientist’s. (Indeed, what does it mean to say, outside of science and perhaps the law courts, “We do not understand”?)

The truth table, which you invented, certainly has a permanent place in formal logic (and computer science).

As for your insistence that the business of philosophy is to clear up the language puzzles that lead others astray: it is true that when we have a problem with, say, the plumbing, we naturally call the plumber. But I have never known any intellectuals, or read of any, who, when they confronted a problem in their discipline, said to their colleagues, “Well, gentlemen, we’ll have to call the philosopher.”

Let me conclude by saying what someone should have said to you long ago: It is not the bewitchment of language that we have to worry about, but the bewitchment of *your use of language* — plus your charisma and mysticism. Contrary to your claim, you didn’t show the fly the way *out* of the fly bottle. You showed it the way *in*.

— John Franklin

Against Foucault

I agree with some of Foucault’s ideas that I have been able to understand. Nevertheless, I believe there is much that needs to be brought to the attention of his readers. I will be focusing on his 1963 book, *The Birth of the Clinic*¹, because it seems to me a prime example of the kind of thinking and writing that prevailed among French philosophers of the latter half of the 20th century.

“The Birth of the Clinic”

1. Vintage Books, N.Y., 1975.

The book describes what Foucault claims was a fundamental change in medical perception that took place at the beginning of the 19th century. What that change was is exceedingly difficult to determine from the usually impenetrable prose of the book itself¹ (nowhere in his preface does he indicate that he assumes readers have previously read other specified works). For example, in describing the medicine of the 18th century, he writes::

“Disease is perceived fundamentally in a space of projection without depth, of coincidence without development. There is only one plane and one moment. The form in which truth is originally shown is the surface in which relief is both manifested and abolished — the portrait.” — Foucault, Michel, *The Birth of the Clinic*, Vintage Books, N.Y., 1975, p. 6.

(Whenever I come upon an intellectual with no knowledge of mathematics or science using the word “space”, I reach for my gun.)

At present, I believe the change in medical perception has to do with what might be called “the institutionalization of medical knowledge” — the change in the practice of medicine from an activity conducted by doctors usually visiting patients in the patient’s home, to a vast, corporate enterprise represented by hospitals (clinics) and by an ever-growing body of knowledge resulting from the ubiquitous “clinical gaze” in which the patient provides merely an “instance” of a disease. Foucault seems to be making the same point about the practice of medicine that he made about the practice of penology in *Discipline and Punish*, in which he showed that, beginning in the 19th century, penology became a matter of a State-wide program aimed at modifying the thinking and behavior of the criminal via the all-seeing eye of the prison authority, and not primarily a matter of physical punishment, which penology had been in previous centuries.

At present, I think that what he means when he speaks of “the clinical gaze”, and “the speaking eye”, is something akin to data-taking in contrast to mere observation. Data-taking carries with it the implication, “If everything relevant isn’t recorded, and if it isn’t recorded in the proper way, it has no validity,” and this rigidity is apparently the change in medical procedure that Foucault is attempting to call to our attention.

But it will make our task of attempting to understand Foucault’s book considerably easier if we first step back and ask (1) about the kind of philosopher Foucault was, and (2) who his audience was and continues to be.

Foucault a Have-Not Philosopher

Foucault was one of a number of late 20th century French philosophers beginning with Sartre who seem to me to fall into the category I have defined elsewhere in this essay as “have-not” philosophers (see “Have-Not Philosophies” on page 390). They might also be called “anti-Object” philosophers, because the number 1 fact of their lives was that, as thinkers who were at home in literature and not at all at home in the modern world of science and technology and business and, in particular, capitalism, they knew that they were second-class citizens. So these thinkers took as their major task, to fight the modern world, which meant to confront and oppose the Object, and those who acquired power via the Object.

1. An invaluable explication of the text can be found in Guitting, Gary, *Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England, 1995. I did not know about this book while writing this section of the chapter.

Their audiences were others like themselves — the vast population of those who are alienated from the modern world and whose plea to philosophers is always, “Please tell us a story that will make the Object go away! — and do so in language we will not understand, so that we will know that what is being said is true!”

(Gary Gutting, in his outstanding explication of Foucault’s main ideas, remarks on “the dazzled reception [of *The Order of Things*] by an intellectual public far more impressed than its comprehension of Foucault’s fuliginous pronouncements could possibly warrant.”¹ (For me — and, I suspect, for anyone who is accustomed to asking, “Is this true?” — *The Order of Things* is the nearest thing we have to an incomprehensible book.)

One need only listen to the young women undergraduates in the humanities gushing over Foucault’s “analysis of power”² to understand how the primary purpose of the humanities in our time has become that of soothing the pain and assuaging the envy of those who know that what they care about has no importance outside of certain academic fiefdoms and the labyrinths of government bureaucracies dedicated to “social questions”.

Disclaimer: I Am Not Just Another Technically-Trained Person

Before I am dismissed as just another person with a technical background who simply doesn’t *get* what the anti-Object philosophers are doing, let me repeat what I said in the section “Reading Russell After Reading Heidegger” on page 368, namely, that I have spent far more time in my life reading and studying literature, history, and philosophy than I have in studying technical subjects. I have no use for engineers and other technical people whose reaction to poetry is along the lines of “But where are the *facts*?” On the other hand, I firmly believe that anyone who does not have an idea of what modern physics and mathematics are all about — who does not have an idea of their extraordinary accomplishments and the *beauty* of their most profound ideas, and, most important, who does not have a clear idea of the difference between the What and the How — cannot consider him- or herself an educated person, and, in particular, cannot be taken seriously as a philosopher.

Word-Based Thinkers

Note: If, as I assert elsewhere in this chapter, written philosophy is literature, then much of the criticism of word-based thinkers in the following sections is invalid. In particular, difficulty and obscurity must be viewed as mere literary devices. Indeed, difficulty and obscurity are for a philosopher what perspective is for a painter, namely, a means of creating the illusion of depth.

The Single Greatest Disadvantage of Not Understanding the Nature of the Technical

The single greatest disadvantage that thinkers with no scientific or technical education face is their ignorance of the importance of the difference between the What and the How. In mathematically-based disciplines, this difference is a fact of everyday life. Perhaps the best example for the educated layman is that of a function to be computed (the What), vs. the various computer programs (the Hows) that can compute it. The programs may be written in different programming languages, they may use different procedures for computing the function, they may use different

1. Gutting, Gary, *Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England, 1995, p. 175.

2. “I ask myself what else it was I was talking about in *Madness and Civilization* and *The Birth of the Clinic*, but power.” — quoted in Gutting, Guy, *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 21.

amounts of computer memory, they may run at different speeds. But they all compute the same function.

The anti-Object philosophers have little or no knowledge of the What vs. the How, and the reason is that their educations, regardless in what branch of the humanities, are all word-based. Let me quote from the chapter, “The Humanities”, in this book.

“I once knew a humanities professor who ... often insisted how... she and her fellow students at a prestigious Eastern liberal arts school had to ‘learn to *think*’. When I asked her what exactly that meant, she replied, ‘We had to write a paper every week!’ I asked her to categorize the subjects she was asked to write on. She waved away such a silly question. I asked her what classes of problems her subject attempted to solve. All irrelevant.”

Learning to write (in an approved style) can legitimately be called the core discipline of the humanities. But this is a word-based discipline, as opposed to a concept-based discipline. The liberal arts professors I have known all seemed to believe, one way or another, that truth is created by words, that something expertly expressed in the language of the academic sub-culture, and approved by figures in authority, is true. And the better it is expressed, in the opinions of those in authority, the truer it is.

One professor I knew apparently believed that even a properly written paper did not acquire the property of being true until it was published in a recognized journal. She had no concept of the standard definition of truth in the sciences, namely, an assertion that expresses a correspondence between a state of affairs *over there* (the What) and what the assertion expresses *here* (any of a variety of Hows can express the same What). She did not understand that an assertion can be true regardless whether the assertion is merely spoken, or is written in long-hand, or typed on a word-processor, or published in a journal.

The Writing of Word-Based Thinkers Difficulty and Length Are Best

In the word-based, academic environment of the humanities, the more words and the more difficult the words, the greater the degree of truth. The more difficult something is to understand, the greater its depth. The following exchange was remembered by philosopher John Searle:

Searle: Michel [Foucault], when you and I talk, you are just as clear as any other clear person I am speaking to. But why is your writing so unclear and difficult?

Foucault: John, if I wrote as clearly as you do, the French would not take me seriously! ¹

We need only read some of the reviews of Foucault’s books to see how easily the non-thinkers can be led astray by incomprehensible language. For example, Christopher Lasch called *The Birth of the Clinic* “Elegant, arrogant, razor-blade brilliant” (back cover of Vintage edition).

To the great statement with which Kant refuted the ontological proof of the existence of God — “Existence is not an attribute” — we add, “and difficulty is not substance.”

Every Nuance a Different Truth

1. Told to me by a student in Searle’s philosophy of language course at the University of California, Berkeley, January, 2014.

Another aspect of word-based disciplines is that every nuance of wording is a nuance of truth. For a reader to say, “I don’t understand this. Can’t it be made simpler?”, is to say, “I can’t understand this truth. Can’t you give me a simpler truth?” “Every nuance a different truth” accounts for the mind-numbing complexity of the prose of many professors in the humanities, especially philosophers.

The Misuse of Allusions

Certainly one of the things that make *The Birth of the Clinic* and *The Order of Things* so difficult to understand is Foucault’s excessive use of allusions. Hegel was guilty of a similar practice, and Kaufmann’s remarks are valuable here:

“The highly allusive style turns the reader into a detective rather than a critical philosopher: one looks for clues and feels happy every time one has solved some small mystery; one feels that along with whoever has figured things out one belongs on the author’s side as opposed to the many who have not got the point. The question whether the author is right drops from consciousness.

“Thus allusions replace arguments. Instead of remaining a preliminary that is almost taken for granted, understanding, because it has become so exceedingly difficult, takes the place of critical evaluation for which no energy seems to be left. It is so hard to get the point, and so few do, that the big problem is no longer whether the point stands up but rather whether one has got it. And the main difference is not between those who agree and those who do not, but between those who understand and belong and those who do not.”¹

Foucault No Heir of Nietzsche

Foucault is sometimes described as “the real heir of Nietzsche” — an utterly bizarre claim, and indicative of the fundamental dimness of his readers (and of some philosophers who teach his work to wide-eyed, uncomprehending undergraduates), since anyone who knows and appreciates Nietzsche’s extraordinary literary genius knows that he could have summed up the essence of Foucault’s book in two pages or less (apart from the quotations from historical documents).

“... my ambition is to say in ten sentences what everyone else says in a book — what everyone else *does not* say in a book.” — *Twilight of the Idols*, sect. 51

He would have regarded Foucault’s book — the length, the ponderous language — as ripe material for his scorn, and he would certainly have regarded with wry amusement the phenomenon of the academic superstar of the late 20th century (Foucault and Derrida were two prime examples): so many lectures to give, so many airline flights, so many books to complete, so many interviews, so many adoring students, so much explaining to be done — the sacrifices that genius must make in modern times!

Needed: a Course in Writing Obscurely

1. Kaufmann, Walter, *Hegel: Reinterpretation, Texts, and Commentary*, Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, N.Y., 1965, pp. 137-138.

If the writing of the word-based thinkers is fundamentally *literature*, then we can inquire into the rules that govern their art. I suspect that this has not been done, at least not by these thinkers, because their belief is that they are in the business of conveying truth, and that only experience, and genius, can provide the skills needed.

Let me begin by mentioning a famous hoax that was perpetrated by Alan Sokal in 1996, namely, his paper, “Transgressing the Boundaries: The Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity”, which the editors of the journal *Social Text* eagerly published, only to learn later that Sokal had deliberately written the paper in suitably meaningless post-modernist jargon, and that it was full of -self-contradictions and nonsense. The question we must ask is, Why did the editors respond so enthusiastically to the paper? And our answer is, Because it excelled as a literary work of art of the kind that they deemed important.

Consider some of the techniques that the word-based thinkers use in their writing. I will take as a sample passage the following from Foucault’s book:

One can, therefore, as an initial approximation, define this clinical gaze as a perceptual act sustained by a logic of operations; it is analytic because it restores the genesis of composition; but it is pure of all intervention insofar as this genesis is only the syntax of the language spoken by things themselves in an original silence. The gaze of observation and the things it perceives communicate through the same Logos, which, in the latter, is a genesis of totalities and, in the former, a logic of operations. — *The Birth of the Clinic*, p. 109.

One of the first things we notice is the use of grownup words, that is, words from the sciences, including computer science and mathematics: “initial approximation”, “logic of operations”, “analytic”. Elsewhere in his book, Foucault uses again and again the words, “structure” (probably the favorite among scientifically-ignorant writers), “space” (probably the second favorite), “axis” (“axis of truth”), “density”, and others. This appropriation of terms from the sciences is common throughout the humanities today. One need only consider all the “theories” currently being investigated: critical theory, cultural theory, post-modern theory, gender theory, feminist theory, queer theory, to name just a few — these by thinkers who have only the vaguest idea of what a theory is in the sciences, much less mathematics. .

No one who can write clearly should underestimate the difficulty of writing paragraphs like the one quoted above. A precise explication of the techniques used is not at all easy, but here is a partial list.

- Always include a few abstruse terms, e.g., “mathesis”, “episteme”, “positivity”, but never give definitions of them. You will thereby accomplish two things: first, prevent the terms from becoming mere Objects, like those in the sciences and mathematics, and second, make the reader believe that he or she is reading an important, a great, work, and that he or she may not be qualified to understand its profundity.

- Give the illusion that differences exist where they do not. The general form here is as follows: “We have established that $x = x$. However, we should not assume that this implies that $x = x$, for there are several fundamentally important differences between, on the one hand x , and, on the other, x .”

- Never say anything important (or unimportant!) simply and clearly, but surround it with occasional clear language, so that the reader will feel that the obscurity is necessary. For example:

“It is here that we find that new epistemological domain that the Classical age called ‘general grammar’. It would be nonsense to see this purely and simply as the application of a logic to the theory of language. But it would be equally nonsensical to attempt to interpret it as a sort of prefiguration of a linguistics. *General grammar is the study of verbal order in its relation to the simultaneity that it is its task to represent.*” — Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things*, Vintage Books, 1970, p. 83.

- Always remember that, because you are a superior kind of thinker (because you are an academic in the humanities), you have perfect freedom to use metaphorically any term from any other discipline, including mathematics and the sciences — to *appropriate* whatever terms you wish and exploit them in any way you want for your own purposes. (See above regarding words like “space”, “structure”.)

Thus Foucault subtitled *The Order of Things*, “An Archaeology of the Human Sciences”. The use of the word “archaeology” seems strange to us, because there is only one subject called “archeology”. Therefore, we assume, something deep and important must be contained in this book. A responsible author would, on the other hand, at least constrain his use of the metaphor and write instead, “An Archeological Study of the Human Sciences”. But that would be much less impressive to the naive humanities reader. More extreme is a sentence like, “Before the end of the eighteenth century, *man* did not exist — any more than the potency of life, the fecundity of labour, or the historical density of language.” — *ibid.*, p. 308. The author’s intent is to shock us, and thus force us to figure out how he could say such a thing. But what he wants to say can be conveyed directly and simply. Hours of poring over his text are not necessary.

- Above all, have as little first-hand knowledge of the subject as possible. No one with any kind of scientific, much less medical, training, still less actual clinical experience, could have possibly written a book like *The Birth of the Clinic*. But if you know nothing about how a hospital or a laboratory works — why the participants do what they do — then you can let your liberal arts imagination (artistic ability) run wild. You can build a case that whatever strikes your artistic mind as fundamental, *is* fundamental. You can be like the child for whom the metal buttons on the policeman’s uniform and his badge and his car are far more important than the dull procedures (about which he knows nothing) that lead to the capture of criminals.

If there is a single fallacy that underlies virtually all writing in the humanities that is in any way “theoretical”, and certainly that includes books like *The Order of Things*, that fallacy is arguing or implying, “If x can be seen as y , then x is y .” Foucault’s books are full of instances of this. But *metaphor is not knowledge*.

It is appropriate at this point to mention word-based thinkers’ writing about mathematics.

“I read Hegel’s *Greater Logic*, and thought, as I still do, that all he says about mathematics is muddle-headed nonsense.”¹

“Bergson does not know what number is, and has himself no clear idea of it.”²

Russell, as one of the great logicians of the 20th century, was certainly qualified to make such judgements.

But even a first-year calculus student can see the blundering misunderstandings in Karl Marx's writings on mathematics.¹

I strongly suspect that word-based thinkers regard such criticisms as somehow "unfair". What they mean is that these writings are not to be taken at face value, but instead as part of the literary world the philosophers are setting forth, just as Hegel's and Heidegger's obscurity is in itself a literary device.

A Problem Faced By Those for Whom Truth = Art

If, as I have argued above, in the humanities truth = art, then the humanities, including philosophy, must address the question of criteria for making judgements. Is it at all meaningful to say that a work is poorly written? If so, then that implies an underlying concept that is being written *about*, and that there are better and worse ways of writing about it. But then the author cannot argue that what some readers regard as poorly written, is in fact written exactly as it should be, because that is the only way he or she can present the truth being expressed. (Which raises the question, *What does it mean to be brilliant in the humanities?*)

For those who want to argue that, if I insist that most books and papers in the humanities are literary art, then these works should be judged the same way that literary works are judged, my reply is, But literary works do not make *claims*. That is a fundamental difference.

It seems to me that every Foucault expert should be able to state which (if any) of the following assertions are legitimate, and why:

"Foucault is right/wrong when he says *x* about *y*."

"Foucault agrees/disagrees with *z* regarding *w*."

"The meaning of the passage *u* in *The Order of Things* is ..."

The expert's responses then give us a basis for criticizing Foucault.

The Goals of Anti-Object Thinkers

Anti-Object thinkers are word-based thinkers. They have two primary goals: to de-Object-ify the Object and to sniff out manifestations of power wherever they can be found.

The Attempt to De-Objectify the Subject

No Definitions

The section "De-Object-ifying Objects" in the chapter "The Object", contains a list of the techniques that anti-Object philosophers use in attempting to achieve their goal. One of these is the avoidance of definitions of technical terms, because definitions make Objects out of the terms defined, as in mathematics and the sciences. Foucault uses this technique throughout his book. To

1. Russell, Bertrand, "My Mental Development", in *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp, Library of Living Philosophers, Tudor Publishing Co., N.Y., 1951

2. *ibid.*, *A History of Western Philosophy*, Simon and Schuster, N.Y., 1945, p. 801.

1. *The Mathematical Manuscripts of Karl Marx*, tr. C. Aronson, M. Meo, New Park Publications, London, 1983.

take the most egregious example, the term “gaze”, which is of central importance, is never defined. But neither are the terms “clinic” (the precise meaning of the term at the time the book covers is important), “free field”, “movement” (a term having a special sense in the book), “pathological anatomy”, “sign”, “speaking eye”, “structure”, and “visible invisible”.

No Indexes

Another de-Objectifying technique is the avoidance of indexes, since indexes make Objects out of the terms they contain. Foucault’s book contains a name index but no subject index. In my opinion, a book with the scholarly pretensions of this one that lacks a subject index cannot be deserving of respect. (His *The Order of Things*, which can rightly be called a disgrace in its unforgivable obscurity, has no index at all.) Foucault apparently believes that his work is so deep, so complex, that it must be read cover to cover several times or not at all. Which is nonsense.

Obsession with Power

The anti-Object philosophers, fully aware they were second-class citizens in the modern intellectual world, and thus had little or no power outside of what they could manufacture for themselves in the academy, were always attempting to sniff out power in the world around them. (“Who has what we do not have, so that we can heap scorn and contempt upon them?”) The primary power was capitalism, but it was also the world of science (domain of the Object) and, at least in Foucault’s case, the world of the government-controlled institution. So there seems little doubt, even if one has not understood most of Foucault’s obscure book, that he was determined to show the taking over of medicine by the institution of the clinic.

These philosophers perfected a technique for dealing with power, namely, analysis of it. In the simplest possible terms: formerly power was up and they were down; now, via their analysis, they were up and power was down. This can be seen clearly in Heidegger, in his analysis of science using a language that says, “Scientists need us to explain the nature of their enterprise.” So with Foucault and the nature of penology and of medical practice. These formidable sources of power are brought down via an extensive, ponderous, often incomprehensible analysis. The truth about them is revealed and their power is taken away.

How “The Birth of the Clinic” Should Have Been Written

I have no respect for those who attempt to demolish a philosophy or an approach to philosophy without offering something to replace it. So the question that must be asked at the conclusion of this section is, “How should *The Birth of the Clinic* have been written?”

First, of course, the underlying idea must be clear and must be expressed in a couple of pages. I gladly accept the challenge of doing this if I can talk to an expert on Foucault. There is no use proceeding unless the reader (and the author!) have a clear idea of what the fuss is all about.

It is clear from Foucault’s book that the idea underlying his book is rooted in the difference between medical procedure in Europe, particularly in the 17th and 18th centuries, prior to the publication of Broussai’s *Examen de la doctrine médicale* in 1816, and medical procedure in Europe thereafter. So an obvious way to organize the book is under various medical topics, in each case using historical documents, including letters and records of first-person testimony, describing the situation in these topics *before and after 1816*. These topics certainly include

experience of the patient at the hands of a doctor in the patient's home and in the hospital (clinic);
point of view from which the doctor proceeded with a patient;
nature of the hospital (clinic);
nature of medical knowledge;
how medical knowledge was acquired;
nature of medical observation of disease ("the gaze");
government laws, edicts, rules, governing the practice of medicine;
treatment of specific diseases.

The goal as much as possible should be to let the historical documents speak for themselves, while at the same time allowing the author to point out and explain important facets of the documents. But the goal should be to reduce to a minimum the turgid scholarly poetry that fills the present book. And, of course, such a revised version of Foucault's book must contain a complete index of names and subjects.

I have not the slightest doubt that by following these suggestions, I — and I am sure other intellectuals — could write a much better book than Foucault's. I was going to add, "and one that would, in the opinion of experts, not distort his underlying idea", but this contradicts what I said above under "Every Nuance a Different Truth" on page 381. Because in the minds of the philosophers of Foucault's school, and of most of his readers, making such a change in *wording* would inescapably mean making such a change in the underlying idea — in other words, would result in something far different from what Foucault was trying to say in his book (change of words = change of meaning = change of truth).

Conversations With A Foucault Scholar

In 2010 I met a man who had been working on a PhD thesis on Foucault for more than 20 years, the subject of his thesis being Foucault's *The Order of Things*. He worked part-time as a clerk in a Berkeley book store and was delighted to talk about this book, and about other works of Foucault, and even to allow me to ask questions about the book. He sometimes held forth at length, with passionate incomprehensibility, on one aspect or another of Foucault's thought.

At a book club dinner at which he tried to explain part of his thesis, I am sure that no one understood what he was talking about, but they liked his enthusiasm, and his anecdote about having met Foucault on a sidewalk in Berkeley in '83, and about how they had coffee together, and about Foucault's acceptance of one of his ideas. The diners, none of whom were philosophers, or had majored in philosophy, also like the big words and phrases, e.g., the frequent use of the word "episteme".

You certainly couldn't dislike this man, even though it was absolutely impossible to pin him down on anything (as it had been impossible to pin Foucault down in interviews, and as it is in many of his books). In my never-ending attempts to understand *The Order of Things*, I finally decided that the first order of business was for us to establish a point of departure that we could agree upon, so I asked him what kinds of questions and comments he considered legitimate in response to a reading of the book, or, for that matter, of his thesis. This seemed (and seems) a good place to begin. I told him, by way of example, that, in the case of poetry, a response that most poets and poetry lovers would consider illegitimate would be "this poem is worthless because it doesn't contain any facts" (sometimes dubbed, "the engineer's response"). In the

words of Gilbert Ryle (whom I consider the most underrated philosopher of the 20th century), such a response indicates a confusion about *the line of business* that the poet is in.

But the scholar laughed, and dodged and weaved, and made clear that even my simple question had no meaning when dealing with Foucault. He said, in so many words, that to ask such a question betrays a fundamental lack of understanding of what Foucault is *doing*. When I attempted to spell out more clearly, in emails, my questions about what questions were legitimate to ask in connection with Foucault, he said that his email system wasn't working.

I reached a point where I began to think that perhaps the aim of Foucault's thought was to produce a physical sensation in the body along with subtle changes in the movements of one's body — changes that only another Foucault initiate could recognize. Perhaps when one understood Foucault's thought, one understood that it was necessary always to hold one's head just a few degrees off center, and to rub thumb against forefinger at precise intervals every few minutes. And why shouldn't a philosopher have such a goal? But then the question arose, "What does it mean to criticize, to comment on, such a philosophy?"

During our discussions, I couldn't help thinking of the *nobility* of science and mathematics, arch-enemies of the have-not philosophers — the nobility of questions inspired by these disciplines, e.g., "What do you mean when you say...?" and "Why should I believe that what you say is true, and if truth is not relevant here, then what exactly are you trying to accomplish?" These are not pedantic trivialities, and they are not tools that were invented to oppress the masses. But let me hasten to add that I do *not* expect philosophy or history of philosophy or history of culture to be merely a collection of facts. A man who admires Nietzsche should not be accused of that. But I do expect any piece of writing on these subjects to be no more difficult than it needs to be. (If you are going to be a word-based philosopher, you damn well better have Nietzsche's literary skill.)

I wish I could conclude with a report of some sort of a resolution of my difficulties, but I can't. One Sunday, as I came in for our 20 minutes or so of conversation, he said, "I can't talk to you any more," and turned away. I had had enough. I never returned to the store. Once every few months I would see him when he came into The Musical Offering, the restaurant/CD store next door. We would have a brief, but always cordial conversation. I would always begin by asking, "How's the thesis?" He: "Almost done!... I'm close as hell...", after which he would tell me about how brilliant his three thesis advisors were, and how one of them (Hubert Dreyfus, the noted Heidegger scholar who was not a specialist in Foucault) had professed interest in one of his ideas, and ...

Philosophy Students

Living in a university town, I take advantage of every opportunity to talk to philosophy students, mainly seniors and graduate students, and, if possible, get them to read this and other chapters in this book.

I must confess that I am appalled at how little these students know about *how to think*; about how to read and evaluate a piece of writing that has anything to do with the subject of philosophy. No philosophy student I have ever met has asked, in response to something I have said or written, "On what grounds do you say this?" None has ever attempted to relate it to what other thinkers have said. None has given any sign of having any grasp of the history of philosophy since, say, 1600. None has had any substantial background in mathematics. None has had a clue about the artistic aspects of philosophy that I have discussed at length in this book.

The wretched superficiality of a modern liberal arts education has been all too evident. If I go to a senior or graduate student in mathematics, at least I can be confident that he or she will be able to evaluate a mathematical argument (assuming he or she understands it). If I go to a senior or graduate student in philosophy, I can be confident only of talking to someone who, at best, is trying, with nervous uncertainty, to master — and believe — the Party Line of this or that philosophical speciality he or she hopes to earn a PhD in.

Philosophers in the Future

No future philosopher will be worth studying who does not have a demonstrated knowledge and understanding and appreciation of mathematics and the hard sciences on the one hand, *and* the humanities on the other. The days are gone when a thinker can be taken seriously who walls himself up on one side and makes a career out of demonstrating how inadequate the other side is at dealing with the questions posed by his own side. (“Before I built a wall I’d ask to know/What I was walling in or walling out...” — Robert Frost.) Anyone who doubts this should read Schroedinger’s little book, *Mind and Matter*, and then ask himself in whose hands he would want the future of philosophy to lie, if the choice came to that: thinkers like Schroedinger (a physicist with an obvious appreciation and respect for non-scientific matters), or any 20th century existentialist. My vote is with the former because such philosophers not only know what business they are in, but know also when it is time to change businesses, and are capable of doing so.

“When a person lays it down that he can’t understand mathematics, that is to say, can’t understand the *evident*, that blocks the road, don’t you see?” — C.S. Peirce in a letter to William James, quoted in Passmore, John, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, Penguin Books, Baltimore, Md., p. 136.

I must emphasize that I am not proposing that philosophy become mathematical or scientific. I am proposing — I am declaring — that any future philosopher deserving of our respect should give abundant evidence that he is *wide awake*.

Necessary Skills for the Philosopher of the Future

Three skills every philosopher of the future must have:

(1) the skill of being able to distinguish between art and knowledge, art and theory (wherever interpretation is king, we know that the business-at-hand is art, regardless of the names given to it);

(2) the skill of being able to recognize the Object wherever it appears, however it might be disguised; and

(3) the skill of being able to recognize loser philosophies, have-not philosophies, philosophies whose purpose is to console losers into believing they really are winners, or could be winners, or would have been winners except for.... (Just about any theory in the humanities during the second half of the 20th century was a have-not philosophy).

Have-Not Philosophies

Just as every thinking person needs to be able to recognize cults (see the section, “Additional Thoughts” in the chapter, “Psychology”), so every thinking person — and especially every student — needs to be able to recognize loser philosophies (or, to be kinder, have-not philosophies). It is a disgrace that the ability to recognize such philosophies is not considered among the basic skills to be imparted in every undergraduate education in the humanities, though the reason is all too obvious: the multicultural Party line does not permit it.

The place to begin is with a question that, so far as I know, is never put to humanities students, namely: why is it that humanities professors and students devote such a large part of their energies to the plight of the poor, the oppressed, the disadvantaged, while professors and students in mathematics and the hard sciences do not — or, certainly devote much less of their energies to these matters? The answer that humanities professors and students like to give is that their field of study is concerned with “the human condition” (after all, that is what literature and philosophy and history are about, isn’t it?) Scientists and mathematicians, on the other hand, are concerned with the non-human, the abstract: numbers, forces of nature. The answer is a classic case of self-flattery that avoids the truth. The truth is that this community knows to the very depths of its being that in today’s world, the humanities are have-nots, *relative to the sciences and engineering*. The big money, the big prestige, the major changes in the world, are brought about by people who know science and technology, not by people who know literature and history. In a very important sense, the humanities no longer really matter. And so what could be more natural than for those who study and work in these fields than to see themselves in all the poor, oppressed, cast-out members of humanity? Which explains why all the solutions put forth by the deep thinkers in the humanities always center on the evils of some Other in the world — imperialism, capitalism, globalization, American business, the wealthy. Never do we hear solutions proposed that imply that part of the fault may lie in the behavior of the have-nots themselves — behavior such as uncontrolled population growth. In the last analysis, the humanities experts are in the business of consoling, soothing, comforting, not in the business of fixing the problem.

So now let us try to list some of the characteristics of have-not philosophies:

- A belief that all important distinctions — in ability, in political and economic power, in accomplishment — are the result of unfair advantage;. To quote a Communist I know, “each of us has the talents of Picasso, Einstein, Beethoven (combined!) but capitalism prevents us from realizing them”. The fact that some groups have unfair advantage over others is the only reason that there are differences in the economic and social hierarchies — the only reason there *are* social and economic hierarchies. Dead White Males have little inherent worth: their prestige is solely a result of indoctrination by a power elite.

“It is now becoming ever more common within the American educational system for increasing numbers of young blacks to learn that what we call ‘Western civilization’ was invented by black Egyptians and feloniously appropriated by the Greeks, or that black Africa was a peaceful, technologically advanced continent before the white Europeans appropriated it...

“Recently, a journalist telephoned five leading professors of Egyptology, asking them what they thought about the claim of a black Egyptian provenance for Western civilization. They all said it was nonsense. At the same time, they all withheld permission for their names to be attached to this risky, ‘politically incorrect’ position.” — Kristol, Irving, “The Tragedy of ‘Multiculturalism’”, in *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, Elephant Paperbacks, Chicago, Ill., 1995, p. 53.

- The unquestioned belief that the underdog is inherently good. The ingenuity of have-not philosophers in finding evidence of the oppressor is often nothing short of astounding. Consider the following passage regarding deconstruction:

One typical form of deconstructive reading is the critique of binary oppositions, or the criticism of dichotomous thought. A central deconstructive argument holds that, in all the classic dualities of Western thought, one term is privileged or “central” over the other. The privileged, central term is the one most associated with the phallus and the logos. Examples include:

- * speech over writing
- * presence over absence
- * identity over difference
- * fullness over emptiness
- * meaning over meaninglessness
- * mastery over submission
- * life over death

Derrida argues in *Of Grammatology* (translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and published in English in 1976) that, in each such case, the first term is classically conceived as original, authentic, and superior, while the second is thought of as secondary, derivative, or even “parasitic.” These binary oppositions, or “violent hierarchies”, and others of their form, he argues, must be deconstructed.

This deconstruction is effected in stages. First, Derrida suggests, the opposition must be inverted, and the second, traditionally subordinate term must be privileged. He argues that these oppositions cannot be simply transcended; given the thousands of years of philosophical history behind them, it would be disingenuous to attempt to move directly to a domain of thought beyond these distinctions. So deconstruction attempts to compensate for these historical power imbalances, undertaking the difficult project of thinking through the philosophical implications of reversing them.

Only after this task is undertaken (if not completed, which may be impossible), Derrida argues, can philosophy begin to conceive a conceptual terrain outside these oppositions...
Wikipedia, July 28, 2006, “Deconstruction”

- The belief that important, prestigious things are really much simpler than they seem; anyone could accomplish them if they hadn’t been taught that these things are only for the few.

“Chairman Mao coined the slogan, ‘Science is simply acting daringly.’ He purged trained scientists in the 1950s and encouraged Party zealots to embark on crazy experiments, inspired by the equally zany theories of Stalin’s pseudoscientist T. D. Lysenko. ‘There is nothing special,’ Mao said, ‘about making nuclear reactors, cyclotrons or rockets...You need to have spirit to feel superior to everyone, as if there was no one beside you.’ All the sense of envious inferiority that Mao and his fellow Party provincials felt toward people of higher education is contained in these words.” Buruma, Ian and Margalit, Avishai, “Occidentalism”, *The New York Review of Books*, Jan. 17, 2002, p. 5.

Invariably, in have-not philosophies, a problem is *either* the fault of some external power that must be overthrown, *or else* the power to solve the problem lies entirely within us — nothing in between, nothing requiring our engagement with the world on the world's terms, nothing requiring, at times, a compromise with the world, nothing allowing uncertainty about the cause of our problems. What a consolation for those on the bottom is the idea that “it's all in your power”! You thought you were powerless but now, with a single thought, you can see that you have all the power you need! The martial arts training centers that are found in the lower class commercial districts of virtually every city cater to this same delusion. All you need to know is how to defend yourself using your body alone! See how powerful you really are! The problem with the delusion was made comically clear in the Mel Brooks film, *History of the World — Part 1*, in which a swordsman of dazzling dexterity attempts to frighten off a man who is approaching him. The man calmly takes out a gun and shoots him dead.

- Indifference, if not open hostility, to the idea that there are ways of thinking that are not centered in this or that social group — that there are objective criteria for truth regarding certain matters. Thus the hard sciences and mathematics are suspect, because their truths are no respecters of social class, in particular, of the class of the exploited. “Post-modernists have ignorantly written off science as just another text.”¹ The logic of these disciplines makes it entirely possible that, on a given issue, those in power are right, and those without power are wrong. Skepticism is suspect because the withholding of judgment means the at least temporary withholding of belief that the poor are always right.

Instead, there is a preference for “new kinds of truths” that somehow always wind up being favorable to the poor, the exploited, the disenfranchised. Poetry is substituted for reason, while at the same time the poetry makes the same demands for agreement as reason does (cf. Marx, the existentialists, the deconstructionists, post-modernists). The job of the thinker is to champion the underdog, and any theory that does that is true.

- A social goal of equality, of a general leveling, rooted in the conviction that we are all equally talented, and that our talents will blossom once we get rid of the oppressor. There are contexts where equality is desirable: for example, we want everyone to be treated equally before the law; we want there to be equality of opportunity. But apart from such contexts, whenever you hear equality praised as a laudable goal, beware! loser philosophy at work!

The thoroughly reprehensible habit of the liberal arts community taking its experience of the world as being somehow representative of *mankind's* experience of the world, has a pre-eminent example in Sartre's famous pronouncement, “Man is a useless passion” (Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness*, Washington Square Press, Inc., N.Y., 1966, p. 754). I am quite confident that very few among the droves of undergraduates who have been presented with this utterance as a statement of fact about the human condition (certainly very few among the ambitious students who wanted an A in the course) have dared to question its universality. But that is precisely what must be done. Does the utterance apply to the native inhabitants of the rain forest in South America? Does it apply to the prosperous American businessman? Most importantly, does it apply to engineers and scientists and mathematicians? The statement was made at a time when physicists

1. Lehrer, Jonah, *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*, Houghton Mifflin Company, N.Y., 2008, p. 193.

were opening the heavens (the early 1940s) and exploring the interior of the atom, and when major discoveries were being made in the other sciences, and in mathematics, and engineering, not to mention astronomy, as well. Can anyone seriously believe that those who were making these discoveries, and implementing them, considered man a useless passion? It is not *man* that is a useless passion, it is the liberal arts intellectual.

Exercises for Young Philosophers

Exercise 1. Take any contemporary philosophical idea, no matter how original, and attempt to express it using nothing but quotes from the works of previous philosophers, your success to be measured by, say, responses to a questionnaire which each reader fills out after reading the quotes.

“‘The basis of my film,’ writes Argentine-born director Edgardo Cozarinsky, ‘is an idea of Walter Benjamin’s to write a book consisting entirely of quotations. I wanted to let quotations talk to each other, so that by the process of confrontation alone they would say more...’” — Geritz, Kathy, summary of film, *One Man’s War (La Guerre d’un Seul Homme)*, in *Calendar*, University Art Museum, Pacific Film Archive, University of California at Berkeley, 2625 Durant Ave., Berkeley, Calif. 94720, Sept. 1989, p. 5.

“The best way to find out how much originality a man has is to see what he can do with another man’s idea. I believe it is something of this kind that explains why the great masters — the most original men, that is — have always come out of long lineages of other great artists, on whose shoulders and triumphs they stand.” — Ivins, Jr., William M., “Some Disconnected Notes about Drawing”, *Harper’s Magazine*, December, 1949, pp. 84-85, quoted in Grout, Donald Jay, *A History of Western Music*, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., N. Y., 1973, p. 445.

Exercise 2. For a few days or so, attempt to see everything as *mere appearance*. As much as you can, concentrate on the sensual aspects of things — the smoothness and weight of a coffee cup, the experience of uttering words, of walking on a sidewalk, of smelling car exhaust, of eating — while at the same time repeating to yourself, *This is all there is!* Discuss, with others performing the same exercise (a) what makes it difficult to carry this out over a period of many hours; (b) the characteristics of a being which is *capable* of performing such an exercise; (c) why such an exercise is probably not necessary (in addition to being impossible) for a creature like a goldfish, that nevertheless (as far as we know) really does live in a world in which mere appearance is all there is.

Exercise 3. Suppose it were announced one day that at last the (or at least a) *correct* (True) philosophy book had just been published. If you believe such a book could be written, explain how you would identify it in a pile of recently published philosophy books. If you do not believe such a book could be written, explain why.

Exercise 4. Suppose a computer of the power of, say, HAL in Kubrick’s film *2001* were developed. Would part of its software properly be called “its philosophy”, e.g., would its programmers at some point have to explicitly provide it with “a way of experiencing the world”?

Exercise 5. If a philosophy is a way of experiencing the world, why isn’t nitrous oxide, or any drug, or any pervasive smell, a philosophy? The answer “Because philosophy must be based on reason” is not acceptable in light of all the philosophies which are not based on reason.

If we mention smell in connection with a philosophy, the assumption is always that we are using the word in a pejorative sense. And yet it may be that — once we have a machine such as that described in the chapter “Psychology”, that enables us to compare feelings such as we experience on viewing a work of art or reading a book — it may be that something like *smell* is what we sense in a work of philosophy, and that what drives philosophical controversies is not the *substance* of this or that philosophy, but the differing smells. Certainly many of the arguments between different philosophical schools — or different sub-divisions of a given school — often seem as though they were attempts, using the clumsy machinery of language, to argue about differences as subtle as those between similar smells.

Suppose that for each philosopher there were a set of pills, one for each major book the philosopher had written. The person taking the pill would see the world as the philosopher had when he wrote the book. How would the existence of such pills change the study of philosophy? What would it mean to investigate the truth of a philosophy if such pills existed?

Exercise 6. We know what the purpose of a theory is in the sciences (to make predictions about a certain class of natural phenomena), and in mathematics (to enable one to solve a certain class of mathematical problems). What is the purpose of a theory in philosophy?

Exercise 7. Suppose the writings of all major Western and Eastern philosophers were stored in a computer memory, with sufficient indexing so that one could ask for everything that one or more given philosophers had said on any given philosophical subject.

Assume that every student of philosophy had such a computer system and were permitted to use it in exams. Would this — *should* this — shorten the length of time required to earn a degree (undergraduate or advanced) in philosophy? Give reasons for your reply. (The purpose of this exercise is to probe the question, “How much does a philosophy education, or, indeed the education in any humanities subject, consist of learning who said what, when, about what?”)

Exercise 8. Suppose a philosopher were presented with a list of every philosophical “ism”, each with its various branches, e.g., idealism, absolute idealism, personalistic idealism, subjective idealism, ..., empiricism, ..., materialism, ..., vitalism, ..., Platonism, etc., and then he or she were asked to indicate the percentage of, say, a \$10 million grant that he or she would apply to fund research in each item on the list. If the philosopher then wrote a book setting forth his or her own philosophical views, what would that book contain that was not contained in the percentages he or she assigned?

Exercise 9. Suppose you were to write a mathematics text in a very informal style, with frequent use of phrases like “The inside scoop on this monster of a theorem is...”, “This next concept may seem tough, but just stay cool...”, etc., along with drawings that included humorous cartoon characters. Now most mathematicians would turn up their noses at such a book, and if pressed as to why, would probably say that such a treatment demeans the subject. But if the definitions, theorems, and proofs were all correct, they could not say that the *content* of the book was in error.

Suppose, now, you had studied Heidegger’s philosophy under Heidegger, gotten A’s on all your exams, and in his opinion understood it better than anyone else. Suppose you then wrote an exposition of it which Heidegger himself considered to be accurate, and then, just before publication, unknown to him, you replaced phrases like, “Heidegger’s concept, Being-alongside-of, is

exemplified by ...”, with phrases like, “Heidegger’s mind-blaster, head-bender, thought-wrencher, Being-alongside-of, is exemplified by...”. On what grounds would Heidegger have probably criticized this latter exposition?

If Wittgenstein’s ideas were presented in the form of, say, a Broadway musical, to what degree, if any, would that change his ideas, and why? What would Wittgenstein himself probably have said in response to such a presentation?

Comments: In technical subjects — the hard sciences, mathematics, formal logic, engineering — it is not names that are important, nor the syntax in which statements are expressed; only the relationships expressed are important. Thus, one way of testing how technical — how logical, how scientific, how Object-based — a subject really is, is to ask its professors how they would feel if you changed all the technical names in the subject. I am sure that there are Kant scholars who would feel that Kant’s ideas would somehow be fundamentally changed if his technical terms, e.g., “the synthetic *a priori*”, were changed, leaving everything else the same.

Exercise 10. One way of answering the question, “What did Kant say?”, is to give the person asking it a copy of Kant’s works. Another way is to write a summary whose length is considerably less than the length of the works themselves — say, less than one-quarter the length — this summary having been developed by having students who had not read Kant use it to answer exam questions on Kant’s philosophy, and then improving the summary based on their performance on the exams. Suppose that students who had not read Kant, but had read only the final version of the summary, averaged grades of, say, 85 on exams which were equivalent to those on which the summary had been developed. What reply would you make to a Kant scholar who said that the only way to learn Kant’s philosophy is by reading it, preferably in the original? What, exactly, of importance does the summary *not* contain?

Exercise 11. “You will know you have found the answer when the question no longer bothers you.” Discuss possible meanings of this assertion in various disciplines.

Comments: Certainly the assertion is true in mathematics, in the sense that, once a problem has been solved, there is no longer any interest in the question whether the problem can be solved, although there may be interest in finding other, perhaps shorter, solutions. Likewise in science. In psychology, philosophy, and religion, the assertion frequently means, “The answer to the question is to outgrow your need to find an answer to it,” which may carry either the implication that the question is not important or that there is no way of knowing what an answer would “look like”, hence there is no reason in trying to find one.

Exercise 12. Discuss what it would be like to live in a world, or at least a country, in which a philosophy were considered to be the definitive, the final, the correct one. (Exclude totalitarian Communist countries from consideration: pick any other philosophy you like as being the correct one, or simply discuss the question in the abstract.) As part of your discussion, try to come up with a list of philosophers of the present and the past who you believe would say, if asked, that theirs was “only one philosophy among many others that might be equally valid”.

Exercise 13. Do whatever is necessary to become confident that you understand why “virtue” was so important to philosophers of previous ages, e.g., those of ancient Athens. Have you ever met anyone in our time who gave a damn about virtue? Have you ever met anyone who seemed to know what the term meant in those previous ages? Did it mean something roughly equivalent

to, say, what being a good Christian meant in medieval times? Or to being spiritual in our time (New Age philosophy)? Do not give some typical rubbishy school answer like, “It is important to be good, and so the ancient Greeks considered virtue important ...”

Exercise 14. Contemplate the fact that there are, and always have been, people in the world who were born into wealth, who are physically beautiful, who live long lives free of any serious illnesses or accidents, who, in essence, have anything they want without having to lift a finger. Furthermore contemplate the fact that at least some of these people are selfish, inconsiderate, sometimes outrageously cruel, and yet suffer no consequences. Imagine yourself a philosopher writing on the meaning of life for an audience that includes people with none of the advantages just described. What will you say, assuming that you do not wish to invoke any religious dogma, e.g., about next lives?

Exercise 15. Without looking up the existing literature on the subject, discuss the concept of the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Consider, e.g., units of happiness, and any particular happiness distribution over the population. Define a function from any given distribution of happiness, and any number of new happiness units, to a new distribution of happiness, assuming that none of the existing units can be reassigned, and with the goal that repeated applications of the function do in fact tend toward the greatest happiness for the greatest number. (Thus, e.g., in general, it does not seem that all the new units would ever be given to one person.)

Exercise 16. Consider the question, “What is the nature of... ?” (1) asked in isolation (2) asked in the company of others

Exercise 17. Take almost any book by Michel Foucault, e.g., *Discipline and Punish*, and ask “What is the purpose of books like this?” To explain something? But were you searching for such an explanation before you came upon the book? Or to give you the history of the motives underlying the penal code? Were you searching for such a history? Or is it rather merely to provide you with the consolation, “Grim and awful things like this have an explanation! Don’t despair.”

Exercise 18. If you are a PhD candidate, or a recent PhD, ask yourself the following questions. Judge the quality of the philosophy education you have received, by how often you were asked to answer them before.

“What are the criteria for correctness (acceptability, goodness) in my specialty?”

“If a professor claims to be opposed to the correspondence theory of truth, does he give tests in his courses and mark them? On what basis?”

“Are there any parts of my speciality that are not art, and if so, which ones are they?”

“If every work of philosophy is a literary work to a greater or lesser degree, what are some ways I can extract the substance from the literature? What criteria do I use to decide if I or someone else has done a good job at this?”

“Why am I reluctant to participate in public dialogues about my or other philosophers’ work?”

Exercise 19. Try to determine if, after Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* was published, anyone asked Wittgenstein the following questions: “Suppose a language were developed that met all the requirements you set forth in your book. Suppose this language were in turn published in a book. How would you want philosophers, scientists and mathematicians to proceed thereafter? Would they always consult the book before writing anything that they felt was true, or capable of being shown to be true or false? Would novelists and poets go on as they had before, since the language did not apply to their work? How about essayists? How about journalists? How about persons wanting to comment on or criticize the book?”

Additional Thoughts

The East: endlessly pursuing the perfect state of Being. The West: endlessly pursuing the perfect description of how things are.

The Ultimate Answer: the older I get, the more I am inclined to agree with those who argue that the answer to the questions that every thinking person asks him- or herself — “Why was the universe created?”, “What is the meaning of human life?” — will be the disappearance of the questions.

Just as it is often impossible to see a pattern in a set of events unless we view them at sufficiently rapid speed, so certain ideas are out of reach of those without sufficient self-confidence, sufficient arrogance.

All books are Worlds but not all Worlds are books.

In philosophy, “is” always precedes “should”: we want to know what *is* in order to know how we should live.

Best answer I have ever come across to the age-old question of how we know that this world is real and the dream world is not: “...because waking I often observe the absurdity of dreams, but never dream of the absurdities of my waking thoughts...” — Hobbes, Thomas, *Leviathan*, Part I, Chapter II, “Of Imagination”, first published 1651.

One of the unquestioned assumptions of all those who write about the place of mathematics in the world, is that mathematics can never say anything about the real world — that it is highly fortunate for us that mathematics turns out to be applicable to real world problems, but that this is merely an accident, and does not proceed from the nature of mathematics itself. And yet, mathematics *is* the creation of human brains, which are made of atoms and molecules that are found outside of brains, too. Which should we regard as more amazing: that mathematics is often applicable to real world problems, or that we should believe it possible for something arising from ordinary atoms and molecules to have “nothing to do” with the forces governing those atoms and molecules? (See Wigner essay, “On the Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics”.)

“To test Fisher’s theory [that the ratio of males in a population tends to be about the same as the ratio of females], we must look for exceptions. We must seek unusual situations in which the premises of Fisher’s theory are not met — situations that lead to a specific prediction about how sex ratio should depart from one to one. If change of premises leads to a definite and successful prediction of altered outcome, then we have an independent test that strongly boosts our confidence. This method is embodied in the old proverb that ‘the exception proves the rule,’ although many people misunderstand the proverb because it embodies the less common meaning of ‘prove.’ Prove comes from the Latin *probare* — to test or to try. Its usual, modern meaning refers to final and convincing demonstration and the motto would seem to say that exceptions establish indubitable validity. But in another sense, closer to its root, ‘prove’ (as in ‘proving ground’ or printer’s ‘proof’) is more like its cognate ‘probe’ — a test or an exploration. It is the exception that probes the rule by testing and exploring its consequences in altered situations.” — Gould, Stephen Jay, “Death Before Birth” in *The Panda’s Thumb*, W. W. Norton & Co., N.Y., 1980, pp. 71-72.

In fact, if we take “proves” in its formal logical sense, “The exception proves the rule” implies that “The exception *might not* prove the rule”! For “The exception proves the rule” is itself a rule. Now, if it has no exceptions, then it is still possible that there might be another proof of its validity. But if it has an exception, then this means there is a case in which the exception does not prove the rule!

John Searle’s Chinese Room Argument argues that it is possible to do a meaningful task (e.g., translating between Chinese and English) by carrying out “meaningless” instructions, i.e., without knowing what task the instructions implement. Assume that somewhere in the universe there is a planet containing a race of intelligent beings who have numerous “activities” each of which can be described by a set of rules. Eventually, these beings invent the computer and the debate soon arises about whether computers “understand” the activities that they are programmed to emulate. A famous philosopher on the planet makes the equivalent of the Chinese Room Argument.

In order to test the argument, the beings select some of their number to be put into rooms and to carry out what to these subjects are instructions using “meaningless” symbols. Each set of instructions and symbols implements one of the activities, but the beings in the rooms are not, of course, told what the activities are.

Space travelers from Earth reach the planet, and soon learn about the debate, and the closed room tests. They inquire about the instructions and meaningless symbols, and find out that, in one case, these are precisely those that are used in our game of chess.

The point is that, for *intelligent* subjects (humans or beings on another planet), “understanding” is a function of repeated, long-term use, and not of the symbols used, or the way the instructions are expressed (as long as the subjects can follow them), or even of what explanations might be given as to the meaning of the instructions and symbols. If several subjects on the distant planet were given the same set of instructions and the same set of “meaningless” symbols, and were allowed to communicate among themselves, they would soon find a world of meaning before them, they would begin to break down the instructions and symbols into those having similar properties, they would pose questions about the system to themselves, and soon start to speak of their progress in acquiring a deeper understanding of it.

Searle is to me a prime example of the modern academic philosopher: comfortable and secure in his specialty — in his answers to the questions his specialty poses — never having to face (or never seeing the point of facing) competent critics in the kind of person-to-person dialogue I have advocated in this book, living in a nice house in the hills, having a guaranteed lifetime income, a steady supply of students. (Ah! the life of the mind!) Yet this man, “one of the world’s most eminent thinkers” according to the text on the jacket of one of his recent books, appears not to have the slightest acquaintance with Continental philosophy.

“People sometimes speak of the ‘scientific world-view’ as if it were one view of how things are among others, as if there might be all sorts of world-views and ‘science’ gave us one of them. In one way this is right; but in another way this is misleading and indeed suggests something false. It is possible to look at the same reality with different interests in mind. There is an economic point of view, an aesthetic point of view, a political point of view, etc., and the point of view of scientific investigation, in this sense, is one point of view among others.

“However, there is a way of interpreting this conception where it suggests that science names a specific kind of ontology, as if there were a scientific reality that is different from, for example, the reality of common sense. I think that is profoundly mistaken. The view implicit in this book, which I now want to make explicit, is that science does not name an ontological domain; it names rather a set of methods for finding out about anything at all that admits of systematic investigation.” — Searle, John, *Mind: A Brief Introduction*, Oxford University Press, N.Y., 2004, p. 302.

The passage reveals an extraordinary naivete. A Continental philosopher opening Searle’s book sees in a moment that it is yet another exercise in the Object ontology, and probably dismisses it on that account.

There are questions which can best be described as *misplaced*, meaning, misplaced in time — occurring at a time when they can not legitimately be asked, even though it may be perfectly legitimate to ask them at another time. An example is, “Where is the woman who will rent the room I am now advertising?” The question is analogous to, e.g., “Where is the eclipse that will take place on x ?”, where x is the date of a predicted eclipse. It is perfectly legitimate to ask of the woman who eventually rents the room, “Where were you on the date y ?”, where y is the date when you asked the first, misplaced, question. In that case, she may or may not be able to answer, depending on her memory. (In a court trial, she might be asked to confirm her memory with the testimony of one or more witnesses.) But until a woman rents the room, *there is no such woman*, even though it is true that there are only a finite number of candidates and that it is reasonable to assert that most of them reside, at the time of asking the first question, within, say, 100 miles of

Berkeley. (The ad is for a woman graduate student or faculty member.) The underlying rule here may be stated, somewhat tautologically, “A thing is not an element of a relationship until it has entered into that relationship.”

What makes such misplaced questions seem that they are, in fact, meaningful questions, is that we can easily *imagine* the entities (in this case, a person) they refer to; we can imagine the woman sitting alone in a shabby rented room, imagining, wishing for, exactly the kind of room we have for rent! But it is not the force of logic that is making the question seem so meaningful. It is the force of our ability to create fiction, in short, the force of our literary ability.

There are also questions which can be described as misplaced in space, e.g., “In which direction should I hit this ball in order to hit a home run?” if asked, say, on a downtown street.

Wittgenstein built a career out of such analyses.

Post-modernists: “All language is deceptive. It must never be taken at face-value.”

My response: “Does that include the language, ‘All language is deceptive. It must never be taken at face-value.’?”

Analysis of language in the manner of the post-modernists is the last refuge of philosophers who haven’t any good ideas.

Pragmatism:

(1) To say that something is true if it is useful, or has good effects, is, as a general rule, nonsense. The reason it is nonsense is that there is no way of determining, at a given time, whether the thing will be useful or have good effects in the future, if it not useful or has good effects at the given time.

Certainly in mathematics and the sciences there have been discoveries whose usefulness could not be determined until a later date. Yet it was clear upon publication of the relevant papers, and approval by the math or scientific communities, that the discoveries were true.

(2) However, there is a class of assertions for which usefulness (having good effects) might be a criterion of validity. For example, “It is true that theft is bad”. We imagine a society in which theft is not regarded as bad, and conclude that it would be a chaotic society, with people devoting most of their time and energy to simply protecting their possessions and money. So in this case, we can say, “Yes, it is true that theft is bad.”

There are many other similar assertions: “It is true that honesty is better than dishonesty”, “It is true that telling the truth is better than lying,” “It is true that raising children in loving homes is better than ignoring them,” etc.

The gist of what I am saying here is that “true” and “false” have meaning only when applied to appropriate contexts. There is no such thing as “true” or “false” in the abstract.

Concluding Philosophical Remark

Every philosopher dies believing he has finally discovered the truth. And then the next philosopher comes along and shows that his predecessors were all wrong. And so it goes, time without end. So what do I believe about the philosophical ideas set forth in this book? I believe that as long as philosophy continues to produce works of art and imagine them to be theories upon which future generations can build, philosophy will continue to get nowhere. I believe that philosophy only becomes a legitimate activity in person-to-person, spoken dialogues among intellectual equals who may well disagree with each other, and that it is largely a waste of time to discuss the works of philosophers of the past without having on hand a complete concordance of those works and of the philosopher's letters and recorded conversations. But I also believe that literary artists as great as Heidegger and Sartre, perhaps even as great as Nietzsche, will continue to appear and speak to their times, and that many people will continue to flock to them and say, yes, now we have the truth, all those others were wrong, but now this one is finally *right*.