Pictures and Reality

(One of three essays on philosophy in this book, the other two being “The Object” and “Philosophy”)

"I maintain there is nothing in the nature of philosophy to warrant the existence of conflicting philosophical 'schools'." — Ayer, Alfred Jules, *Language, Truth and Logic*, Dover Publications, Inc., N.Y., 1952, p. 32.

"The metaphysicians of Tlön do not seek for the truth or even for verisimilitude, but rather for the astounding. They judge that metaphysics is a branch of fantastic literature." — Borges, Jorge Luis, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", in *Labyrinths*, New Directions, N.Y., 1964, p. 10.

"Bryant, in his very learned 'Mythology', mentions [a] source of error, when he says that 'although the pagan fables are not believed, yet we forget ourselves continually, and make inferences from them as existing realities.'" — Poe, Edgar Allan, "The Purloined Letter", in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, introd. Hervey Allen, The Modern Library, 1938, p. 218.

[The following essay, like "The Object", should be entirely unnecessary, since its principal idea has been set forth many times in the 20th century. Yet this idea continutes to be ignored by those with a vested interest in ignoring it, and so we have to keep on trying.]

The Question: "Why Do Philosophers Disagree?"

There is a type of person — typically, he or she has some training in mathematics or science — who, soon after he begins reading philosophy, finds that he is bothered by a single, persistent question, namely, "Why do philosophers disagree?" (An equally, if not more, important question for him often is, "Why does this fact of disagreement bother some philosophers a great deal and others hardly at all?")

To be sure, many of the disagreements throughout the humanities are similar to those in science and mathematics, i.e., they are disagreements over the relative importance of various branches or schools of the subject. But let us quickly review some of the answers that have been given for the cause of other disagreements.

"Philosophers Disagree Because of Problems Inherent in the Nature of Language"

"Philosophy, [Merleau-Ponty] says, asks what the world is like before we begin to talk about it, and it addresses that question to the 'mixture of the world and ourselves' which precedes all reflection. Then how, we naturally ask, can the philosopher *say* what he finds? Whatever he tells us will inevitably be a description of the world as it is talked about, not of the world before it is talked about. Merleau-Ponty falls back at this point on his description of the 'ambiguity' of language; through our language, he argues, we can suggest more than we can explicitly say. But, of course, what this 'more' is cannot be said." — Passmore, John, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, Penguin Books, Middlesex, England, 1972, p. 503.

"For a *large* class of cases — though not for all — in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language." — Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. by Anscombe, G. E. M., MacMillan, New York, 1953, paragraph

43.

Which brings to mind the following:

"...Casanova's relations with women were not always smooth sailing. In London, for instance, he fell desperately in love with a lady of easy virtue, one Marianne Charpillon, who proceeded to milk him for 2,600 guineas while denying him her favors.

"Furious at having been made a laughingstock, Casanova sought an imaginative revenge. He purchased a parrot and immediately set about teaching it to say, 'The Charpillon is a greater whore than her mother', then offered it for sale at a public auction.

"The Charpillon family did not think this was funny at all and wanted to take the matter to court. However, it turned out to be impossible to sue a parrot for slander under British law." — Bering-Jensen, Helle, "A Side of Casanova Nobody Knows", review of Childs, J. Rives, *Casanova: A New Persepective*, Paragon House, in *Insight* (The Washington Times), Oct. 12, 1987, p. 63.

The following digression is on a more serious note: Wittgenstein is considered one of the founders of the 20th century movement in philosophy which attempted to do away with metaphysics by showing that it arises from a misuse of language. But suppose a self-teacher begins reading a difficult work of metaphysics. He is immediately baffled by the meanings of the technical terms (the words that begin with capitals). These terms are not defined in the text, as they would be in a work on logic or mathematics, possibly because the metaphysician does not want to impose the wrong ontology on them.

If the student is ambitious, he may attempt to read other philosophers who use the same terms, and thus acquire some understanding of them. But he may observe that this attempt is similar to that of attempting to learn a foreign language by reading alone, without an opportunity to speak it with (or write it to) a native speaker. True, over the years, reading seems to become easier, but he still can barely make himself understood in the rare opportunities he has for conversation, and in reading, he is often unsure of the meaning of sentences — he feels he doesn't *belong to the language*: it remains outside of him.

But if the student happens to have the opportunity to discuss the metaphysics with an expert in the field — to raise questions, attempt counterarguments, propose ideas that occur to him — then he finds that the meanings of the terms become clearer, and the more he uses them in this way, the clearer they become.

The question, then, is why should we not consider the meaning of these metaphysical terms to be established by their use, just as, according to Wittgenstein, the meaning of ordinary words is? This argument has, in fact, been used by theologians and others in the humanities to dispute the logical positivist idea that only verifiable statements have meaning. Suppose the following experiment were carried out: a few philosophers agree among themselves and in secret to create a new philosophical term, say, "syntemporalism", with the specific aim of merely defining its "usage", without making any attempt to think up a concept to which it is to apply — in fact, they make every attempt, in the papers they write that make use of the term, to make it as difficult as possible for the reader to form a clear concept of the meaning *from* the usage. Would some readers nevertheless find they are able to understand its meaning?[1] (End of digressions)

1. In the usual game of 20 Questions, a player leaves the room while the others decide on an object which is "animal, vegetable, or mineral" and then respond truthfully to the questions posed by the player when he or she returns to the room and tries to deduce the object. The physicist John Wheeler has described a game of 20 Questions in which no object is agreed upon beforehand, the only requirement of those answering the player's questions being that the answers be consistent with those already given.

"Philosophers Do Not 'Disagree', They Are Simply In Different 'Lines of Business'"

"The philosopher is confronted, often enough, by two conclusions, each of them reached, it would seem, by an impeccable chain of reasoning, yet so related that one of them must be wholly wrong if the other is only partly right. [In *Dilemmas*] Ryle tries to show that in each case the conflict is only an apparent one — a pseudo-conflict between theories which are 'in a different line of business', and stand in no need, for that reason, of being reconciled." — (Passmore 1972, 449)

"Take, for example, the familiar problem how the world of science is related to 'the world of everyday life'. On the one side, the physicist assues us that things are really arrangements of electrons in space, that they are not 'really' coloured, solid or sharply-defined; on the other side, we are quite convinced that chairs and tables are real and that they really have the colour, the solidity, the shape, we ordinarily ascribe to them. How is this dilemma to be resolved? The conclusions of the physicist, Ryle tries to show, do not really conflict with our everyday judgements, so that the supposed dilemma turns out to be no more than a difference in interest.

"He makes his point by means of an analogy. A College auditor may tell an undergraduate that the College accounts 'cover the whole life of the College' — its games, its entertainments, its teachings are all there depicted. The auditor is not deceiving the undergraduate, for indeed the accounts are comprehensive, accurate and exhaustive. Yet the undergraduate is convinced that the accounts 'leave something out'. That, Ryle thinks, is precisely our position *vis-a-vis* the physicist. Any physical change can be represented as a movement of electrons; in that respect physics is 'complete'. Yet, somehow, the world we love and fear has escaped the physicist's net.

"The undergraduate, Ryle suggests, should look more closely at the auditor's claim that his accounts 'cover the whole life of the College'. No doubt they do, in the sense that every College activity is represented in the account books as a debit or a credit; but his accounts do not describe, do not even attempt to describe, precisely those features of College life which the undergraduate finds so fascinating. For the accountant, a new library book is a debit of twenty-five shillings, not the precious life-blood of a master spirit. Similarly, Ryle argues, although physics covers everything, it does not give a complete description of what it covers. The physicist is interested only in certain aspects of the world around us. Just as the accountant has his business and the undergraduate a different business, so the physicist has a different business again. Each can go on his his way, according to Ryle, without any fear of meeting a dilemma around the corner." — ibid., pp. 449-450.

Let me say here and now that I think Ryle was the most underrated philosopher of the 20th century. His "line of business" argument seems to me as important as anything that Wittgenstein or any other 20th century philosopher said.

"Nothing may seem simpler or more obvious than to know what a company's business is. A steel mill makes steel, a railroad runs trains to carry freight and passengers, an insurance company underwrites fire risks, a bank lends money. Actually, 'What is our business?' is almost always a difficult question and the right answer is usually anything but obvious." — Drucker, Peter, *Management*, Harper & Row, N.Y., 1974, p. 77.

A Different Answer

"The (pseudo)statements of metaphysics do not serve for the *description of states of affairs*, neither existing ones (in that case they would be true statements) nor non-existing ones (in that case they would be at least false statements). They serve for the *expression of the general attitude of a person towards life* ('Lebenseinstellung, Lebensgefuehl')." — Carnap, Rudolph, "The Elimination of Metaphysics", in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer, The Free Press, N.Y., 1959, p. 78.

"...art is an adequate, metaphysics an inadequate means for the expression of the basic attitude. Of course, there need be no intrinsic objection to one's using any means of expression one likes. But in the case of metaphysics we find this situation: through the form of its works it pretends to be something that it is not."— ibid., p. 79.

"The metaphysican believes that he travels in territory in which truth and falsehood are at stake. In reality, however, he has not asserted anything, but only expressed something, like an artist." — ibid., p. 79.

"Our conjecture that metaphysics is a substitute, albeit an inadequate one, for art, seems to be further confirmed by the fact that the metaphysician who perhaps had artistic talent to the highest degree, viz., Nietzsche, almost entirely avoided the error of that confusion. A large part of his work has predominantly empirical content. We find there, for instance, historical analyses of specific artistic phenomena, or an historical-psychological analysis of morals. In the work, however, in which he expresses most strongly that which others express through metaphysics or ethics, in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, he does not choose the misleading theoretical form, but openly the form of art, of poetry." — ibid., p. 80.

"Metaphysics is concept-poetry." — Carnap, publication unknown to me.

Many disagreements in the humanities take the form "author *x* says *y* is the case but this is not correct. For he has failed to take into account z_1, z_2...z_k."

"And such is their method, that rests not so much upon evidence of truth proved by arguments, authorities, similitudes, examples, as upon particular confutations and solutions of every scruple, cavillation, and objection; breeding for the most part one question as fast as it solveth another..." — Bacon, Francis, *The Proficience and Advancement of Learning, Divine and Human, First Book, in Elizabethan Verse and Prose*, ed. George Reuben Potter, Henry Holt and Co., N.Y., 1928, p. 539.

Such disagreements motivate a major portion of the writing in the humanities. But they are not the type of disagreement which can be settled in the way a conjecture in mathematics can be settled, namely by a proof or disproof of the conjecture, or in the way a conjecture in science can be settled ("There is less than 10% oxygen in the atmosphere on the surface of Mars"), namely by scientific data. And yet the disagreements continue. So we may find ourselves asking, "What are these disagreements *like*? What business are philosophers and, indeed, all thinkers in the humanities, really in?"

Initially, these disagreements may remind us of the fabled three blind men trying to describe an elephant. But this suggests there is an "it" which, *eventually*, with sufficient describing by sufficiently many blind men, will be described, i.e., eventually, there will be agreement among all the describers. But even a superficial knowledge of the humanities suggests this is not likely to be the case.

"In general, the postulation of real non-existent entitites results from the superstition...that, to every word or phrase that can be the grammatical subject of a sentence, there must somewhere be a real entity corresponding." — Ayer, Alfred Jules, *Language, Truth and Logic*, Dover Publications, N.Y., 1952, p. 43.

So we say, tentatively, that disagreements in the humanities are not like the disagreements that might arise if three or more blind men attempted to describe an elephant. (Exercise for those who believe there are such "it"s in the humanities: pick any one of them, and list the criteria by which it will be determined when that "it" has been successfully described.)

We think again of the form of these disagreements. The form, relative to many thinkers, is: "*x* is *y*!", "No, *x* is *z*!", "No, x is *w*!" ... So it seems clear that we must pay attention to the nature of "is" in the humanities (and I use "is" here to mean all declarative sentences which profess to be descriptions). If I were the head of a philosophy department, I would require every philosophy major to spend a year studying the use of such sentences, not only in philosophy and the other humanities, but also in fiction, poetry, the sciences and mathematics, so that the student could come to see that in philosophy "is" should always be written in double quotes, and that the student's respect for a philosopher should be in proportion to how clearly he demonstrates that for him, "is" seldom if ever means "is real" in the same sense that it does in the sciences and mathematics.

Thesis (first part): A proposition may be a picture of reality, as Wittgenstein claimed early in his career[1], but not all pictures of reality are propositions, and not all strings of symbols in a language are pictures of reality.

Consider the following (partial) classification of the strings of symbols in a language (an indented line means that what the line represents is a subset of what the previous line represents):

Strings of symbols which are capable of producing visual images or concepts in at least some readers

Grammatical strings

Pictures of reality

Propositions

Consider the string "mrz". Many people will say that if "mrz" is not a code word or a little known acronym or abbreviation, then it is not merely an ungrammatical string as far as the English language is concerned, it is also meaningless. But I can (and do) think to myself, "'mrz' ... these letters are pronounced 'emm ar zee'; 'emmarzee' in German might be pronounced 'Emmersee', and since 'See' means lake I can imagine a lake, *der Emmersee*, which, so far as I know, doesn't exist. But I imagine it to be located in a part of Germany where the weather is sunny and clear most of the year. The lake is very large, with vineyards along the steep slopes on one side. Nearby, in a large, castle-like mansion, lives the Count von Emmersee, a strange, reclusive man, who had the entire interior of the mansion finished in dark, lacquered and polished wood. There is a little, crooked, dirt path from his back door down to the lake, and often, very early on summer mornings, he likes to go down to the lake and bathe nude in front of the horses..."

Of course, another person, when asked what the string "mrz" calls to mind, may come up with

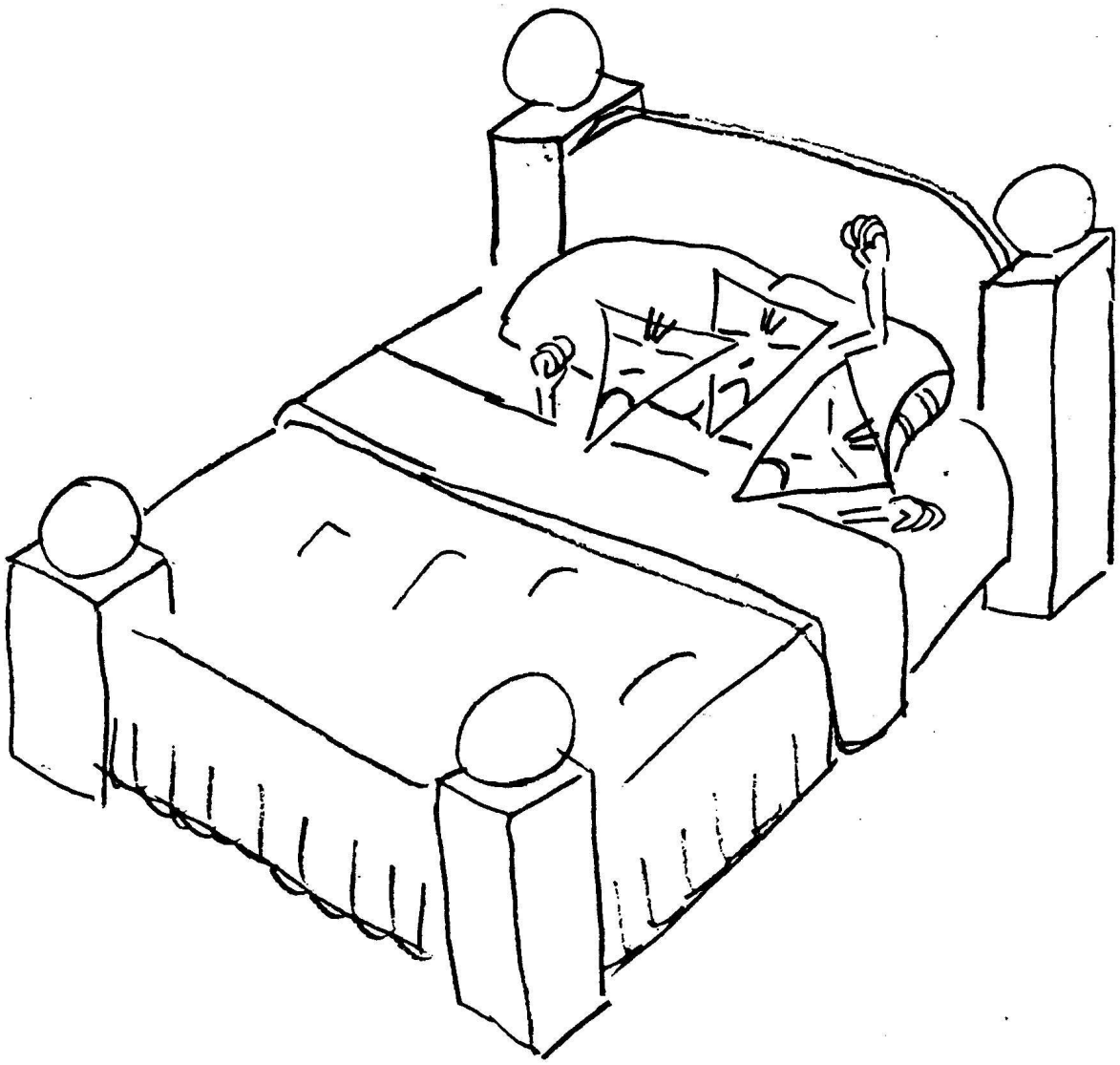
1. Paragraph 4.01 in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

something entirely different, or reply "Nothing".

An example of a "grammatical string" is the famous one from linguistics, which was originally devised to be an example of a grammatically correct, but meaningless, string of English symbols:

(1) Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.

Yet I can make a cartoon of what I conceive this sentence to express. I can draw three cartoon figures, with say, pale, watercolor-green faces, in a big four-poster bed, their eyes closed, but their faces scrunched in a manner that clearly indicates that these three are sleeping furiously.



Colorless Green Ideas Sleeping Furiously

I do not say that every reader of English will be able — or willing! — to spontaneously create such a picture or other description of what (1) represents. On the other hand, I do say that some readers will say that the cartoon can be considered, with appropriate sense of humor, a representation of the meaning of (1).

"In truth, the Library includes all verbal structures, all variations permitted by the twenty-five orthographical symbols, but not a single example of absolute nonsense. It is useless to observe that the best volume of the many [hexagonal galleries] under my administration is entitled *The Combed Thunderclap* and another *Axaxaxas mloe*. These phrases, at first glance incoherent, can no doubt be justified in a cryptographical or allegorical manner; such a justification is verbal and, *ex hypothesi*, already figures in the Library. I cannot combine some characters *dhcmrlchtdj* which the divine Library has not foreseen and which in one of its secret tongues do not contain a terrible meaning. No one can articulate a syllable which is not filled with tenderness and fear, which is not, in one of these languages, the powerful name of a god. To speak is to fall into tautology. This wordy and useless epistle already exists in one of the thirty volumes of the five shelves of one of the innumerable [hexagonal galleries] — and its refutation as well. (An *n* number of possible languages use the same vocabulary; in some of them, the symbol *library* allows the correct definition *a ubiquitous and lasting system of hexagonal galleries*, but library is bread or *pyramid* or anything else, and these seven words which define it have another value. You who read me, are You sure of understanding my language?)" — Borges, Jorge Luis, "The Library of Babel", in *Labyrinths*, New Directions, N.Y., 1964, pp. 57, 58.

Finally, stepping outside the realm of strings of alphabetical symbols, I argue that it is perfectly possible to create illustrations of three logically non-existent entities, e.g., the three-sided square, the two-sided triangle, and the integer that lies between 1 and 2. We can draw three sides of the square in solid black lines, the fourth side in a dashed line; similarly for the two-sided triangle. Finally, we can draw a horizontal line with, say, heavy dots at regular intervals, these marked, say, -4, -3, -2, -1, 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, ..., and then put another heavy dot between those for 1 and 2.

With the appropriate sense of humor, we can indeed "see" the above as illustrations of the non-existent objects named. And despite some logicians' abhorence of overpopulated ontologies, we can also imagine these objects as occupying a realm where all non-existent things exist, including, e.g., the Golden Mountain, the unicorn, etc.

"[Aristotle] ... notes (as Plato, according to Plutarch, did earlier) that a definition tells us what a thing is but not that the thing exists...Leibniz gave the example of a regular polyhedron with ten faces; one can define such a figure but it does not exist." — Kline, Morris, *Mathematical Thought from Ancient to Modern Times*, Oxford University Press, N.Y., 1972, p. 52.

Thesis (second part): thinkers in the humanities, including philosophers (and the author of this book), are in the business of being artists. "Is" for them usually means "can be seen as". Thus the perennial disagreements in these disciplines are like the disagreements of painters over how something should be (can be) seen. And although it was considered scandalous for an academic to proclaim in the mid-eighties that literature exists so that literary critics can write about it, this was in fact an insightful observation. Critics are artists, not "seekers after truth"; their subject matter is literature in the same way that countrysides, men, women, children, apples, pears, bottles, jugs, etc. are the subject matter of (some) painters.

A clarification is in order here on my use of the word "art". Only the most ignorant academic believes that the intellectual disciplines are divided between the sciences and the arts. The best

work in any discipline is art. (In the technical disciplines, for me at least, the term always implies accomplishing a great deal with very little.) In the above remarks, I could have, and perhaps should have, substituted "literature" for "art", but in any case, I mean something that is "like" literature, painting, sculpture, music, dance, film, insofar as artists in these disciplines aim at "the willing suspension of disbelief."

The form of (many) arguments in the humanities is:

1. y has the parts y_1, y_2, ..., y_n.
2. x has the parts x_1, x_2, ..., x_n.
3. x_1 is (can be seen as) y_1;
   x_2 is (can be seen as) y_2;
   .
   .
   .
   x_n is (can be seen as) y_n.
4. Therefore x is (can be seen as — can be imagined as —) y.

Some may protest that x can be seen as almost anything, but in fact in the humanities there is no such arbitrariness; there is a tradition, only certain types of problems are deemed worthy of interest. And that is precisely true of the arts. Or, in other words, I do not pretend to explain why it is that only certain y's are chosen for a given x to be seen as, or why some of these y's are deemed far more important than others.

The naivete of most philosophers and humanities thinkers can be expressed by a single sentence: "It can be seen this way — why, then it must *be* this way!" For these thinkers, studying a subject means attempting to see something in a certain way. We can imagine a philosopher whose philosophy included the assertion, "Everything is made of glass." His argument might run as follows: "First, we know that many things are, in fact, made of glass, e.g., window panes, bottles, light filters, fiberglass, etc. But it is also clear that water is made of glass, since it is transparent — it is a kind of fluid glass. All shiny things — e.g., metals, plastics, wet leaves, jewelry — are certainly made of glass, as revealed by their shininess. However, the fundamental glass nature of some things — e.g., cloth and human skin — can only be understood by advanced students. Only long contemplation of these things, combined with the determination to see them *as glass*, can bring the student to this understanding. One must try to see human skin as a special kind of glass — an advanced kind — which is not shiny or hard or transparent or translucent, but instead is soft, opaque, hirsute."

Is the process by which we attempt to understand, say, Spinoza, fundamentally different from that by which we attempt to understand that all things are made of glass? A particularly unfortunate type of philosophy professor for an undergraduate to have is one who tries to convince his students that "all the great philosophers were really saying the same thing" — unless, of course, the students realize what business they are in when they attempt to see, e.g., Kant as "saying the same thing" as, e.g., Plato.

A useful way of thinking about academic writing in the humanities is to imagine that professors, instead of being scholars whose medium is the written word, were painters, and that what they published in learned journals were paintings. Now you are in a position to think clearly

about what the nature of the academic enterprise in the humanities really is — what it really "is like".

I open Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* "at random" and read the following: "The psychic object, being the shadow cast by the For-itself reflected-on, possesses in degraded form the characteristics of consciousness. In particular it appears as an unachieved and probable totality there where the For-itself makes itself exist in the diasporatic unity of a detotalized totality." (Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness*, tr. by Hazel E. Barnes, Washington Square Press, N.Y., 1966, p. 200.)

If we begin studying the existentialist philosophers in a university, we are told that one of their goals is the description of the structure of the world as it is experienced. We therefore attempt to see passages such as the above as descriptions which apply to the world of our own experience. But before classroom fear and shame force us to accept the professor's word, a few of us can't help thinking that such a passage in no way describes the structure of *our* world of experience. We can well imagine a description of equivalent complexity, with an equal or greater number of strange terms, being found in a medical textbook, and we can imagine ourselves thinking, "My God! So that's how the nervous system is made!", but in the passage above the claim is that we are reading a description of the structure of our own experience. How can we know if the description is accurate? Isn't it rather the case, that the more we study the description — the more we understand the meaning of each strange term and of each sentence — the more accurate the description becomes?

Existentialism is often called a modern scholasticism (ordinary-language philosophy is another modern scholasticism). What purpose does such a scholasticism serve? Those who remember what it was like to read works such as *Being and Nothinginess* after a lifetime of trying to find a way to live a life that had no meaning or purpose, can remember the sense they had that now this meaninglessness and purposelessness was every bit as deep and important as a scientific subject; it required a theory every bit as difficult as that of a science! We, too, mattered! Existentialism crowded the empty rooms with a rich and complex furniture.

And let us never forget that in the late 19th century, and throughout the 20th century, the grim existentialist universe existed side by side with the exhilerating universe of the scientist and the mathematician, for whom these times were the best of times, the golden age of golden ages. "The death of God", "the loss of values", the "meaninglessness of life", "existentialist despair" — these and countless other similar terms came from the intellectual class that knew only too well that it had no role to play in the exciting new intellectual world that was being created all around them.

Since academics in the humanities have to justify their existence like everyone else, and since one can get far more funding if one has a reputation as a pursuer of Truth than as a pursuer of interesting, or even profound, pictures, there is a strong incentive to dismiss any suggestion that humanities thinkers are artists. Yet a simple question, put to any such thinker, will often bring the

truth to light: "What would convince you that you are wrong?"

Those who find the thesis, second part, rather unexciting should consider the behavior of philosophers and humanities thinkers regarding their own prose and that of thinkers they admire. What is the explanation for their peculiar obsessions? Here is a thinker, e.g., who seems willing to defend to his dying day the "rightness" of certain peculiar locutions he is fond of. He is appalled at suggestions that he reorganize a book he has written, calling the present, peculiar, difficult organization, "essential" to the idea he is attempting to convey. He fusses over his manuscripts, is outraged when a secretary or typesetter misplaces a comma. He scoffs at any suggestion that he should defend his ideas in an open forum including not only some of the best minds in his and any other university, but also anyone who happens to walk in the door. The thought of discussing, arguing for, his ideas is anathema to him. What business is he in? What is the nature of the non-mathematical, non-scientific "truth" that demands such "precision", such freedom from the contamination of argument and discussion?

The reader may reply that the term "world view" covers everything I have said regarding the humanities thinker as artist. My only disagreement with this is that "world view" does not seem to suggest the obsessions, the concern with a certain kind of beauty ("*This* is how it is!"), the skills cultivated for the purpose of presentation, the degree to which the thinker's emotional experiences have formed his particular view — the degree to which the view is necessary for the thinker — which the term "artist" does cover.

Many of the mannerisms that we outsiders love to hate in humanities thinkers — the pompous language, the proliferation of obscure technical terms, the atmosphere of intimidating high seriousness, the reliance on *interpretation* as a means of settling disagreements — all these become understandable once we see this type of thinker as first and foremost an *artist*. Pompous language is a way of "putting a vibrato" on what is said. It is therefore, in some hands, a literary skill, not a lack of literary skill. Similarly with obscure language. Most authors take it for granted nowadays that they should attempt to write clearly, but they should ask themselves, paraphrasing Hegel, "Who can write obscurely?" Every bit as interesting as John Holt's attempt to learn how primary school students think about mathematical concepts, would be an attempt to learn how prestigious academics with pompous, obscure, writing styles, think about their writing in relation to what they are trying to express. And what could suggest more clearly that one is primarily behaving as an artist than the importance of interpretation, i.e., the importance of seeing the meaning of a text in one way rather than another?

It is not what we say that counts, but the claims we make for it. Pages of metaphysics which a scientifically-trained person would regard with contempt when presented as statements about the world, he might have no difficulty accepting when presented as, say, a quote from the work of a philosopher who is a character in a novel. He might say, in regard to the first, "This makes no sense, I have no idea what the author is talking about," but he might, perhaps merely for his own amusement (because it doesn't count), attempt to "make sense" out of the pages in the second case, and even develop a vague idea of what the philosopher is trying to say. He might, from the context of the novel, e.g., come to the conclusion that the philosopher is attempting to use metaphysical language in a poetic way, in order to create a new experience of the world.

"So, we can change the entire nature of a metaphysical work simply by placing quotation marks around it?" — S.f.

The answer is yes, as the reader who finds the Derrida phenomenon a disgrace, can ascertain for himself by imagining Derrida's works to be quoted in a novel in which a philosopher named Jacques Derrida is a central character. Now, suddenly, these works step forward to become what they are, namely, an extremely sophisticated form of poetry. Now we can revel in their ingenuity, their subtlety, their complexity, the vast learning on which they are based. Now we are freed of what has previously infuriated us, namely, the claim that these works are somehow statements about — descriptions of — certain facets of modern reality.

We must learn to recognize the assertoric force underlying utterances when it occurs, regardless of what the author wants us to call his utterances. The same sentence presented in a philosophy book and quoted in a novel are two entirely different things. (See Index under "quotation marks", "quotes".)

To put it another way, *it is not what we say that counts, but the "counter" where we intend to cash it in*. No statement or series of statements, no utterance, no string of words or letters or symbols can be judged until we know what "credit" the person who produced it is expecting us to give him for it. If he expects to get credit for it at the Scientific counter or the Logical/Mathematical counter, then we know how to go about deciding whether we should, in fact, give him Scientific or Mathematical/Logical credit. And similarly for the various other counters: the Literary (artistic), the Action-Producing ("Fire!"), the Normative ("Smoking Prohibited"), etc. Some utterances can receive credit at more than one counter, e.g., D'Arcy Thompson's *On Growth and Form* is often cited as a great work of literature as well as a great scientific treatise.

Consider the following experiment: two different groups of randomly-selected readers of, say, *Scientific American*, are asked to read several pages of the kind of metaphysics that non-metaphysicians love to hate: sentence after sentence of long-winded assertions about Essence, Being, Nothing, Time, the Absolute, etc. The first group is given these pages as part of a book on the subject of metaphysics. The second group is given the pages as part of a novel, they being a quote from the work of a philosopher who is a character in the novel. Each member of each group receives a copy of the book containing the pages he is to read. No member of either group knows of the existence of the other group. After reading the pages, each member is asked to reply to a series of questions which test his understanding of what he has read. He is allowed to refer to the pages while answering the questions. The questions are of the sort, "According to the author of the pages you read, is Being possible without Time?", "Does the existence of the Absolute imply the existence of Nothing?", etc. Now, I claim that, for each question, the percentage of members answering the question correctly in the first group, will be "close" to the corresponding percentage for the second group, and that, if this is so, then the pages presented the same "picture" to both groups.

Additional Thoughts

Against the main idea of this essay is, for example, the argument of Ryle:

"...it is far riskier to characterize the physicist, the theologian, the historian, the poet and the man in the street as all alike producing 'pictures', whether of the same object or of different objects. The highly concrete word 'picture' smothers the enormous differences between the businesses of the scientist, historian, poet and theologian even worse than the relatively abstract word 'description' smothers the big differences between the businesses of the accountant and the reviewer. It is just these smothered differences which need to be brought out into the open. If the seeming feuds between science and theology or between fundamental physics and common knowledge are to be dissolved at all, their dissolution can come not from making the polite compromise that both parties are really artists of a sort working from different points of view and with different sketching materials, but only from drawing uncompromising contrasts between their businesses." — Ryle, Gilbert, *Dilemmas*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1954, pp. 80-81.

My reply to this criticism is that I am applying the main idea of this essay only to the humanities.

An obvious question is, "How can any thinker demonstrate that *x* can be seen as *y*?" — a question that lies at the very heart of all intellectual endeavors, or at least, at the very heart of studying any subject. (Closely related questions are "How can the author of a work demonstrate that the subject is understandable?" "How can the author of a work demonstrate that the subject can be learned?") The answer, of course, is that the author can't demonstrate it; in writing the work, he merely sets forth an implicit claim that others can see *x* as he does, that the subject is understandable, learnable. The "proof" that these claims are valid is up to the student; and — outside of schools, at least — he may decide that the effort of arriving at this "proof" is not worth his trouble (and explain his decision by saying that the subject is incomprehensible, or rubbish).

Some readers will remind me that the idea that philosophy is primarily art, goes back to Nietzsche at the very least. The only reason I bother trying to remake the case is that the idea seems to have made no impression on most philosophers and other thinkers in the humanities — certainly not on a number of young persons I have personally known who received Ph.D.'s in the humanities during the 1980's from some of the nation's most prestigious universities.

The astute reader will observe that it is not important what category we put the humanities in, but what effect a given categorization has on the criteria by which we judge individual works. Thus, e.g., the logical positivists proposed a new criterion for judging works, and indeed, sentences, in philosophy. To place a humanities discipline in the category of art, means, among other things, that we will ask how effectively it convinces us — on its own terms — that the World it presents to us is "real". It means, e.g., that we will not assume that a work of philosophy whose sentences are not propositions, or, more important, that a work of philosophy whose concepts are not Objects, has necessarily failed in its task.

"Even if it's wrong, it's right!" — an attempt to call attention to the artistic qualities of a work of intellect.

Perhaps Hume had the fundamentally artistic nature of philosophy in mind when he wrote:

"All probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation. 'Tis not solely in poetry and music, we must follow our taste and sentiment, but likewise in philosophy. When I am convinced of any principle, 'tis only an idea, which strikes more strongly upon me. When I give the preference to one set of arguments above another, I do nothing but decide from my feeling concerning the superiority of their influence. Objects have no discoverable connexion together; nor is it from any other principle but custom operating upon the imagination, that we can draw any inference from the appearance of one to the existence of the other." — Hume, David, *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part III, Sec. VIII.

There will, of course, be those — particularly those with a vested interest in the great tradition — who will view with contempt any suggestion that philosophy is "merely" or "primarily" a form of art. They will say that I have completely overlooked the importance of Reason in philosophy. But anyone with an understanding of elementary mathematics and modern logic who looks at the "proofs" and other arguments that have been given in philosophy can surely not consider Reason, as it operates in these two subjects, as being one of the sources of philosophy's power. How many times do we read of this or that philosopher's "certainty" of the truth of his doctrines? —

"...the *truth* of the thoughts that are here set forth seems to me unassailable and definitive. I therefore believe myself to have found, on all essential points, the final solution of the problems [of philosophy]." — Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, tr. Pears, D. F., and McGuinness, B. F., The Humanities Press, N.Y., 1961, p. 5.

— only to find that within a few years these certainties have been shown (perhaps by the philosopher himself) to be not at all certain. On the other hand, there is a kind of certainty which is not based on logical argument but rather on a way of seeing things.

Of course, if someone has a low opinion of the depth and power and importance of art, then he will simply reply, "Philosophy is more than just an art form!". But that is not our problem.

Every philosopher wants to write the last philosophy book. But in saying that a philosopher — insofar as he is not a logician or a codifier of (yesterday's) rules for scientific procedure or the creator of a new science — is fundamentally and primarily an artist, I do not in any way claim to be having yet another last word on philosophy. Rather I hope to be opening the way for many new philosophies, because at long last philosophers will know what business they are in. "The fact that every philosophy [on Tlön] is by definition a dialectical game, a *Philosophie des Als Ob*, has caused them to multiply. There is an abundance of incredible systems of pleasing design or sensational type." — Borges, Jorge Luis, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", in *Labyrinths*, New Directions, N.Y., 1964, p. 10. Once philosophy is regarded as fundamentally an art, we will see it develop the same *richness* as mathematics developed once it was recognized as not being fundamentally a description of Nature.

Any reader with the slightest training in science, and the slightest knowledge of the history of science, must react with incredulity to attempts to read new meaning into the scientific works of the ancient Greek philosophers, e.g., Aristotle. ("He was more right than we realize!") Most of these attempts are made naively, i.e., without a clear understanding of the difference between the literary (artistic) aspects of a work of philosophy, and the scientific and logical aspects — the same clear understanding that was also, no doubt, lacking when the works were originally written. A philosophical work, *as literature*, can always be revived, interpreted anew, made relevant to a particular time, but not so a philosophical work as science or logic: if its scientific and logical statements were once valid, they have long since been superseded. Period. They now possess historical interest only.

On the other hand, it is a good exercise — a *necessary exercise* — for students of philosophy to soak themselves in the *literary* aspects of at least one ancient philosophical work, which means, to deliberately attempt to see the modern world through the work, to make the work "immortal" again, to force themselves to see things through those ancient, simple, categories (those distillations of plausibility arguments, naive common sense, superstition, religion, even more ancient philosophical tradition), to experience the smells (horse manure, wood smoke, sewage) and the sounds (clip-clop of horse's hooves, shouts of street vendors) of the city where the philosopher lived.

Since most of the logical positivists did not think much about the literary aspects of philosophy, they paid no attention to such possibilities of going back in philosophical history. Consider, e.g.,

"Once Hume had exposed the fallacies of his predecessors when dealing with the notion of causality he had made it impossible for anyone to think along the lines of Spinoza whose world looks to us strange as the moon. Suppose that you look at a picture-puzzle: at first you can see in it only a maze of lines; then, suddenly, you recognize a human face. Can you now, having discovered the face, see the lines as before? Clearly not. As with the maze of lines, so with the muddle cleared up by Hume: to recapture the mood of the past, to travel back into the fog has become impossible — one of the big difficulties of understanding history of philosophy. It is for the same reason that the rise of the linguistic technique in our day has put an end to the great speculative systems of the past." — Waismann, Friedrich, "How I See Philosophy", in *Logical Positivism*, ed. Ayer, A. J., The Free Press, N.Y., p. 376.

The evolution of humankind's understanding of the nature of philosophy will be seen to have followed the evolution of humankind's understanding of the nature of the Bible: at first, each philosophy was taken to be true statements about the nature of the world, the philosopher's task being to bring those who did not agree with him to see that, in reality, he was right and the others were wrong; then philosophy was seen to be a worthless enterprise because virtually none of its statements could be scientifically or logically verified; finally, philosophy will be seen to be a form of literature, with all the potential power and value of that art form.

"It used to be a commonplace to insist on the elimination of the 'literary' dimension from philosophy. This was particularly true for a philosophical tradition inspired by the possibilities of formalization and by the success of the natural sciences. And yet even in the most rigorous instances of such philosophy we find demands for 'clarity', for 'tight argument', and distinctions between 'strong' and 'weak' proofs which call out for rhetorical reading. Equally, modern literary theory, quite as much as literature itself, is increasingly looking to philosophy (and other theoritical disciplines such as linguistics) for its inspiration. After a wave of structuralist analysis, the growing influence of deconstructive and hermeneutic readings continues to bear witness to this. While philosophy and literature are not to be identified, even if philosophy is thought of as 'a kind of writing', much of the most exciting theoretical work being done today, in Britain, Europe, and America, exploits their tensions and intertwinings. When one recalls that Plato, who wished to keep philosophy and poetry apart, actually unified the two in his own writing, it is clear that the current upsurge of interest in this field is only re-engaging with the questions alive in the broader tradition." — *The Problems of Modernity*, ed. Andrew Benjamin, Routledge, 29 W. 35th St., N.Y. C. 10001, opp. title page.

"The conception of philosophy as description derives, I suppose, from Husserl, but the effect of it is that existentialists have often occupied themselves doing the sort of thing which has traditionally been done by poets and novelists, so that much that seems new when contrasted with the post-Cartesian philosophical tradition fits quite well enough into the artistic tradition." — Moore, Asher, "Existentialism and the Tradition", in *An Invitation to Phenomenology*: Studies in the Philosophy of Experience, ed. James M. Edie, Quadrangle Books, Chicago, 1965, p. 95.

When we read passages from the old philosophical classics like that of Schopenhauer quoted in the previous chapter — "If, raised by the power of mind, a man relinquishes the common way of looking at things...if he thus ceases to consider the where, the when, the why, the whither of things, and looks simply and solely at the what...forgets even his individuality, his will...if thus the object has to such an extent passed out of all relation to someting outside of it, and the subject out of all relation to the will...then that which is so known is no longer the particular thing as such; but it is the *Idea*..." — when we read such passages, we have to scratch our heads in wonder at the thought of a bunch of dour old philosophical clerks fussing over whether such philosophical utterances are *true* or not. "We are not *soft* like those losers in the humanities! We are *hard*, like you in the sciences and mathematics! *Please* take us in!"

What is the purpose of obscurity in the writings of thinkers in the humanities? (Normally this is achieved through such literary devices as pompous and arcane language, but not always — consider, e.g., Wittgenstein.) In line with other remarks in this book, my reply is that it is an attempt at keeping the subject de-Object-ified and also (which may amount to the same thing) of calling attention to the fact that after all is said and done, something is "left over" (what is left over is the fact of self-consciousness). A cynical term for these goals is "mystification", and Wittgenstein for one was a master of it. I do not believe, after numerous readings, that the *concepts* in the *Tractatus* are as difficult as they seem initially. Ryle's *Dilemmas* seems to me a straightforward, read-

ily understandable, exposition of most of the ideas of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, a book which baffled a number of leading thinkers, including Russell. The source of the difficulties in both cases lies in Wittgenstein's attempt to invoke and maintain the proper "philosophical atmosphere", and that task is purely an artistic one.

Part of the task of studying philosophy is (should be!) learning how to separate the "music" from the ideas in any philosophical work. About 90% of the text of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, and its introduction, *Prolegomena to a Future Metaphysics*, is music. For any B or A student with, say, two undergraduate years of mathematics and hard science, plus, say, a semester of reading in the pre-Kantian philosophers, the ideas in the *Critique* can be summarized in less than ten, single-spaced word-processor pages. (The way to test this statement is described in the Preface of this book.)

"[Bertrand Russell] said that what Kant did, trying to answer Hume (to whom I say there is no answer), was to invent more and more sophisticated stuff, till he could no longer see through it and could believe it to be an answer." — Littlewood, J.E., *Littlewood's Miscellany*, Cambridge University Press, N.Y., 1990, p. 128.

Elsewhere, Russell quotes Hegel: "*The Absolute Idea*. The idea, as unity of the subjective and objective Idea, is the notion of the Idea — a notion whose object is the Idea as such, and for which the objective is Idea — an Object which embraces all characteristics in its unity." Russell then says, "I hate to spoil the luminous clarity of this sentence by any commentary, but in fact the same thing could be said by saying 'The Absolute Idea is pure thought thinking about pure thought'." — Russell, Bertrand, "Philosophy and Politics" in *Unpopular Essays*, Simon and Schuster, N.Y., 1950, quoted in *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*, ed. Egner, Robert E., and Denonn, Lester E., Simon and Schuster, N.Y., 1961, p. 460.

Russell is here separating the ideas (substance) from the "music" in Hegel's definition. And yet if we are to understand Hegel, we must understand his music, which means doing a literary analysis of his definition. Certainly one of the purposes of the definition is to create in us a sense of the profundity and importance of the Absolute Idea, and Hegel's phrases do this: "The idea, as unity of the subjective and objective Idea, is the notion of the Idea..." — already we are struggling to grasp the meaning: The idea (small "i") is the notion of the Idea (big "I"). And then later the word "unity" appears to have an additional meaning: something is "an Object which embraces all characteristics in its unity." The words in the definition are not mere words, they also cast a spell, like the echoes in a church, or like the words in a poem.

Give me any philosophical idea whatever, and a sufficiently great literary artist, and I will make that idea seem like the truth to many people, including many academics. In fact, originality in philosophy is precisely the ability to convince a significant number of people that a new truth has been discovered which is neither scientific, nor logical, nor artistic (in the usual sense of "artistic truth"), yet which is every bit as good, as *valid*, as *reliable*, as scientific or logical truth. An original philosopher is like a filmmaker who, in a world in which everyone goes to the movies

and understands what the movies are and how they work — in which everyone understands that the illusion of motion is caused by rapidly viewing a succession of slightly different still photographs, that the people on the screen are just actors, that the events portrayed (entire lifetimes) didn't really take place in just a few hours, that when it is raining in the movie that does not necessarily mean it is raining outside the theater — an original philosopher is like a filmmaker in such a world who creates a film which makes people think to themselves, feel in themselves: "All those others were merely movies, but this: this is *real*!" A prime example of such a philosopher in the twentieth century was Wittgenstein. The *Tractatus* bewitches us because it has all the trappings of a work of formal logic. Who can possibly disagree with sentences as austere, as unemotional, as true-seeming as these? Surely *this* can't be just literature! Yet that is precisely what it is.

Another prime example is Rousseau, a philosopher whose literary genius to this day is able to bamboozle the naive souls who make academic careers out of understanding and interpreting his thought. But if we subtract the literary properties from his thought, we find a collection of ideas (e.g., the noble savage, the General Will) that are naive to the point of silliness, and that cannot stand up to any kind of rigorous substantive analysis.

"'Savages are not bad,' Rousseau wrote of the state of nature [in his 'Discourse on Inequality'], for 'the calmness of their passions and their ignorance of vice...prevents them from doing ill.' [John] Adams wrote [in the margin of his translation of Rousseau's essay]: 'Calmness of the passions of savages! ha! ha! ha!'" — Brookhiser, Richard, "John Adams Talks to His Books", *The New York Times Book Review*, Sept. 3, 2006, p. 23.

And Adams was in a position to know far more about savages than Rousseau ever was.

Suppose a letter were found in Hegel's papers in which he stated that he had from the very start intended that his philosophy be just a joke, a proof of the gullibility of man, in particular, of certain kinds of professors. What can we say about the labor of Hegelian professors over the years? Certainly not that this labor had produced nothing!

Is there a way to separate the music from the thought in a philosophical work, or, indeed, in any theoretical work in the humanities? None that I know of. But a good beginning toward finding such a method is the recognition that music is almost wholly a matter of syntax ("change the words and you change the meaning", as the naive academic sometimes put it). The thought, on the other hand, can be expressed in many different ways. Thus the thought — at least the major features of the thought — is what is found in explanations of a theory that appear in dictionaries, encyclopedias, lecture notes prepared by a professor, Cliffs Notes, etc. In other words, in writing that "doesn't count" in the academic world. (It is amazing how people reveal themselves in activities that don't count.) The thought can be summarized, the music can't be (although fragments of it can be quoted).

Humanities professors have a keen ear for the music in a theoretical work. If the music is new, they pronounce the work original. Or, I should say, if they like the music in the work, they pronounce the work original; if not, they call it derivative, couching all this, of course, in talk about the *ideas* in the work. But the typical humanities professor avoids ideas — naked, unadorned, ideas — like the plague; to be interested in the pure idea (not to be confused with the Pure Idea, of course) is to him or her a sign of barbarism. And no wonder: the pure idea in a the-

ory in the humanities can usually be expressed in a page or two, and that includes "big ideas" like those of Kant and Marx.

Why not just say that every philosophy is a model of the world? Because to speak of a "model of the world" is to impose the Object ontology on the entire enterprise of philosophy, a limitation rightly regarded with contempt by some of the greatest philosophers since the mid-19th century.

Suppose there were several environmental cubicles in which temperature, sounds, and smells could be controlled, so that, in one, the environment would be that of a cool summer's day in the country; in another, that of a classroom at the start of fall semester (stink of newly-varnished desks) in a run-down building in the center of a city; in another, that of the bedroom of a wealthy woman in Atherton, Calif. A copy of a given philosophical classic is given to several students, none of whom has read the work before. They are told to read certain assigned passages while alone inside one of the cubicles. Then the students must answer certain questions about what they had read, including questions about the feelings the text aroused in them. If this experiment were repeated many times on different groups of students, would their answers show a correlation with the cubical in which they had done the reading?

Why do we think it necessary that a philosophy be presented in words? If a philosophy is "a way of viewing the world", why isn't nitrous oxide or any drug a philosophy?

Is there such a thing as a philosophy which is merely "experienced", is merely a governor of behavior, but is not known to be a philosophy by the person experiencing it, being acted on by it?

\ Who can look at a perspective drawing or painting and not see the picture in the picture — the house, the road, the distant hills? That is how difficult it is not to be seduced by theories in the liberal arts! Just as, in the case of the drawing or painting, we can't *not* see the depth of the scene that the conventions of perspective make it almost unavoidable for us to see, so we can't *not* see the World that the theory present to us.

"The aspects of things //of language// which are philosophically most important are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity.

"(One is unable to notice something because it is always (openly) before one's eyes.)" — Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951*, Hackett Publishing Co., Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1993, p. 179.

Consider an introduction to Western metaphysics used in an undergraduate course. The book *presents* the subject, it gives a little historic background, introduces questions and concepts that belong to the subject, it attempts to clarify possible confusions, it differentiates some concepts from others in the subject, and in other subjects, it has a beginning, a middle, and an end, with footnotes and a bibliography. It is written in clear, grammatically correct English that most students can understand. Surely the book is *about something!* (Look at all this scholarly machinery it employs!) Furthermore, it is possible, through further reading, for the student to develop a

clearer, deeper, idea of these concepts — to eventually reach a point where at least some professors in the subject will be inclined to say, "He" (or she) " knows a lot about Western metaphysics."

I can have a very clear idea of things that don't exist. An artist can make precise pictures of creatures and places that don't exist — unicorns, the Golden Mountain, people who walk on their hands and carry their heads carefully balanced on the soles of their feet. But the very clear idea — the picture — does not imply existence.

Is there a place for disagreement in philosophy? If philosophy is primarily a form of literary art, then what does it mean to *disagree* about a philosophical work? There are disagreements in mathematics[1] and the sciences, but in the vast majority of cases, the means of settling the disagreement are known and agreed upon. There are disagreements about literary works — not only about historical facts (who said what when?) — but, far more commonly, about interpretations. There is no universally-agreed-upon method of resolving these disagreements, especially if the disagreements are between the interpretations under different ideologies (e.g., Marxist vs. realist vs. psychoanalytic). Within a given ideology, the resolution is typically achieved by a combination of literary skill, proportion of like-minded adherents, and authority.

But what about philosophy? From what we have said in the concluding part of this essay, it would seem that the study of philosophy should consist of (1) separating the ideas (substance) from the music, and (2) trying to experience the philosophy as the philosopher intended us to. There will of course be disagreements about the degrees of success that experts in the philosophy claim in achieving these goals, but the question of the "truth" of the philosophy would seem to be irrelevant.

1. I think I know more about disagreement in mathematics than most writers on the subject — in fact, than most mathematicians.