
Plato’s Epistemology and Quantum Mechanics...2
Andrea Holmen

Detectable Design? A Response to Elliot Sober...6
Gareth Amphlett

Socrates and Wittgenstein: The Meaning of a Word...13
Arron Shiffer

Foucault’s Playdough...20
Karlie Knudtsen

The Problem of Misunderstanding...30
Aaron Elliott

Socrates on the Identity Conditions of the Arts...35
Karlie Knudtsen

Hamlet as Dionysian Man...46
Christopher Turner

Little Town Joy...53
Siamak Alipanah

What could a Philosopher Teach...54
Michael Malone

Photography
Charlie Camacho, Jeff Downard, Karlie Knudtsen
Welcome from the Editorial Board

Welcome to the third edition of Zētētikon, a philosophical magazine. The title of our journal comes from the Greek and describes one who is ‘disposed to search or inquire.’ The submissions chosen by the editorial board all reflect this spirit of inquiry.

As you will notice, multiple themes and types of scholarship are presented in this issue, from original philosophical argumentation to exegesis. All of these pieces are the result of work being produced and submitted by the members of the intellectual community at Northern Arizona University.

Zētētikon is produced in large part by and on behalf of the Undergraduate Philosophy Club of Northern Arizona University, and is made possible through the Richard A. Wood Fund. The editorial board selects submissions for Zētētikon through a process of blind review. The board consists of six senior members of the Undergraduate Philosophy Club, one NAU philosophy alumnus, and three faculty members.

If you have any questions, suggestions, or comments, or if you would like to submit a piece for a future issue, please write to: zētētikon@nau.edu

Editorial Board

Faculty: Jeff Downard
Peter Kosso
Julie Piering

Students: Michele Beier
Aaron Elliott
John Garletts
Tiffany Lee
Marcus Lobstein
Chris Richards
David Watts

photo by Jeff Downard
PLATO’S EPISTEMOLOGY & QUANTUM MECHANICS

Andrea Holmen

Throughout his dialogues Plato distinguishes between mere opinion and knowledge. He points out that one can apparently know something without being able to give an account of why that is so; in such a case one does not have genuine knowledge. Since the discovery of quantum mechanics, physicists have been grappling with the ability to really explain some things and have at times resorted to basing their knowledge on measurement without genuine insight into the cause. In this paper I will examine Plato’s ideas about knowledge and see how these ideas relate to the physicists’ stance on the interpretation of quantum mechanics.

Plato is careful to distinguish between appearance and reality. There are genuinely good things and apparently good things. There is also a distinction between really knowing something and apparently knowing it. One way to find out whether a person really knows some bit of knowledge is to ask for an account of how one knows that. For example, if you ask someone what the fourth planet from the Sun is and one replies with Mars, if no account can be given of how that is known, it doesn’t count as knowledge even though it is a correct answer. In this case the person being questioned might not have true knowledge about the planets, however, the fact that they gave a correct answer is an example of correct judgment. This middle of the road option between wisdom and ignorance, is “judging things correctly without being able to give a reason” (Symposium, 202a). Even though Plato is polarized regarding apparent and genuine knowledge one can still be on the road to wisdom with correct judgment.

Plato’s notion that if you cannot give an account of something then you do not know it is a little extreme, especially as there does not seem to be a way for people to know the causal account for everything that they do. Drinking coffee in the morning is helpful in waking me up and keeping me awake, but I do not really know how the caffeine in the coffee works in my body. Just because I cannot give a clear account of how and why the coffee helps keep me awake does not mean that I am going to stop drinking coffee in the morning. I am sure that somebody can give an account of why this happens and so I will have to trust their judgment on the matter. It does not seem feasible for every person to be able to give a detailed account of all things, but as long as someone can give an account then that knowledge should be good enough for everyone else to make a correct judgment.

Plato runs into this very problem of not being able to give an account of the forms but this does not keep him from trying to explain them. The forms, especially the form of the Good, are such abstract entities that Plato is unable to
describe them directly and can only give general ideas about them by referring to other things which they are like. In the case of the form of the Good no one can give an account of it, not even Plato himself and so “even the fullest possible knowledge of other things is of no benefit” (*Republic*, 505a). Despite using things such as the analogy of the sun and the allegory of the cave, Plato is still unable to give a direct account of the forms. In this case, based on Plato’s own account of what amounts to knowledge, this information is ruled out as genuine knowledge since no one can give a direct account of the forms without resorting to some analogy or allegory.

Plato’s accounts of knowledge and understanding can be very helpful in trying to understand the current state of quantum mechanics in physics. Quantum mechanics, which is the theory that describes subatomic particles, has been successful in predicting events and explaining measurements but at the foundational level there are still some very deep problems. The difficulties in understanding quantum mechanics go beyond the fact that we have to switch from one paradigm to another (to borrow from Kuhn) and leave the deterministic macro world we are used to. Instead of being able to give a precise location of a particle, for example, all physicists are left with is a probability distribution of finding the particle somewhere within a given region. The true difficulties of quantum mechanics are beyond this; there are some genuinely weird things that happen in quantum mechanics which no one fully understands.

A good example of the weirdness in quantum mechanics is the double-slit experiment with an electron. An electron, which seems to be a localized particle, should end up directly through either slit when passed through a screen containing two slits. The electrons should arrive on the other side in clumps directly across from the openings in the first screen (Fig 1). This pattern is specific to particles.

![Fig 1: Double-slit Particles*](image1)

![Fig 2: Double-slit Waves*](image2)

If you were to send a wave, such as water or light or sound, through the double slit there would be no direct hits right across from the opening in the slits. An interference pattern will show up, where the wave interferes with itself and there are alternating dark and light spots on the screen second screen (Fig 2). This pattern is specific to waves. Although you would suspect electrons, which are particles, to show up on the other side of the slit the way particles do, this is
not what happens. An interference pattern is shown to exist. Electrons behave like waves even though they are particles.

Even when electrons are passed through the two slits one by one, the interference pattern shows up after several electrons pass through. It is as though the electrons interfere individually with themselves but end up at one specific point on either side of the slits, and only after several electrons pass through does the interference pattern start to show up. The electrons are not interfering with each other but themselves, where the interference pattern only shows up as a collective thing. No physicist is able to give a satisfying account of why this happens which prompts physicists such as Richard Feynman to claim that “It is safe to say that nobody understands quantum mechanics.”

The mystery of the double-slit is hard to understand and explain but by examining Plato’s epistemology some sense can be made of it. Even though it is a measurable effect no one can give an account of why the electron interference appears, just as no one can give an account of the form of the Good even though it is present in observable objects. People are able to say how the interference shows up by postulating that electrons are waves but exactly what is waving and how the collective interference pattern shows up is beyond anyone. In this case it seems as though the physicist possesses a kind of correct judgment. The electrons do definitely interfere, as is shown with the measured result and as can be predicted, but an account is missing as to how this interference happens and so this seems to be midway between knowledge and opinion.

The result of the double-slit experiment with electrons is similar to Plato trying to explain the forms. Physicists know a lot about particles and waves and can explain the interactions of each individual entity but a road block shows up when trying to explain the electron interference. Even though knowledge of particles and waves is present, complete sense cannot be made of particles exhibiting wave characteristics. Similarly, for Plato knowledge of other particularly existing things does not help with knowledge of the forms. Perhaps this is a limit for physicists between what they can have genuine knowledge about and what they can merely have apparent knowledge about. Likewise, Plato admits that the forms are knowable and indeed known, but there is a difficulty in expressing them in language.

Although in the physicist’s case no one can give a proper account of the cause of the electron interference pattern and in Plato’s case no one is able to give a complete account of the form of the Good, this does not mean that these endeavors should be given up. Socrates’ famous maxim “the unexamined life isn’t worth living” (Apology, 38a) should be considered in physics. It is not the physicist’s life that should be examined, though; it is the physical theories that need to be continually examined. The overriding interpretation of quantum mechanics is, namely that it is useless to talk about what is happening to the electrons since the interference shows up and that is that, is very dangerous. To stop and count that as an explanation puts physics in danger of standing still. It is only though constant examination of the physical theories that a physicist can hope to get closer to the true nature of reality and past mere appearances.
By thinking through Platonic epistemology and the double-slit experiment in quantum mechanics one can see that some things are not as easy to understand as one would hope. The physicist should take notes from Plato, however, and observe that the search for knowledge and wisdom is an ongoing quest that can have fruitful results along the way.

Endnotes
*http://www.blacklightpower.com/theory/DoubleSlit/ Fig 37-3 Two Slit experiment.jpg

Works Cited
In his book *Philosophy of Biology*, Elliot Sober devotes a chapter to Creationism. He states, “Creationists maintain that some characteristics of living things are the result of intelligent design by God; they deny that natural processes suffice to account for all features of living things.” Creationism can be formed so it is either based on blind faith or evidence. Evidence can be either empirical or non-empirical. For example, evidence for the proposition “There is a man in the other room” would be empirical (for one would have to look in the other room to find out if it is true) whereas evidence for the proposition “There exists a universal moral law” would be non-empirical (for how could one ever experience it through the senses?). “Scientific Creationism” is the position that creationism can be supported with empirical evidence. In his chapter, Sober criticizes scientific creationism, concluding that it is an oxymoron. This paper will respond to Sober. It should be noted that although this paper will present a current argument for creationism or intelligent design, its focus is demonstrating the legitimacy of scientific creationism, not on establishing creationism’s veracity.

Sober’s argument against scientific creationism runs as follows: In order for a hypothesis or theory to be scientific it must be testable, that is, one should be able to look at empirical evidence and make a judgment if the hypothesis in question is true or false or at least if it has high or low likelihood. Hypotheses do this by yielding test implications: deductive statements from the hypothesis that can be empirically tested. But very rarely do hypotheses yield implications by themselves; rather they yield implications when conjoined with other hypotheses (called auxiliary hypotheses). This is the position formed by philosopher of science Pierre Duhem. Sober uses as an example the hypothesis that the Cretaceous extinction of the dinosaurs was caused by a meteor hitting the earth. Sober writes: Alvarez et al. (1980) argued that the presence of the metal iridium in various geological deposits was strong evidence for this hypothesis. The point here is that the meteor hypothesis, by itself, says nothing about where iridium should be found. The argument requires further assumption- for example, that iridium concentrations are higher in meteors than they are on earth and that deposits from a meteor hit should be found in certain geological strata. Thus, the meteor hypothesis predicts what we should observe only when it is supplemented with further assumptions.

In abstract terms, it is often the case that hypothesis \( H \) will yield not test implications, but that \( H \) with auxiliary assumptions \( A_1 \& A_2 \& \ldots \& A_n \) will yield test implications. Now apply this to creationism. The proposition “God separately created living things” offers nothing to test by itself. One has to conjoin it with at least one more proposition, like “If God had
separately created living things, he would have made them perfectly adapted to their environments”. This conjunction is full of possibilities for testing. One could analyze the relation of a species to its environment to discern perfect adaptability. Now Sober’s objection is that in the case of creationism there is no way to choose between auxiliary hypotheses to make the proposition “God separately created living things” testable. To quote him:

The hypothesis that God separately created living things is testable only when it is conjoined with auxiliary assumptions. But how is one to know which auxiliary hypotheses to believe? Different religions conceive of God in different ways. And there are conceptions of God… that perhaps are not part of any mainstream religion… The fact that some of these conceptions of God are familiar while others are decidedly odd is no basis for selecting. What one wants is evidence that one of them is true and that the rest are false. Without any evidence of this sort, the project of testing the hypothesis that God separately created the species that populate the living world is stopped dead. 4

Since there is no good way to choose between auxiliary hypotheses, there is no way to form a testable form of creationism, and thus “scientific creationism” is a meaningless statement.

How can one adequately respond to Sober’s objection? There are two ways. The first is to find some way to choose between auxiliary hypotheses which allow creationism to be testable. The second is to show that creationism is positively supported by evidence that falsifies (or at least seems to falsify) evolutionary theory. We will examine these ways in order.

How can one reformulate creationism so that it is testable? There are two parts to this that Sober requires. The first is to choose a conception of God that you want to test. Sober claims there are no good ways to do this. Our version of God has to be one that creates, as is implied in the term creationism. This gets rid of Sober’s pseudo-problem, “Different religions conceive of God in different ways.” The only interest for a creationist is a view of God that pictures him as creating, or at least designing. Furthermore, if God created he logically must have some consciousness and intelligence. Non-conscious beings don’t create/design things. This provides the following proposition to be tested, “A conscious and intelligent being created or at least designed the living organisms on the planet”. The next step is to determine what test implications, if any, can be derived from this proposition or if some auxiliary hypotheses need to be added. Since the statement is concerned with creating and/or designing, one needs to find evidence that living things are created and/or designed. To do this, criteria must be laid out for discerning design.

The problem is, how do we distinguish between a biological system that is intelligently designed and one that is “designed” by natural selection and some other cause of evolution (natural selection being the primary cause)? The only way to do this is to show that natural selection and the other causes (i.e. gene migration, random genetic drift, mutation, etc.) are not capable or are at least unlikely of accounting for the complexity one finds in the biological
system at hand, which is the same as saying natural selection and the other causes have to be falsified or virtually falsified (rendered improbable). So the first tactic to replying to Sober (reformulating the design hypothesis) reduces to the second tactic (falsifying evolutionary theory). Can this be done? As long as one does not exclude the possibility of design from the get-go, then it is worth a try.\textsuperscript{5}

Natural selection acting on random variation works in small increments. There will be a slight variation that makes a group within a species better at surviving and reproducing and that variation will then get passed on to the next generation, and this process will eventually result in a new species, through the accumulation of “numerous, successive, slight modifications”. Biochemist Michael Behe of Lehigh University, however, claims that certain biological systems could not be produced by “numerous, successive, slight modifications”, namely systems that are irreducibly complex. A system is irreducibly complex if it “is composed of several interacting parts, where the removal of any one of the parts causes the system to cease functioning.”\textsuperscript{6} The example he gives is a mouse trap since the only way for a mouse trap to function is to have all the parts present (i.e. the flat wooden platform, the metal hammer, a spring, a sensitive catch, and a metal bar).

Behe continues, “An irreducibly complex system cannot be produced directly by numerous, successive, slight modifications of a precursor system, because any precursor to an irreducibly complex system that is missing a part is by definition nonfunctional.”\textsuperscript{7} Finally, before he proceeds to show a couple of biological systems which are irreducibly complex, he warns, “Demonstration that a system is irreducibly complex is not a proof that there is absolutely no gradual route to its production… However, as the complexity of an interacting system increases, the likelihood of such and indirect route drops precipitously.”\textsuperscript{8}

In his essay \textit{Darwin’s Breakdown: Irreducible Complexity and Design at the Foundation of Life}, Behe provides two examples of irreducibly complex systems: the cilium and the system that targets proteins for delivery to subcellular compartments. Cilia are “hairlike structures on the surfaces of many animal and lower plant cells that can move fluid over the cell’s surface or ‘row’ single cells through a fluid.”\textsuperscript{9} We have cilia lining the cells of our respiratory tract, for example, allowing mucus to be transported to the throat for elimination. Behe provides the structure of a cilium:

A cilium consists of a bundle of fibers called an axoneme. An axoneme contains a ring of nine double “microtubules” surrounding two central single microtubules. Each outer doublet consists of a ring of thirteen filaments fused to an assembly of ten filaments. The filaments of the microtubules are composed of two proteins called alpha and beta tubulin. The eleven microtubules forming an axoneme are held together by three types of connectors: outer doublets are joined to each other by linkers of a highly elastic protein called nexin; and the central microtubules are joined by a connecting bridge. Finally, every doublet bears two arms, an inner arm and an outer arm, both containing a protein called dynein.\textsuperscript{10}
Ciliary motion is a result of a dynein protein which is attached to microtubule pushing another microtubule down. As this occurs, the nexin protein linkers become taut and prevent the microtubules from moving too far, converting the sliding motion into a bending motion. From this, a back and forth motion occurs, causing movement. This system is irreducibly complex: it needs motor proteins for sliding movement, linking proteins for bending movement, and microtubules to have something to move. Behe writes, “All of these parts are required to perform one function: ciliary motion. Just as a mousetrap does not work unless all of its constituent parts are present, ciliary motion simply does not exist in the absence of microtubules, connectors, and motors.”

The next example is the system of protein delivery into subcellular compartments. The eukaryotic cell contains a number of compartments for different functions. Behe describes the process by which a protein arrives at the lysosome, a compartment for digestion:

It turns out that proteins that will wind up in subcellular compartments contain a special amino acid sequence near the beginning called a “signal sequence.” As the proteins are being synthesized, a complex molecular assemblage called the signal recognition particle (SRP) binds to the signal sequence. This causes synthesis of the protein to halt temporarily. During the pause in protein synthesis the SRP binds the trans-membrane SRP receptor, which causes protein synthesis to resume and which allows passage of the protein into the interior or the endoplasmic reticulum (ER). As the protein passes into the ER the signal sequence is cut off.

For many proteins the ER is just a way station on their travels to their final destination (Figure 3). Proteins that will end up in a lysosome are enzymatically “tagged” with a carbohydrate residue called mannose-6-phosphate while still in the ER. An area of the ER membrane then begins to concentrate several proteins; one protein, clathrin, forms a sort of geodesic dome called a coated vesicle, which buds off from the ER. In the dome there is also a receptor protein that binds to both the clathrin and to the mannose-6-phosphate group of the protein that is being transported. The coated vesicle then leaves the ER, travels through the cytoplasm, and binds to the lysosome through another specific receptor protein. Finally, in a maneuver involving several more proteins, the vesicle fuses with the lysosome and the protein is at its destination. During its travel our protein interacted with dozens of macromolecules to achieve one purpose: its arrival in the lysosome. Virtually all components of the transport system are necessary for the system to operate, and therefore the system is irreducible. The consequences of a gap in the transport chain can be seen in the hereditary defect known as I-cell disease. It results from a deficiency of the enzyme that places the mannose-6-phosphate on proteins to be targeted to the lysosomes. I-cell disease is characterized by progressive retardation, skeletal deformities, and early death. Behe concludes that such systems like this (e.g. blood-clotting and the bacterial flagellum) are indicators of intelligent design.
Behe, of course, has his critics. We shall examine three, progressing from what this author judges to be the least serious to the most serious. The problems are: 1) The problem of identifying irreducibly complex systems. 2) The problem of the parts of an irreducibly complex system having independent functionality. 3) The problem of intelligent design being a “science-stopper” and inserting a “God of the gaps”. Critics try to take Behe’s mousetrap example and use it against him. Different types of mousetraps can be constructed with fewer parts than the one described above. As Eugenie Scott writes, “Scientists gleefully set about producing four-part, three-part, two-part, and even one-part mousetraps to demonstrate the reducibility of Behe’s prime example of an irreducibly complex structure.”

So this is the first problem. But it is hardly a problem. As Behe writes, “The point of irreducible complexity is not that you can’t make some other system that could work in a different way with fewer parts. The point is that the trap we’re considering right now needs all of its parts to function.” And as Scott concedes, “Ultimately, of course, it is possible to reduce a structure to so few parts that, indeed, removal of any one part will make the structure cease functioning.” So there are obviously irreducibly complex systems in nature.

The second problem is the fact that some parts of supposed irreducibly complex systems can be used for other functions. Again, critics try to dismantle the mousetrap. Kenneth Miller writes,

Take away two parts (the catch and the metal bar), and you may not have a mousetrap but you do have a three-part machine that makes a fully functional tie clip or paper clip. Take away the spring, and you have a two-part key chain. The catch of some mousetraps could be used as a fishhook, and the wooden base as a paperweight; useful applications of other parts include everything from toothpicks to nutcrackers and clipboard holders. The point, which science has long understood, is that bits and pieces of supposedly irreducibly complex machines may have different—but still useful—functions.

So perhaps the parts of the cilium served different functions at one time, and came together later. Natural selection could still favor these parts as functional for the organism. But the answer to this objection was given preemptively above, “Demonstration that a system is irreducibly complex is not a proof that there is absolutely no gradual route to its production...However, as the complexity of an interacting system increases, the likelihood of such an indirect route drops precipitously.”

The logic seems to be something like this: Irreducibly complex systems have precise, complementary parts. For these parts to come together in a gradual way, the parts have to naturally be attracted to each other and come together in the right way at the right time. Now imagine a system with a 1000 extremely exact complementary parts, where each part is vital for the functioning of the system. What is the probability all these parts had different functions elsewhere, and then through natural selection alone, were modified and drawn to each other to form this complex system? Intuitively, the probability seems low, but at this point it becomes a question for mathematicians.
The next objection claims that if we allow intelligent design as a possible explanation for biological organisms, you effectively stop science. Scott gives a good description of the problem,

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century scientists limit themselves to explaining natural phenomena using only natural causes for another practical reason: if a scientist is “allowed” to refer to God as a direct causal force, then there is no reason to continue looking for a natural explanation. Scientific explanation screeches to a halt. If there were a natural explanation, perhaps unknown or not yet able to be studied given technological limits or inadequate theory, then it would never be discovered if scientists, giving up in despair, invoked the supernatural. Scientists are quite used to saying “I don’t know yet.”¹⁷

Historians of science, if asked by anyone, will surely be able to produce numerous examples of exactly what Scott is talking about. Time and again, natural law has replaced supposed intelligent, or mystical, or supernatural cause. Scott herself provides a fun example: a ring of toadstools in the woods.¹⁸

Every medieval peasant knows that rings of toadstools that suddenly appear in the woods are the result of a fairy celebration the night before, and not the result of some natural process. After all, it has all the appearance of design. It suddenly appears out of nowhere and has a symmetrical shape. Let us assume that given the state of science in the year 800, no explanation could be provided. Thus the fairy-revelry theory is reasonable explanation for the phenomenon in question.

Although I am naturally partial to the fairy-revelry theory, I of course do not believe it. The critical question is: Why isn’t intelligent design like the fairy-revelry theory? Let us assume, for the sake of discussion, that Behe and other Intelligent Design theorists are dead-on in their scientific arguments. Darwinian gradualism and any other forms of evolution, like self-organization, are simply unable to account for the complexity of life. Now consider this argument: 1) Life either originated by sheer chance, purely mechanical and impersonal evolution, or through intelligent design. 2) Life did not originate by sheer chance 3) Life did not originate by purely mechanical and impersonal evolution. 4) Therefore, Life originated by intelligent design. In logic, this argument is called valid, meaning that if premises 1-3 are true, then the conclusion has to be true. And even if the premises are only highly probable, that still makes the conclusion highly probable. So, assuming as we are Behe and others are correct in falsifying all evolution, what’s the problem?

The problem is premise 3. Even if Behe and others are right, their arguments only falsify the current forms of evolution on the table right now. And, given the past history of science, is it unreasonable to assume a discovery in the future that will solve all our problems? It has happened before. So to absolutely establish design, intelligent design theorists need to be able to list all the possible options on the table, and then refute them one by one until only design remains. Otherwise, it would seem we have just made a “God of the gaps”, meaning God is there to fill in the gaps of our understanding, but will
eventually be pushed out when, as usual, our scientific knowledge increases and we discover there is a natural explanation after all. God, and with Him intelligent agency, just keeps seeming to get pushed out.

So the task for intelligent design is to rigorously define and establish criteria for design and to list and refute all the viable non-design, mechanical mechanisms of evolution. If this can be done, one can conclude that the theory of intelligent design is a good one, having strong empirical evidence to back it up, and that “scientific creationism” is not an oxymoron.

Endnotes
1 Sober, Elliot. *Philosophy of Biology*. 2nd ed. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000), 28. I do not think this is the best definition of creationism. Creationism could be stated more broadly to be “The view that some intelligent agent or agents created and/or designed some biological entities”. In this view, though God is clearly an option, God is not the sole option (extra terrestrials being a possibility).
2 Those interested in such a task are directed toward the work of the Intelligent Design community, the key players being Phillip E. Johnson, Michael Behe, Jonathan Wells, William Dembski, and Stephen C. Meyer.
3 Ibid., 49.
4 Ibid., 53.
5 There are two popular ways used to exclude design from the get-go. The first is to appeal to what is called methodological naturalism, which for our purposes can be defined as the view that science should limit itself unconscious, “blind” material explanations. In this view, to appeal to a designer is the same as to appeal to a mystery. The second way is to make an unbridgeable divide between “religion” and “science” and to place design in the religion category and evolution in the science category. When this is done, it becomes impossible to detect design in nature, regardless of the evidence.
7 Ibid., 94.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 95.
11 Ibid., 96.
12 Ibid., 96-98.
15 Scott, 117.
16 Quoted in Strobel, 200.
17 Scott, 50.
18 Ibid., 122. This example in the context is used to attack mathematician and philosopher William A. Dembski’s “Explanatory Filter” for detecting intelligent design. I am slightly adapting it for the present purpose.
SOCRATES AND WITTGENSTEIN: THE MEANING OF A WORD

Arron Shiffer

There is a strong comparison between one of the oldest and one of the more recent philosophers, Socrates and Wittgenstein: both were interested in the pursuit of the meaning of a word while at the same time denying that there was a “definition” of the word. To “define” a word is to create philosophical problems. Both philosophers recognized these problems introduced by those who chose to define “truths” in order to perfect a philosophical system. They also took notice that philosophers tended to remove philosophy from common practice and common language and reduce it to a specialized system that revealed answers to the ultimate questions (or began with answers and determined the means to those ends). Socrates and Wittgenstein recognized that philosophy needs to be a practice and not a dogma.

Because Socrates “knew nothing” he saw little point in writing philosophy down; he preferred to live the discourse of his philosophy. Information regarding Socrates’ teachings must be drawn out of the texts of Plato, Xenophon, Aristophanes, Aristotle etc... Socrates worked through dialectic to search for the ultimate goal, the “examined life.” Socrates’ life served as an example, by his constant re-examination of what his own life should be, and equally important, what it should not be. For how can you know the right way to live if you have not examined and re-examined the question?

Ludwig Wittgenstein published very little and he later rejected that which he did publish. Wittgenstein’s other works are his leftover notes in which he “spares no one the trouble of thinking” (Philosophical Investigations [hereafter PI], “Preface”). Wittgenstein’s work is intended to resolve the confusions that people cause themselves because of their misunderstandings of language and meaning. He, like Socrates, was known for the disavowal of his own knowledge.

Plato’s Apology is said to be a reliable account of the trial in which Socrates was convicted for impiety and corrupting the youth. The account, largely accepted by the hundreds of people present, is a testament to the credibility of the Socratic philosophy found in the early Platonic dialogues. One can see a clear distinction when reading Socrates through Plato’s Socrates and when reading Plato through Plato’s Socrates. Gregory Vlastos, in Socratic Studies, places the dialogues in three groups: the early, middle, and late. The groups are subdivided by the change in philosophical style from Socrates’ influence to Plato’s separate philosophy. In the early group, we find texts such as: Apology, Gorgias, Crito, Euthyphro, and Republic I. In the middle group, we find: Symposium and Republic II –X. Lastly, in the late group we find the oldest Platonic dialogues, such as Sophist, Politicus, and Laws.
The large difference between Socrates and Plato is that of providing answers to Socrates’ questions. Aristotle claimed that “Socrates, on the other hand, was concerned only with ethics and not at all with nature as a whole; he was seeking the universal in ethics and was the first to turn his thought to definitions” (Aristotle, *Introductory Readings*, 125-126). Several questions can be raised regarding the validity of this statement. Most importantly for this paper, was it Socrates or Plato who turned his thought to definitions? Socrates refused to define anything. It is only in the later dialogues that definitions are proposed. Socrates is searching for answers but does not seem to believe that his interlocutor will actually know them.

In the middle and later dialogues Plato begins to answer Socrates’ questions by giving definitions. This concept is summed up best by Vlastos: “When Plato puts this new doctrine (recollection) into the mouth of Socrates we know that the protagonist of the elenctic dialogues has achieved euthanasia in a genius greater than his own – Plato’s” (*Socratic Studies*, p. 79). Wittgenstein recognizes exactly this problem when he cites *Theaetetus* in the *Philosophical Investigations* (PI 46 & 518). *Theaetetus* is a middle period dialogue where Plato begins to usurp Socrates’ philosophy. Wittgenstein is largely critical of the dialogue.

With an understanding of the difference between Plato and Socrates in place, we can try to understand Socrates himself and the tools used to “examine oneself,” or perhaps more properly, to entice someone to examine his or her self. Socratic irony and ignorance are the most important of these tools. Socratic irony is not just a way for Socrates to be humorous. He is using it to show how being pompous or producing mere flattery is wrong, and worse, it takes away credibility from those who have knowledge. The problem of flattery is central within the critiques found within the *Gorgias*. He uses the technique to keep the conversation intellectually honest. Vlastos is helpful on this point: “As instrument of Socratic teaching this irony is best left unresolved. Its purpose is not, as Kierkegaard would have it, to “deceive [the learner] into truth.” It is to tease, mock, perplex him into seeking the truth” (*Socratic Studies*, 65).

Wittgenstein had concepts equal to those of flattery and of irony. He produces an interlocutor in the *Philosophical Investigations* that permits the text to function in a way very much like Socrates’ dialectic. He also makes use of irony to show how philosophers make mistakes. Thus, Wittgenstein says that “Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language” (PI, 109).

The mistake of philosophers, according to both Wittgenstein and Socrates, is to define these words wholly. It is a mistake to define a term largely because the person is mistaken in their understanding of the word, especially when it comes to ethics. “‘Here I might as well draw a circle or heart as a rectangle, for all the colours merge. Anything – and nothing - is right –.’ And this is the position you are in if you look for definitions corresponding to our concepts in aesthetics or ethics” (PI, 77).
In the *Gorgias*, Socrates challenges Callicles to define who the “better” people are. He tries to show Callicles that his definition of “better” is flawed in its accuracy and its attempt.

Is it the same man you call the “better” and the “superior”? I wasn’t able then, either, to figure out what you meant. Is it the stronger ones you call superior, and should those who are weaker take orders from the one who’s stronger?...Or do “better” and “superior” have the same definition? (*Plato’s Complete Works* [hereafter PCW], 832).

It is important to think through the problems and to produce a useful understanding of the issue but to answer the questions that are posed (Who are the better people?) is to kill the importance of the task. However, both Socrates and Wittgenstein thought that work in ethics and aesthetics were of great importance.

Socrates and Wittgenstein were both known for their aggressive attempts to talk about philosophy with anyone who would listen. Socratic philosophy was always done in the marketplace through dialectic. Wittgenstein focused on the idea that language is external (public) and the meanings of words were in their “use.” This certainly implies that the need for discussion and agreement is necessary. “What we do is to bring back words from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (PI, 116). Terms are defined through the examination and re-examination of external agreement of interlocutors, in other words, the *use*. “One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to *look at* its use and learn from that. But the difficulty is to remove the prejudice which stands in the way of doing this” (PI, 340).

Ignorance is a tool employed by Socrates in his search for the right way to live. The use of ignorance can be understood in another way. Simply put, Socrates knows enough to know that he knows nothing, at least nothing of grand importance. He claims to know nothing because he does not feel he has adequate answers to even the basic philosophical questions. Wittgenstein paralleled this ignorance in those things “that one cannot talk about” and the use of “nonsense”. His criticisms of philosophy are along these lines. “When we do philosophy we are like savages, primitive people, who hear the expressions of civilized men, put a false interpretation on them, and then draw the queerest conclusions from it” (PI, 194).

These acceptances of ignorance by Socrates and Wittgenstein allow for philosophy to be done properly. Wittgenstein recognizes that philosophers abuse language and destroy knowledge by adding unnecessary fluff. One must follow processes to get at the solutions not just guess at one or define a solution and see what follows from it. “It is not our aim to refine or complete the system of rules for the use of our words in unheard-of ways. For the clarity we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear. The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to” (PI,
There is a further respect in which Socratic knowledge is poles apart from knowledge\( _C \) [the subscript \( C \) means knowledge of certainty and the subscript \( E \) signifies elenctic knowledge]: it is full of gaps, unanswered questions, it is surrounded and invaded by unresolved perplexity. But this does not trouble Socrates. He does not find it debilitating, but exhilarating, as well he may, for what he needs to make his method work is not completeness but consistency within that set of elenctically testable beliefs which constitutes his knowledge\( _E \). At no time does this method require of him that he produce himself answers to the questions his interlocutors fail to find. The task it sets him is to refute bogus ones, and this he does by eliciting from them the beliefs which generate the negation of their false answers. So if an inquiry should run into aporia, he can reckon the exercise not failure but incomplete success (Socratic Studies, 57-58).

Socrates and Wittgenstein gained knowledge\( _E \) from their dialogues with others and looked forward to them in the hopes of learning something further. It can certainly be said that one gains the knowledge\( _E \) of what justice, virtue, and friendship are not in these dialogues, or more precisely, one has learned what knowledge\( _E \) is not through some past conversation (with, for example, Diotima). This knowledge\( _E \) is very scientific minded. One does not claim to have the knowledge\( _C \) but tries to get to it through experimentation of ideas and makes progress in doing so. Furthermore, it is imperative to constantly re-examine these ideas through separate independent experimental conversations. The wisdom in ignorance is that one knows enough to know that they do not know everything and must allow for the possibility that they may be wrong. The only path to knowledge\( _C \), if it is at all attainable, is the constant re-examination of the self and others through public conversation. The “use” of language is the path to knowledge of meaning. One will not find answers internally; answers are only found through external communication.

“So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?” – It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in the form of life (Pl, 241).

Works Cited
photo by Karlie Knudtsen
When asked about his own writing, Foucault presents his work as, “a reality which can be transformed infinitely...in a word, usable in a different way, by different people, in different countries.” In an attempt to make sense of the multifarious nature of Foucault’s writing, I will interpret his application of genealogy in *Discipline and Punish* as a method that enables him to write a history of the modern soul and empowers us to think differently about institutions and truth. Foucault proffers genealogy as a tool for breaking apart conventional understandings of the world:

For centuries we have been convinced that between our ethics, our personal ethics, our everyday life, and the great political and social and economic structures, there were analytical relations, and that we couldn’t change anything, for instance in our sex life or our family life, without ruining our economy, our democracy, and so on. I think we have to get rid of this idea of an analytical or necessary link between ethics and other social or economic or political structures.

Towards ridding ourselves of unquestioned analytical relations, the genealogical method exemplified in *Discipline and Punish* explores both the way things are and the way things could be, which in combination, reveal the force behind Foucault’s work. Because current systems are contingent upon historical circumstances, we are not necessarily locked into the present state of things. Therefore, we can invent, create, discover, and change institutions and ourselves. Working within this idea, the critical phase of this paper will use Foucault’s example of carceral punishment to explore what the genealogical method is and its deconstructive implications for history, institutions, and individuals. Then, in the positive phase of this paper, I will consider if, given Foucault’s deconstructive analysis, there is anything offered as a foundation on which institutions, systems, or self identity can be built, or if Foucault’s genealogy ultimately collapses into nihilism.

I. CRITICAL PHASE
A. Genealogy and Historical Contingency

Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, serves as a prime example of his application of genealogy and substitutes for his declination to solidify a working definition of the method as such. In this work, Foucault wonders why criminal justice has shifted from a model which redressed crimes to one which reforms criminals. His interest is not focused upon certain forms of punishment as historically necessary and linear outgrowths of previous circumstances, but rather upon the movement of penal justice from punishment...
directed towards criminal bodies to punishment inflicted upon criminal souls. “In order to get a better understanding of what is punished and why,” Foucault thinks “the question how does one punish” is of prime importance. Looking at the practical applications of punitive systems enables two important pieces of information to be ascertained that would otherwise be obscured. First, the hidden and often insidious aims of those systems are revealed, directly feeding into a better understanding of what that system is actually seeking to punish and why that punishment is seen as functional. For Foucault, tools such as governing systems of rules imposed, reasons given, places where certain things are said and done show intentions of more general “regimes of practices.” Examining punitive tools and their applications, from disembowelment or incarceration of criminal bodies to psychological analysis of criminal pasts and personalities, gives better understanding of what is punished and why such punishments are inflicted.

To illustrate the utility of analyzing practical applications, consider this example: A criminal judge decrees twenty years incarceration as a just retribution for manslaughter and yet the criminal will be released after fifteen years for good behavior as determined by a clinical psychologist’s opinion weighting the criminal personality in question against expected norms of individuals in society. Although the stated aim given by the judge appears to be retributive justice proportionally effacing one crime with physical time spent in prison, it appears, upon examination, that the actual aim of imprisonment was behavioral reform of the criminal because the criminal is released according to standards of personality reform and not according to the retributive prescription. In this case, the determination of when justice is served is made through application of the tool(s) of psychology upon the criminal subject where measurements, quantifications, and assessments of the psychological and behavioral modifications of the prisoner are tabulated. The crime now appears to be redressed not through the act of physically confining a person within a prison but rather by transforming the psychological responses of that subject. Showing behavioral reform as the perhaps hidden aim of the penal justice system unmasks the real subject of punishment: the soul and not the body is the amphitheatre of punishment most well suited for the aims of modern penal justice.

It is no surprise that Foucault’s genealogical analysis in *Discipline and Punish* uses ‘the practical how’ of punishment as displayed through bodily torture, “humanitarian reform”, and penal incarceration as a means of entering into the what and why of criminal justice. Prior to the French Revolution, all crimes were understood as attacking the will of the sovereign and were effaced through torturous inscription of those crimes upon the body of the offender in the form of vengeful and violent displays of public torture. In the eighteenth century, a new discourse on punishment presented itself where crime was conceived of not as infractions against a sovereign but as transgressions against a people bound by social contract. Humanitarian reformers of this era sought both redress for offences against society and reconciliation of the
guilty individual back into society as a juridical subject through a therapeutic
semiotic of punishment where crime and punishment become linked through
representation.\textsuperscript{5} However, this veritable theatre of punishments, advocated for a
brief period of sixty years, was only a possible alternative arising from rejection
of a torture system, but not the type of system we have today. Instead, we find
ourselves similarly rebuffing torture and instead replacing it with a system of
penal incarceration where “not the crime so much as the criminal”\textsuperscript{6} becomes the
object of punishment.

Indeed, “all the early nineteenth century texts and discussions testify
to the astonishment of finding the prison being used as a general means of
punishment- something that had not at all been what the eighteenth century
reformers had in mind”.\textsuperscript{7} Plainly, the modern event of penal justice through
incarceration does not directly blossom from eighteenth century roots; it occurs
rather as an historical contingency, a ‘happy’ accident, occurring instead of
‘humanitarian reform’. In fact, underpinning each different practice of penal
justice, form torture to reform to incarceration, an extensive complex of
heterogeneous justifications, rationales, historical precedents, and practical
methods arise not in a necessary or linear fashion from a static set of historical
circumstances but rather as a complex web of historical processes interacting
at certain discernable moments. Comprising these moments are strands of
historical data intersecting and creating events of interaction that reflectively
rediscover the constitutive historical data according to the emergent event
of the data’s interconnection. At this nexus, the self-referential event judges
and justifies itself as necessary and rationally dictated by inventing ‘truth
relationships’ with the historical data strands creating it. More specifically, it
deems itself necessarily true by juxtaposing its own constitutive data to other
event combinations that could have been, but which, circumstantially, and in
reference to the reflecting event itself, were not the case and thus are ‘false’.
This reflexivity back upon the web enables the event to create systemic values
within the web of possibilities surrounding it. Illustrating this, Foucault says
incarceration “appeared so bound up and at such a deep level with the very
functioning of society that it banished into oblivion all the other punishments
that the eighteenth century reformers had imagined. It seemed to have no
alternative, as if carried along by the very movement of history”.\textsuperscript{8} Genealogical
examination of how the carceral event germinates from indeterminate historical
circumstances shows incarceration legitimating itself as necessary by appearing
as the most functional and best method of justice.

Deconstructing the modern carceral event into a “complex
interconnection of a multiplicity of historical processes,”\textsuperscript{9} converging at a
certain moment, and appearing as “an altogether natural, self-evident, and
indispensable” consequent of history\textsuperscript{10}, provides a starting point for thinking
differently about the event and institution of incarceration. According to
Foucault, it isn’t that “the ceremony of public torture is in itself more irrational
than imprisonment in a cell; but it is irrational in terms of a type of penal practice
that involves new ways of envisaging the effects to be produced by the penalty
imposed, new ways of calculating its utility, justifying it, fixing its degrees, and so on”.

Because a new and perhaps hidden end of criminal justice as personality reform has been uncovered, a new method and means of enacting punishment towards that end implies a certain system or web of punishment as most advantageous. However, these new means and ends emerge from previous systems aimed at different penal goals previously seen as necessary but now as defunct and hence contingent. If the means and ends of penal justice are constantly shifting, furnishing further, different means and ends, how can systems built around certain historical conceptions of penal justice be anything but contingencies wearing masks of necessity? This observation creates ontologic openness to exist in other ways within systems appearing fundamental and within foundational events previously considered necessary. One can infer that if circumstances dictated another aim, then another event and subsequent means-ends system would be self-evidently valued as the best framework. Therefore, historically circumstantial events such as ‘incarceration as the best method of penal justice’ are only circumstantial, relative, and contingent upon a certain conception of criminal justice that has changed many times and will continue to do so in the future.

Genealogy enables Foucault to dismantle the perceived necessity of means-ends systems of specific institutions thus demonstrating the system’s precariousness and contingency. By exposing the contingency of the regime, or prevailing system of ‘truth’, the standard of valuation for historically possible events, Foucault shows that in all probability another equal yet contingent system could operate and as such it could determine the ‘truth’ of how things are. According to Foucault, historical events are indeterminate; each constitutive datum can assume different facets depending on what external forces interact with it. Had the raw data of history interfaced differently, incarceration would not be the self-evident and universally approved form of penal justice. Perhaps humanitarian reform or even something altogether different would be the system under which we live. Likewise, interpreting history by the light of the carceral event and subsequent “regime of truth” automatically dictates the only acceptable view of history, posits as true, excludes as false, and values as important or unimportant certain factors that if, arisen in slightly different combination, might serve exactly opposite functions under different “regimes”. Exposing the systemic contingency enables the clay of history be remolded and understood in new light so failing or broken systems can be replaced.

B. Genealogy and Individual Contingency

Further exemplifying genealogy and building upon historical contingency, Foucault introduces what I call “individual contingency”, where power-knowledge complexes based upon historically indeterminate events produce individual subjects of equal contingency. Foucault clarifies Discipline and Punish’s genealogical exploration as a “historical ontology of ourselves in relation to a field of power through which we constitute ourselves as subjects acting on others,” documenting “how the subject is ‘created’ by
power-knowledge complexes of history” arised from the interaction between subjects. Bringing “individual contingency” to the surface, Foucault chronicles the objectification of human beings by systems, such as education and penal justice, and the human’s transformation into subjects for those systems through power and knowledge relationships.

Within Foucault’s work, these two constituents, power and knowledge, “directly imply one another; there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations”. Accessing the ontologic ‘being’ or essence of either term, power or knowledge, itself is impossible, requiring epistemic access we as humans do not have due to involvement of our subjectivity in every interpretive attempt. Therefore, entree into the concepts once again dictates examination of how they operate, what their practical function is, and how they are revealed. Approaching the topic this way assumes nothing about power itself or its essential grounding, in fact this avenue introduces “the suspicion that power as such does not exist” enabling power to show itself without subjective superimpositions. The phenomenon of power, ‘how’ it appears before any subject, “brings into play relations between individuals,” constituting “ensembles of actions that induce others and follow from one another”. Power shows itself at the event of interaction between two individuals or groups; it exists in the relation of one subject’s actions upon another subject’s actions, who, when faced with a relationship of power, has “a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions open up” to it. Through power-relations, “certain actions [of the imposer] may structure the field of other possible actions” open to the imposed upon. This power-relation determines the necessary connection of the historical data both through the production and exchange of signification—sounds, words, position, time and so on— constituting the relational event and fixing the ‘truth’ between subjects. This does two things. First, it produces knowledge of both individuals’ historical circumstances relative to the event. Here, ‘truth’ is determined to be the historical data enabling the subjects to interact and form their relational connection, and ‘falsity’ becomes the circumstances within the web of each subject that inhibits creation of the relation. Secondly, signification of the relational ‘truth’ and ‘falsity’ of the event is distilled and imbedded within each subject’s web of possibilities, further propitiating the gravity of the event, deepening the power relation, expanding knowledge of the relational subjects, and extending the power of the imposer into the formation of the imposed subject by shaping its field of possible actions. Foucault addresses the ultimately arbitrariness by which individuals and ‘knowledge’ of them is created:

Knowledge is an “invention” behind which there is something quite distinct from it: an interplay of instincts, impulses, desires, fear, will to appropriation. It is on the stage where they clash that knowledge comes into being.
Knowledge of an individual, i.e. a specific web or structured field of existence, is invented during events of power-relation between two different subjects, which, paralleling historical contingency, are themselves shapes by complexes of historical data reflecting back upon their historical constitution a hermeneutics of event-relative signification contingent upon the historical circumstances propelling either subject into the relation. Thus, subjective knowledge is not set in stone, it is produced circumstantially, individuals’ and ‘truths’ about them are fabricated as contingencies upon contingencies.

Focusing on “individual contingency”, Discipline and Punish is both a genealogy of social institutions and the formation of modern individuals through powers of discipline and punishment. The practices and techniques, articulated upon carceral subjects structure the field of possible actions for such subjects and the very structuring yields knowledge of the imposed and their constitution relative to the imposer. In fact, disciplinary power “makes people”,21 it is the cause of individuation; one of the prime effects of power is that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires comes to be identified and constituted as individuals”.22

The historically contingent event of ‘incarceration as the best system of penal justice’ produces individuals by determining the fitness of other subjects relative to its own structure. Through carceral exercises of power, surveillance and investigation of those ‘individuals’ as a means of gaining further individuating knowledge is legitimized and provides a foundation for human sciences — sociology, psychology, criminology, even pedagogy. Within these scientific subjects, individuals conceptually interface with each other and the multiplicity and can be compared and contrasted thereto. This serves to increase power-knowledge relations and further form individual subjects through application of the tools and techniques of the science. These “human sciences” arise from historically contingent power-knowledge complexes, like incarceration, and produce “a whole ensemble of regulated communications [between imposer and imposed] ( . . . exhortations, coded signals, signs of obedience, differential marks of the “value” of each person and of the levels of knowledge) and by means a whole series of power processes (enclosure, surveillance, reward and punishment, the pyramidal hierarchy)”23 that become embedded within the fabric of society. Through the spread of the initial power-relation, more and more subjective fields of possibilities become structured relative to the event manifesting normalizing dictums, rationalizations, and structures of acceptability (mores, morals, ethics)24 which are accepted by the multiplicity of fabricated individuals, establishing a society further appropriating, justifying, and inventing narrower and narrower fields of acceptable actions.

Individuals in carceral situations are formed through spatial segmentation of persons within the cellular confines of a prison and panopticon, rendering them visible for study, comparison, and productive of knowledge for an observer concerned with their “individual specificity.” Upon the fabricated individual descends an ever-increasing army of “disciplines”, weighting one
person against another, determining the ‘truth’ of an individual referential to the contingent power of carceral justice, and forcing that very power into the being of the individual. These practices of disciplinary power ought not be conceived as prohibitive but rather as productive. They are productive of individual subjects and “knowledge” of them relative to a historically contingent event.

Foucault’s genealogy exposes and disassembles our conventional understandings of the modern soul by revealing how history is colored, truths constructed, and individuals, disciplines, and ethical structures fabricated by events that could have different outcomes. What if circumstances would have been infinitesimally different? Could history be a non-linear system where small changes in starting conditions produce huge changes in outcomes? Would we have different social institutions, different ideas about truth, perhaps different ideas about who we are?

II. POSITIVE PHASE
A. Genealogy and Ethical Contingency?

Following from Foucault’s analysis of the contingency of history, institutions, and individuals, it might seem as though there is no solid ground from which institutions, societies, or individuals can be rebuilt. Does this also mean that ethics fare the same; are moral codes contingent, relative, and ultimately meaningless? As Foucault has pointed out, our conceptions of history establish disciplines producing social norms and morals emanating through the fabric of society. The dubitability of the very basis of any institutional codes of conduct opens morals and ethics to a myriad alternate dictums of ‘true’ and ‘false’, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. All systems, even systems governing the most basic human relationships, become plagued by recalcitrant openness, resistant to all definite determinations, and no longer able to be understood as rules to follow but rather as contingencies for leveling and remolding. This is extremely disconcerting: there is no substantial prohibition against dismantling ethics forbidding murder or theft. What becomes of ethics? — how do we make sense of ethics and subjectivity as the basis for ethical action; does Foucault’s genealogical understanding of history, institutions, and individuality imply that there is no substantive ground from which to build a valid system of ethics. Must ethics collapses into meaninglessness and nihilism?

Foucault would resist this charge. In fact, a genealogy of ethics examining Greek, Roman, and Christian practices reveals obligations of self knowledge and self care, in other words an aesthetics of existence, were of central importance around which “whole domain[s] of complex and regulated activities . . . considered both as a duty and a technique.”

As Epicurus said: “When young one must not hesitate to study philosophy, and when old, one must not hesitate to study philosophy. It is never too early or too late to take care of one’s soul”. Care of self emerges as the noblest form of living where one acts as sovereign over one’s self— taking one’s self as one’s own object. By doing so, once becomes completely self-possessed and able to limit and control power interferences from external sources and their shaping effect.
upon the human soul. The quintessence of self care, according to Foucault, is death, where, “by thinking of oneself as being about to die, one can judge each action that one is performing in terms of its own value . . . able to become a sort of judge of himself and assess the moral progress he will have made, up to his final day”. This care by which one exercises power over oneself entails intersubjective ethics and regulation of one’s powers over others; “the care of the self is ethical in itself; but it implies complex relationships with others . . . it is important for the free man who conducts himself as he should to be able to govern his wife, his children, his household; it is also the art of governing . . . and if you know ontologically what you are, you cannot abuse your power over others”. Summarily, the type of power-knowledge relationship one ought to have with oneself, rapport à soi, as reflected by death, is the ground of ethics and is essentially subjective.

III. CONCLUSION

Foucault’s use of genealogical methodology deconstructs history, institutions, and individuals, uncovering the dark underbelly of contingency inherent in these structures perceived and accepted as necessary. Showing contingency within ‘self-given’ systems enmeshing us provides a starting point for thinking differently about these systems and the current state of things created by them. Genealogy and its deconstructive nature giving us a way to step outside of the structures within which we operate unwittingly and examine them as things made and fashioned which could be otherwise. They are not, then, essential forms of our lives. The infinitely transformable tool of genealogy opens all possible constructions and systems enabling intellectual vision to penetrate them, recognize them as contingent inventions of certain powers, and understand them as mutable and able to be replaced. This awareness brings both the freedom to rebuild, invent, and create new structures based upon conceptions of self care and provides an incredible weapon for preventing bondage, domination, and tyranny by any regime or system.

Endnotes

1 E 262-263 9 P 338
2 LS 387 10 D&P 170
3 P 326 11 BS 775
4 D&P 27 12 P 338
5 P 336 13 D&P 226
6 P 337 14 E 95
7 P 340 15 E 95
8 P 343 16 E 105
17 E 287-88
18 E 263
19 Regretfully, this paper also lacks space for an examination of Foucault’s genealogy of self, if any is given.

Works Cited

(LS) Shiner, Larry. Reading Foucault. Sangamon State University. 2001
THE PROBLEM OF MISUNDERSTANDING

Aaron Elliott

Any presentation, intentional or not, can potentially be misunderstood. Anything I do or say could be taken to mean something else, even if I am unaware that I am being misunderstood. This is not only true for the overt action, but also for the intention behind the action. If I mutter something to myself, which is not unheard of, people could misunderstand the words I say or they could think I am talking to them, which are two distinct kinds of misunderstanding. I will call these two types of misunderstanding ‘content misunderstanding’ and ‘intent misunderstanding,’ respectively. There is also misunderstanding of meaning, which seems to be where content and intent intersect, since meaning is both contained in my action and intended when I commit the action. Because of this I will treat misunderstanding of meaning as a separate category, instead of as a subcategory of both.

To clarify, I will explain further the differences between these three types of misunderstanding, using examples. Most of these examples are more straightforward than many everyday misunderstandings, but this is in order to make the distinctions between the categories more obvious. Moreover, these categories can provide a deeper understanding of misunderstanding. Content misunderstanding involves misunderstanding the overt features of the action. If I say something and someone thinks that I said something else, this is a content misunderstanding. For instance, I could ask someone to hand me a bowl, but they could believe I asked for a ball. Intent misunderstanding involves desires and specifically desired outcomes. If I throw a snowball towards my friend without wanting to hit him but do, he is likely to misunderstand the intent of my action and think that I was trying to hit him. Meaning misunderstanding deals with misunderstanding the meaning which a person holds regarding his own actions. For instance, if I tell someone that I am going to the store and mean the mall but the person thinks I mean the grocery store, this is a misunderstanding of meaning.

If I try to explain something or do something, a second party can either understand or misunderstand what I do or say. If I am aware of a misunderstanding I can make efforts to explain myself and am likely to do so. In other words, there are things I might have initially done to avoid a misunderstanding. When the person thought I was going to the grocery store, I could have used more precise language to begin with. Conversely, if I cannot make myself understood, then this is because I am unable to clarify myself in such a way as to be understood. Either way, some responsibility for the misunderstanding would fall on me. I could be unaware of the misunderstanding, not know how to properly express myself the first time, or be unable to prevent the misunderstanding. None of these necessarily make the
responsibility entirely, or even half, mine. Nevertheless, some portion can be attributed to me as the misunderstood party.

This assignation of responsibility only applies to beings with the capacities for action and knowledge. That is, if one misunderstands a tree to be a bush, the tree would not share in the responsibility, because it is unable to know that there is a misunderstanding, let alone act in any way to correct the misunderstanding. This is also the case if one misunderstands a complicated concept, such as calculus. Calculus would not be responsible for the misunderstanding, though your math teacher (or Isaac Newton) could be.

Misunderstanding is not inherently, or even necessarily, bad. Misunderstandings can be amusing as evidenced by how often they are used by sit-com writers to make story lines. Misunderstandings are only bad when the consequences are bad, and the worse the consequence the worse the misunderstanding. If you give someone directions, and the person misunderstands them, but it only makes the person five minutes late, the consequences are not so bad, so neither is the misunderstanding. However, if you told someone to invest in Apple, but they thought you said Enron, the consequences would have been really bad, and therefore, the misunderstanding would have been equally bad. There could also be misunderstandings with good consequences; if I ask my father to pick me up from the airport at 3 pm, but he thinks I had said 5 pm, and my plane is delayed for two hours, we both would arrive at the same time, and the misunderstanding would be good.

For good or bad misunderstandings, responsibility would extend to the consequences too. So, if I am responsible for my sister thinking she can borrow my car Friday, when I mean Saturday, and she misses a job interview, I would have some share of the responsibility for her missing the interview.¹ This would, hopefully, be a case of an honest misunderstanding where I did nothing to deliberately cause it and likely was unaware that a misunderstanding existed. There are also dishonest, deliberate or deceptive misunderstandings, where someone intentionally causes the misunderstanding; in this kind of misunderstanding, more of the responsibility belongs to the misunderstood than in an honest misunderstanding. For example, if I were to tell a friend I am at Starbucks and ask her to come meet me, but my friend thinks I mean one on the other side of town and I am aware that she thinks this but do nothing to correct her misunderstanding, then I have deliberately caused the misunderstanding, and have a larger share of the responsibility than if it were an honest misunderstanding.² As for good consequences of misunderstandings, it seems like they are the product of luck, and so responsibility for the misunderstanding should not be transferred to them. An exception to this would be for deliberate misunderstandings with good consequences, but only if the misunderstood plans for the good consequence to follow from the misunderstanding.

Having clarified the concept of misunderstanding, I will now examine God, keeping my previous conclusions in mind. God is commonly thought of as an omniscient, omnipotent being, which would subject God to a share of the causal responsibility for any misunderstanding. While it may be possible that
someone completely understands God, this seems unlikely. Furthermore, there
definitely exist people who misunderstand God. The fact that I said “God is
commonly thought of as an omniscient, omnipotent being” shows that there are
those who think of God as having different, and conflicting, attributes. While
it is possible that some conflicting attributes could be reconcilable, not all of
them can. Some theologians contend that Good and Evil are external to God
and that God must adhere to this distinction, while others say that Good and
Evil are determined by God and, therefore, are dependent on God for existence.3
These ideas are not reconcilable, so at least one of the two misunderstands the
nature of God.4 As a being with the capacities for knowledge and action, God
would have to be partially accountable for this misunderstanding. If God is
misunderstood, and the misunderstanding is honest, then God must flawed in
some way, either by being unable or unknowing, or otherwise less than perfect.
That is to say, God may be unaware of the misunderstanding, may not have
known how to avoid it initially or is unable to prevent it. This means that God
is not omniscient, not omnipotent or is, in some way, less than perfect. Nothing
that is less than perfect can be God, by definition, and therefore God, or the God
of the traditional theistic conception, cannot exist.

Is there any way to avoid this conclusion? We could say that God is
not an agent, that is, not the kind of being which acts and so would be exempt
from fault in misunderstanding. But this would not leave us with the kind of
God we think of when we think of God.5 A non-agent God would be unable
to create or have any effect on the universe, so, phenomenologically, this God
would effectively not exist. It is generally held that God has no spatial or
temporal location, that is, has no specific physical existence. As such, if God
is not an agent then God would be reduced to a level on par with inanimate
objects and without physical existence God would be further reduced to
practically nonexistent. The same problem arises if we say God is not a being
at all, because beings are the only things which can commit actions, so nothing
is gained. In addition to the practical nonexistence of non-agency, God would
loose the capacities to know and be aware, and thus stray even further from our
common conception of divinity. It is the same if we compare God to calculus,
but in this case God would only be a human conception; God, then, would not
only cease to be a being, but also would be dependent on humans for existence.

Perhaps we could say that any misunderstanding is deliberate on God’s
part. If this is the case then God would be purposefully deceitful about God’s
nature, and by extension the nature of all creation, as creation and its nature
would be dependent on God and Its nature. This can be understood as involving
all three types of misunderstanding: content – regarding how God created the
universe (in 7 days or 14 billion years); intent – regarding God’s purpose for
creating the universe (whether or not there is an ultimate end that creation is
driving towards, or if existence is its sole purpose); meaning – the differences
between religions and their divinely mandated moral codes (is Hinduism or
Christianity the more correct religion?). Deliberate misunderstanding would
mean that we know less about the nature of God than we thought. We would be able to make no absolute claims about the nature of God, because there would be no way to determine if God is fooling us into believing this to be Its nature (save logical analysis). Furthermore, deliberate misunderstanding would justifiably lead into a position of skepticism; if God deceives about the most fundamental of realities (and we are aware of this), how can we accept any of our perceptions at face value?

Apart from the practical concern of being lead into skepticism, deliberate misunderstanding does not seem to be a suitable explanation for two reasons. First, if God was moved to deceive about creation then it would seem that creation was not worth telling the truth about, and so would be somehow flawed. A perfect God would not create a world which It subsequently felt compelled to mislead about, and would have instead created a world that matched what God would want to say. To put this another way, God should be able (and would be expected to) create the best possible world. It seems inconsistent for God to then be deceptive about the nature of this creation, because if it is the best of all possible worlds, the world could not be represented any better than what is the truth. It also seems inconsistent for God to furnish a representation of the world that makes it seem worse than it actually is. This representation would be part of the world; the best possible world would have to then contain a representation of itself as inferior to it actuality, which is completely counterintuitive. So, there would be no reason for God to misrepresent Itself and creation, that is, unless God believes that it is for the greater good that we misunderstand.

For the second reason that deliberate misunderstanding is an inadequate explanation, let us say that it was possible for God to have presented Itself and creation in such a way that everyone would have understood their natures, but God chose not to in order to create a greater good. This way God would have known about the misunderstanding in advance and would have been able to prevent it. Thus, while God would be responsible for this misunderstanding, this would not demonstrate any lack of perfection on God’s part. However, if God intentionally fostered misunderstanding in the human race, then God would be directly responsible for all the consequences of the misunderstanding, as demonstrated in the first section. In turn, God would be responsible for every religious war, the Spanish Inquisition, and countless other atrocities carried out in any god’s name.

This leads us into the Problem of Evil in the worst of ways. That is, God would have known about all the evil that would be the product of misunderstanding, and would have been able to prevent it, but deliberately chose to create this evil anyway. This is the worst of ways because the strongest objection, freewill, cannot be used. The freewill objection replies that it is better for freewill to exist with the evil that it causes than for it not to exist. In response to this, Locke proposed a kind of restrained freewill, where people could choose to do evil but were created in such a way that they never would. This has been countered with the notion of ‘robust’ freewill. That is, in order
to truly have freewill all options must really be options. In Locke’s proposal, it seems like the option for choosing evil is not really viable. However, freewill cannot be a solution to the Problem of Evil as approached in this paper. There is nothing inconsistent with having an understanding of God and having freewill. Furthermore, it is nonsensical to propose a concept of ‘robust understanding’ as a solution. This would have to mean that coming into understanding with less information is better than coming into understanding with ample information. To return to the example of me trying to meet a friend at Starbucks with the knowledge that she was going to the wrong one: when she gets there she will find out I am not. When she calls and asks ‘what is going on?’ I would have to tell her that I knew she was going to the wrong one. Then she would ask ‘then why didn’t you tell me?’ If I say that I thought it would be better for her to understand what I meant without me making it explicitly clear, she would have good right to think I was joking or to get angry with me, and this is because the idea of a robust understanding makes no sense.

As I have shown, in any misunderstanding, the one who is misunderstood shares in the responsibility for it due to a lack of knowledge, an inability to prevent it or by deliberately choosing to allow the misunderstanding. This misunderstanding is good, bad or neutral, not inherently but in light of its consequences. The one who was misunderstood then becomes responsible in part for the consequences of the misunderstanding, and so is responsible for bad things when the consequence is bad. God is not exempt from this. As shown by people holding different and irreconcilable beliefs about God, God is clearly misunderstood. God is either shown to be flawed by being misunderstood, due to a lack of knowledge or an inability to prevent it, or because God deliberately chooses to allow Itself to be misunderstood. If God is flawed, then It cannot be God and, like the round-square, cannot exist. If God deliberately allows the misunderstanding, then God is directly responsible for all the evil that has arisen in consequence of this misunderstanding. If God is responsible for an easily avoidable evil, It demonstrates, as above, that It is flawed. In this case, either God did not know that being misunderstood would cause the evils that it has, or God is not good enough to want to prevent them. Either case is inconsistent with the concept of God, and therefore the concept of God is inconsistent, and therefore it is impossible for God to exist.

Endnotes

1 She would also have some responsibility, because she did not make sure that we both knew what the other meant, but this does not mean that I am not responsible in part.
2 This type of misunderstanding (deceptive) closely resembles lying.
3 A more compelling example is the conflict between those who believe that God exists and those who believe God does not. However, this example would require me to demonstrate that existence would be part of God’s nature, and this is beyond the scope of this paper.
4 This would be a content misunderstanding, as it deals with the nature of God, as opposed to God’s intentions or meanings.
5 In the major world religions, from which we derive our conceptions of God, God is personal, that is has properties associated with being a person. For example, a personality, the ability to interact, having interests, etc.
6 It could be said that if we can make no absolute claims about the nature of God, then I cannot claim that God is omnipotent and omniscient, etc, but if God is fooling me into thinking this (like Descartes’ Evil Genius), then God is not these things, so my argument would be proven anyway. Also, through seeking out the logical contradictions in the positions we hold we can discover which of our positions cannot be true, and so could be called misunderstandings. If the conception of God used in my paper proves to contain contradictions, due to my misunderstanding of God, it will be shown that this conception is inconsistent, which is the purpose of this paper.

Aaron Elliott

This essay has been awarded the prize for Best Original Philosophical Argument
SOCRATES ON THE IDENTITY CONDITIONS OF THE ARTS:
with a few comments concerning Leibniz, Quine, and Sartre

Karlie Knudtsen

Socrates is notorious for criticizing formal art as “popular harangues” and deprecating poets, painters, and sculptors as faux experts. Why does Socrates seem to regard these professions (technai) as ersatz and assert the masters thereof as pretenders? Answering these questions requires assembling a coherent model of Socrates’ identity conditions for the arts. Identity conditions provide an important criterion for distinguishing various forms of arts and foster richer dialogue within the aesthetic community by enabling Socrates’ modern critics to understand his conception of technê.

Advancing a theory of identity conditions, section I of this paper enumerates difficulties encountered by readers of the Socratic Dialogues when presented with Socrates’ uncomfortably disparaging position towards the arts. Section II focuses on constructing a teleological account of artistic identity conditions to resolve these difficulties. Section III elucidates why teleologically grounding identity conditions for the arts pushes the initial difficulties back without providing a resolution. Section IV then offers the Socratic solution that the soul itself provides the identity conditions for the arts.

I. Socrates’ identity puzzles for the arts

**Definition of Art:** Representations or imitations expressing beauty

Ion presents Socrates’ shocking claim that a poet’s ability to beautifully speak verse is a divine gift and not an expression of human knowledge or skills mastery.

To Socrates, poets are “nothing but representatives of the gods” and poetry imitation of the voices of the gods. Poetry is not a profession to which “a god has granted the ability to know a certain function,” like navigation knows about the perils of the sea, because it intensionally takes no subject directly as its own instead imitating and representing the functions of all other professional subjects. Poetry then is not a technê able to be individuated by its intensional subject the way generalship can be picked out by knowledge of tactics. What then of the rest of the imitative and representative arts, like sculpture and painting? –Are they also devoid of specific subject matter and precluded from the status of technai or areas of expertise? Does their identity lie only in that which they portray: an iambic pentameter about summer love, a sculpture of ballerinas, or a fresco by Michelangelo?

Socrates’ account of the “technê requirement of professional self-identity” [TRPS] brings the issue to the surface when he states, “I mean if
there is some knowledge of the same subjects, then why should we say there are two different professions? –Especially when each of them would allow us to know the same subjects (ei gar pou tôn autôn pragmatôn epistêmê eiê tis, ti an tên men heteran phaimen einai, tên d’ heteran, hopote ge tauta ei eidenai ap’ amphoterô)." TRPS: If there are two professions that know subject \( y \) then they are identical technai \( (y=y) \) and exhaust the entirety of the subject in question. In similar fashion to Leibniz’s ontological principle known as the Identity of Indiscernibles, this requirement avoids needless multiplication of professions. TRPS stipulates that professions are singularly bound with one subject each. There cannot be two professions concerning the functions generalship knows \( (G, G) \) because they are identical \( (G=G) \) and are the same thing \( (G) \). For instance, consider the intensional subject matter taken by the formal arts. Insofar as poetry concerns itself with intensional subjects belonging to other professions, such as reciting verses about perils of the sea, a subject clearly belonging to navigation, it is not attending to any specific body of poetic knowledge to be mastered as a whole. By concerning itself with functions properly belonging to navigation, poetry takes no unique poetic function as its own, it becomes indistinct from navigation and in fact an expert navigator would speak better on the topic. All imitative and representative art seem to be in the same lacking professional condition as poetry. The intensional subjects of poetry, painting, or sculpting relate everything other than the medium expressing them. Art’s intensional subjects represent only the technê they belong to and cannot serve as a principle of differentiation between formal arts.

Perhaps then extensional subjects, such as techniques and tools, provide differentiating force behind the relative identities of painting and sculpture. For example, painting creates a beautiful imitation by covering two-dimensional canvasses with paints applied by brush. Sculpting creates beautiful representations by using implements to create or modify three-dimensional objects. This hypothesis tempts the inference that the individuating criterion between technai making them distinct professional areas of expertise is extensional subject matter.

However, popular genres of painting and sculpture reveal the two mediums as sharing extensional subject matter, which by the extensional individuation hypothesis collapses their identities. Therefore, the extensional differentiation inference is illicit. For example, the painting technique Impasto used by Van Gogh and Auerbach impinges of the territory of sculpture by using knives and shaping techniques to creating art with three-dimensional extension off of canvases. Compounding the quandary, application of brush and paint to create polychromatic sculpture by the ancient Greeks indicates sculpting concerns itself with the subject matter of painting. Tarbell comments that “by practice and theory we have been taught that sculpture and painting are entirely distinct arts . . . the Greeks had no such idea.” Not only is intensional subject matter insufficient for distinguishing formal art from the represented subject, but these boarder line cases show that extensional subjects are also and insufficient
for discriminating (\textit{diakrinein}) one form of art from another. Therefore, Socrates’ account of TRPS and Leibniz’s Identity of Indiscernibles show that all forms of artistic expression are identical to one another. All modes of artistic expression eventually refer back to an extensional or intensional subject shared with another art rendering individuation amongst them impossible.

Further convoluting the identity conditions of the arts, Socrates formulates the “\textit{technê} requirement of holism” [TRH] stating, “and now take the whole of any other subject: won’t it have the same discipline throughout? And this goes for every subject that can be mastered . . . Take this for discussion – painting is a subject to be mastered as a whole, isn’t it (oukoun epeidan lab i tis kai all n techn n h ntinoun hol n, ho autos tropos t s skepeös estai peri hapasö̂n tōn technō . . . labōmen gar tōi logōi: graphik gar tis esti techn to holon)?”¹⁷ TRH: Mastery of any subject entails mastery of the whole assemblage of knowledge relating to that subject. In other words, the artist effectuating the discipline of painting must master a system of techniques, materials, and knowledge that all work in conjunction with each other and enable artistic creation. The collapsing identity conditions presented by TRPS shows that a master painter will not only have command over the motions of his brush stroke but will also have expert dexterity in all the subjects relating to sculpture. TRH pushes the dilemma further by requiring the expert painter to know the chemical ingredients and organically derivative pigments used in his paints and therefore possessing the arts of chemistry and biology. Furthermore, both the arts of doctoring and biology study the functioning of bodies, so a painter by knowing biology is also implicated as knowing doctoring. After all, these auxiliary proficiencies are implied by one who is master of the whole of the subject, knower of everything covered by his discipline (\textit{ta tēs technēs}). The fallout of TRH shows the master painter is not only a sculptor but also a master chemist, biologist, and doctor. Therefore, mastering any one subject of knowledge as a whole, such as painting, posits a regress of additional background professions for mastery.

The professional regress problem of THR finds corroboration in modern philosophy, specifically in Quine’s Theory of Conformation Holism. According to Conformation Holism, support for a scientific hypothesis properly confers justification on the whole theory including all ancillary hypotheses; only the cluster of propositions and ultimately only the whole of a science has meaning. For example, by verifying the Constant G of Universal Gravitation,¹⁸ one is also affirming the existence of mathematical objects such as numbers as an integral component lending indispensable meaning to the scientific hypothesis as a whole. Integrating this argument with TRH yields the corollary that one who possesses the \textit{technê} of painting also possesses the \textit{technai} of all background subjects to the extent that their skill as a painter becomes meaningless when taken out of the context of the many additional background professions. An expert painter then is also a sculptor, biologist, chemist, doctor and the list goes on potentially \textit{ad infinitum}.

Socrates’ difficulty for distinguishing between various \textit{technê} is now
coming into focus. It appears that we are in the midst of an intellectual maze within which it is beguiling to grasp at any idiosyncratic idea of a *technē* for hope of finding a way out—as soon as one does the realization soon follows that individuating concepts are but mirages eventually receding into infinite similarity. Is it valid to claim that painting and sculpture are essentially no different from each other since they use the same intensional and extensional subject matter (from TRPS) or that a seemingly infinite repertoire of professional knowledge is required to master poetry, painting, or sculpting (from THR)? How then do we account for experience? —What we now claim seems to run counter to it; after all, we seem to have the ability to discern the artistic medium of the sculpture Peplos Kore from paintings of Van Gogh enough to pronounce that one is sculpture and the other painting. Furthermore, the professional regress problem has striking skeptical implications concerning human ability to have enough knowledge to master an artistic subject. Is a person is ever able to possess enough knowledge of the background professions to be a painter who produces meaningful work? There must be a way to reconcile experience and conventional wisdom with these wild claims lurking in the mire of our understanding invoked by TRPS and TRH.

II. Unpacking Socrate’s Identity Requirements for *Technai*

The following interpretation of Socrates “*technē* criterion for individuating professions” [TCIP] sheds light upon identity conditions: TCIP: Professions are “individuated by propositions and deeds [functional agency] rather than objects.”¹⁹ Socrates states, “Then to each profession a god has granted the ability to know a certain function (*ergon*). I mean, the things (*ha*) navigation teaches us – we won’t learn from medicine as well, will we (*oukoun hekastēi tôn techncn apodedotai ti hupo tou theou ergon hoiai te einai gignōskein; ou gar pou ha kubernētikēi gignōskomen, gnōsometha kai iatrikēi)?”²⁰ According to TRPS, painting and sculpture are identical. However, by designating functionality as central to identity, TCIP keeps painting and sculpting two separate skills. Both painting and sculpture seem to posit knowledge of the other, however the knowledge of the other that each is concerned with utilizes different functions; the deed of applying paint by brush to canvas serves a different function than the application of paint to sculpture. Therefore, by TCIP painting and sculpting, doctoring and navigation are all distinct professions.

Providing further grounds of individuating artistic professions, TCIP’s teleological orientation of professions explains *technai* as grounded in an end that serves as the principle of reference defining the *technē* itself. Establishing TCIPi, Socrates states, “With which of the things there are is oratory concerned with? Weaving, for example, is concerned with the production of clothes, isn’t it?”²¹ Weaving’s goal (*telos*) of producing clothing distinguishes it from other professions, such as cobbling, by producing different commodities. Reflexively, the function’s objective end defines the meaning of the relating propositions and deeds. The craft of weaving and the tools and techniques belonging to
that craft are denoted as things producing clothing and thus belonging together 
under the \textit{technē} of weaving. So, functional agency converges on the end as 
giving value to the means. By substituting painting for weaving, the apparent
orientation of painting’s functions, i.e. canvass, paint, chiaroscuro technique,
is towards the final result of producing a beautiful painting, not a beautiful 
sculpture, the aim of which then reflects back on the means of production and 
defines them as functional agents towards painting. Functional distinction yields
identity conditions delineating the \textit{technē} of painting from sculpture. Therefore,
TCIP’s teleological orientation of functions alleviates the difficulty of collapsing
identity (from TRPS) by showing that any application of Leibniz’s Identity of 
Indiscernibles equating painting and sculpture is premature and experiences
illuminating painting as distinct from sculpture are accounted for.

However, the problem of professional regress still poses an obstacle 
for mastering an artistic craft. Solving this dilemma, Socrates articulates further
individuating teleological orientation, TCIP ii, by stating, “And I say that it isn’t 
a craft, but a knack, because it has no account of the nature of whatever things
is applies by which it applies them, so that it is unable to state the cause of each 
thing. And I refuse to call anything that lacks such an account a craft (\textit{technēn de 
autēn ou phēmi einai all’ empeirian, hoti ouk echei logon oudena hōi prospherei}*
\textit{ha prospherei hopoi’ atta tēn phusin estin, hôste tēn aitian hekastou mē echein}* 
eipein. \textit{egō de technēn ou kalō ho an ēi alogon pragma}).”\textsuperscript{22} Rather, a true craft
“has investigated both the nature of the object it serves and the cause of the 
things it does, and is able to give an account of each of these.”\textsuperscript{23} By limiting
the scope of a given craft to those functions and ends it can strictly account for,
this teleological commitment begins eroding the necessary index of background
professions posited for mastery of a \textit{technē}. TCIP ii maintains the profession of 
painting knows the propositions and deeds required to produce its object without
knowing anything extraneous to what the \textit{technē} painting strictly applies. In other
words, the master painter will know the \textit{technē} of sculpting insofar as sculpting
can be applied to covering canvasses with paint but does not need to know how
to chisel marble; the master painter will know biology and chemistry to the extent
that either of those professions apply to the composition of paints but biological
knowledge of the genetic differences between animals is not necessary for a
painter.

TCIP is shown to be an excellent criterion for establishing identity
conditions for distinguishing between \textit{technēs} due to resolutions provided by its
teleological orientation. It provided answers to the initial difficulties raised in
section I and develops teleological orientation distinguishing \textit{technai}. It seems
an airtight account of the identity conditions of the arts has been established
by Socrates and further trouble concerning the matter circumvented. It is
now plausible to say that there is a distinct \textit{technē} of painting and another of
sculpture.

III. Why TCIP is not enough to differentiate between \textit{Technai}

By TCIP, it is viable to conclude that painting and sculpture have
teleological orientations individuated by propositions and deeds delineating one from the other. This solves two main identity problems raised by readers of the Socratic Dialogues: grounding the functions known by a *technē* answers the first concern of collapsing identity conditions and narrowing the scope of expertise responds to the professional regress worry. On its face, TCIP is appealing; however, it does not fully solve the dilemmas raised. To the contrary, it appears to push the problem back by accounting only for the apparent goal of producing specific modes of artistic expression and not addressing the superordinate teleological goal of all art—imitating and representing beauty. When seen in light of this consideration, artistic functions and deeds all serve the same purpose no matter what medium they seem to belong to. By TCIP, applications of paint by brush to canvas or chiseled marble are both subordinate to the goal of producing beautiful art—there is no essential difference in function or deed ultimately. Since the *technai* painting and sculpting ultimately aim at producing beautiful art, by TCIP they must know the propositions and deeds necessary for doing so. Therefore, by sharing a common superordinate goal they also share the same collection of functions for accomplishing that goal. Clearly, both constructions of TCIP fail to fully illuminate any distinction between painting and sculpting.

At this point, two further objections ought to be considered which shed light on the nature of art as such and also show the given definition of art as seeking to imitate and represent beauty is sound. First, one might claim that since some art is randomly created with no particular thing in the artist’s mind the definition of art as imitation and representation is inaccurate. This objection does not hold because an artist creates within the framework of her experience and understanding by utilizing tools (*organai*) that also were created from specific designs. Therefore, despite the lack of an immediate and apparent representation in the art, whether it is an idea or an object, there is always a subtle construction essential to all art that imitates and represents certain experiences and understandings of the artist or the designer of the tools. Because no particular thing is obviously represented to the observer it does not follow that nothing is represented. Secondly, one could contend the definition of art as imitating and representing *beauty* fails since artists frequently portray repulsive subjects or are poorly executed and displeasing to the observer. The reply to this objection follows the same lines as the previous reply. The artist may find an obscure beauty peculiar to their experience or understanding in the depiction of death or physical deformity, things that others might find repulsive or indicating poor taste. Poorly executed art has no bearing on an artist’s attempt to depict something beautiful and is not useful to the objection.

IV. Socrate’s Solution

Revealing his final conclusion for identity conditions, Socrates states:

In fact, if the soul didn’t govern the body but the body governed itself, and if pastry baking and medicine weren’t kept under observations and distinguished
by the soul, but the body itself made judgments about them, making its estimates by reference to the gratification it receives, the world according to Anaxagoras would prevail, Polus my friend – you’re familiar with these views – all things would be mixed together in the same place, and there would be no distinction between matters of medicine and health, and matters of pastry baking.  

SS: Artistic identity conditions are a function of the human soul

To summarize, Socrates posits the human soul as the ground for differentiating between painting and sculpture. How the soul provides these identity conditions must be fleshed out to fully understand Socrates conclusion. This is done in three parts:

Realizing the Good is set over and directs all crafts and products (SS1) is the first step toward understanding SS. Socrates asserts in the argument against akrasia that “no one willingly goes toward the bad or what he believes to be bad . . . instead of to the good,” “those who makes mistakes with regard to . . . good and bad, do so because of a lack of knowledge, and not merely a lack of knowledge but a lack of that knowledge you agreed was measurement.” This knowledge of good and bad reveals itself in the science of measurement, or “art of the greater and lesser.” When added to a person’s soul, this techné acts like a compass magnetized to the Good enabling a person to choose wisely the best option thereby making him better and saving his life. Such a craft of measuring “is entitled to rule all these [other] crafts and use their products because of its knowledge of what food or drink is good or bad for bodily excellence, a knowledge which all the others lack.” Under this direction, relative values of good and bad are placed upon the contents of a choice that are then weighed during discrimination to determine which option will produce the most human benefit. Each time a body or soul is benefited it becomes more excellent and virtuous “due to whatever organization, correctness, and craftsmanship is bestowed on each of them [by the Good].” Not only does the Good direct all human affairs, crafts, and sciences but it brings them to perfection by implanting a certain order and organization. Such ordering of the human soul renders “life harmonious by fitting his deeds to his words in a truly Dorian mode” empowering him “to provide himself with good things through his knowledge of how to associate with them correctly.” All products, crafts, relationships, and souls come to be excellent by choosing in accordance with one’s knowledge of the Good.

Proper understanding of Socrates’ Unity of Virtue (SS2) hypothesis advanced in Protagoras is the second step towards grasping SS. Explicitly illustrating his point, Socrates asks Protagoras, “Is virtue a single thing, with justice and temperance and piety its parts, or are the things I have just listed all names for a single entity?” Protagoras replies, “Virtue is a single entity . . .” Just as piety and justice are “collectively termed the virtue of man” so too is beauty termed under man’s virtue. Therefore, by combining SS1 and SS2, human virtue aims at, is directed by, and is synonymous with the Good, which
is the superordinate virtue. Deduced from this, it is seen that insofar as one has knowledge of the science of measuring good and bad all human activities participate in benefiting the soul. Lack or incomplete knowledge of this technē of measurement destroys harmonious relations causing harm or diminution to the soul’s virtue.

Creating an analogy between SS1, SS2, and the arts, one can postulate that portrayal of beauty through painting and sculpting are directed by the Good (SS1) and contribute to the harmony of the human soul (SS2). Socrates himself offers this conclusion stating:

Well then, won’t the good man, the man who speaks with regard to what’s best, say whatever he says not randomly but with a view to something, just as other craftsmen each of whom keeps his own product in view and so does not select and apply randomly what he applies, but so that he may give his product some shape? Take a look at painters for instance . . . and see how each one places what he does into a certain organization, and compels one thing to be suited for another and to fit it to it until the entire object is put together in an organized and orderly way.35

When directed by knowledge of the Good, painters and sculptors aspire to reproduce virtuous beauty in their works of art. In ratio to that knowledge of the Good they are able to fit each part of their composition harmoniously to every other part creating a beautiful work of art.

For the third and final step towards understanding SS, I appeal to Sartre’s essay “Existentialism as Humanism.”36 Initially, the connection between Sartre and Socrates is difficult to grasp so I shall start with the first common premise progressing to the conclusion: P1) The first commonality is Sartre’s agreement with SS1 and the argument against akrasia, predicating that, “to choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen; for we are unable ever to choose the worse.”37 P2) Paralleling Socrates’ notion that knowledge of the Good directs one’s will to choose the best option (SS1), Sartre asserts the second consistent premise saying “the will follows more or less from the understanding.”38 P3) The third common premise arises with Sartre’s statement, “that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men. For in effect, of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative, at the same time, of an image of man such as he believes he ought to be.”39 Noting that, “man has seen that values depend upon himself,”40 that his soul alone and not a plurality of souls carve out the world, Sartre deepens Socrates’ initial solution presented at the beginning of this section that, in summary, man’s soul carves out the world by distinguishing the various technai. By choosing and representing his understanding of the Good through his art, the artist determines how the Good ought to be understood by all of humanity. If his understanding is imperfect and mistaken, all of humanity is then condemned to the same disorder that is present in the artist’s soul—what tragic consequences there are for his folly. C) Drawing final conclusions from premises 1 through 3, Sartre states, “there are
I interpret this statement as meaning that, in light of the previous premises, from the time man is thrown into this world, his radical freedom to will, choose, and create himself according to his conception of the Good alone determines his status as a painter producing works of painted artistry. By defining himself as a painter rather than a sculptor, man determines the rest of the world to also understand him and his creations under that identity. The world does not define him as a painter by the implements it places in his hands; rather, he defines the implements according to his understanding of himself as being a painter. Man himself determines the teleological orientation of propositions and deeds and the scope of knowledge required to produce meaningful artwork. As man continues to create and evolve within his living circumstance, he carves his world up, defining more and more strictly what it is to be, or not to be, a painter, a sculptor, a man. Man’s evolution of understanding himself through living creates and furthers the delineation between technai and the types of products produced by their subjectively constructed identities. In this way, by defining himself as man, his choices also create and define how all man ought to be, how all man ought to understand the Good and the virtues such as beauty, and how all men ought to view the identities of painter and sculptor produced in accordance with the Good.

V. Conclusion

I now return to my initial question with a supply of ammunition: why does Socrates regards artistic professions (technai) as ersatz and asserts the masters thereof as pretenders? In the Apology, Socrates sets out to discover if he is indeed the wisest amongst men. His investigation reveals that he might be the wisest man but only because he knows his own ignorance, not claiming to know what he does not. Socrates discovers that, “the god is wise and . . . human wisdom is worth little or nothing.” Man, by definition, is ignorant of the knowledge of the Good that would make his soul perfectly harmonious; this arena of wisdom is reserved for the gods alone. The artist, by choosing himself and producing works of art that accord only with human understanding, proclaims a universal understanding of the Good for all of humanity, a power that he cannot have; he cannot be a god for his is only a man. By producing art that fashions human universals for every epoch, the artist vagrantly claims perfect knowledge, a human impossibility. Any hint of true beauty he may chance upon in his portrayal is simply a divine gift, not something he rightly possesses; in defining himself as human he is precluded from divine omniscience. Thus, in expressing virtuous beauty, an artist can only pretend to know the Good which his work is a reflection of. And because he does not know that which he imitates and represents, he is not an expert but a fake inspired by knowledge only gods possess.
The artists of painting, sculpture, and poetry are then, “under the gods’ influence and possession, as their [techmat] lead to success in many important matters, though they have no knowledge of what they are saying or [doing].”\textsuperscript{44} The Beauty and the Good become encapsulated in artists’ renditions purely by chance and blessings of the gods. Man’s ignorance of those things deemed divine, known only by those gods who are divine, means man has no control over and no knowledge of how to intentionally produce any portion representing true Beauty present in a piece of art. “It is a divine power that moves the [poet], as a “Magnetic” stone moves iron rings . . . You know, none of the epic poets, if they are good, are masters of their subject; they are inspired, possessed, and that is how they utter all those beautiful poems . . . lyric poets are not in their right minds when they make those beautiful poems.”\textsuperscript{45} Loosing claims to knowledge as well as one’s mind is imperative for the artist, for the amount the artist thinks he knows that which he represents equals the amount of treachery the medium possesses which he works within. Such artistic mediums as painting, sculpting, and poetry are dangerous undertakings effecting the beliefs of the spectators, for better or worse, by defining how all humanity ought to understand Beauty and the Good, “and you know that this spectator is the last of the rings, don’t you- the ones that I said take their power from each other by virtue of the Heraclean stone [the magnet]?\textsuperscript{46} Ergo, if the artist is confused and mistakenly pretends to know the Good Beauty he imitates, the product is manifest ignorance masquerading as Beauty thereby confusing and disordering the souls of the audience and causing belief that the artist’s lies and deceits are truth.

In final conclusion, there are no artistic professions available to human knowledge and mastery. The nature of art is divine inspiration; it is not a subject open for knowledge and mastery. The true artist is taken outside of himself, his intellect is suspended, in that state he relates the most breathtaking works of art, imbued with Beauty and Good. If the artist were to claim mastery of his profession, he surely would be a pretender, for there is nothing for him to master. An artist is a conduit of the gods knowing nothing of his representations. The artist claiming to know that which he produces is ignorant of the fact that, as a human being, he is precluded from knowledge of Good Beauty, this is relegated solely to the gods. For these reasons, there are no artistic professions to master and any person claiming mastery is a fake.
Endnotes

1All Gorgias translated by Donald J Zeyl
2All Ion translated by Paul Woodruff
3Ion 536c
4Ion 532c
5Ion 534c-535a
6Ion 337a
7Euthydemus 279 e
8All Euthydemus translated by Rosamond Kent Sprague
9Laches 132c
10All Laches translated by Rosamond Kent Sprague
11All transliteraton from www.perseus.tufts.edu
12Ion 537e
13Entities x and y are identical if and only if any predicate possessed by x is also possessed by y
15Ion 537c
17Ion 532d
18Measured in newtons (N), m, and m, in kilograms (kg), r in metres (m), and the constant G is approximately equal to $6.67 \times 10^{-11}$ N m$^2$ kg$^{-2}$
20Ion 537d
21Gorgias 449d
22Gorgias 465a
23Gorgias 501a
24Gorgias 465d
25Akrasia is Greek for weakness of will. This argument against the possibility of weakness of will is found in Protagoras 351b-358e
26Protagoras 358d
27All Protagoras translations by Stanley Lombardo and Karen Bell
28Protagoras 357d
29Laches 190b, Gorgias 352c, Gorgias 357a
30Gorgias 517e
31Gorgias 506e
32Laches 188d
33Laches 199e
34Protagoras 329d
35Gorgias 503e
37P. 6 Sartre
38P. 4 Sartre
39P. 6 Sartre
40P. 24 Sartre
41P. 22 Sartre
42All Apology translated by G.M.A. Grube
43Apology 23b
44Meno 99d
45Ion 533e-534a
46Ion 536a

Works Cited

Gantzler, Jyl. “How to Discriminate Between Experts and Frauds: Some problems for Socratic Peirastic”.

This essay has been awarded the prize for Outstanding Scholarship
HAMLET AS DIONYSIAN MAN

Christopher Turner

In section 7 of his *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche makes an interesting comparison between his notion of Dionysian man and the character of Hamlet. He claims that,

…Dionysian man resembles Hamlet: both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have *gained knowledge*, and nausea inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things; they feel it is ridiculous or humiliating that they should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint. Knowledge kills action; action requires the veils of illusion, that is the doctrine of Hamlet…true knowledge, an insight into the horrible truth, outweighs any motive for action, both in Hamlet and in the Dionysian man. (60)

If it seems puzzling that Dionysian man should, on the one hand, be paralyzed by knowledge, and on the other hand, worship the god with dance and song and wine, look no further than a few lines down where Nietzsche speaks of art as salvation. Tragic art transfigures the horrible in life, makes life worth living where it would otherwise be utterly worthless. In the essay which follows, I will explore some of the ways in which Hamlet can be said to have gained a knowledge that destroys the impulse to action. What is this knowledge, what are these veils of illusion it strips away? It is my contention that Nietzsche’s interpretation hits the mark here; just as the worshippers of the god found salvation in a ritual which formed the basis for tragedy, Hamlet only ‘overcomes’ the misery of his new-found knowledge for a few moments when he, too, participates in a theater group’s presentation of his modified version of a play. However, in the course of the present essay I will qualify my approval of Nietzsche’s interpretation, and I will also focus on two other ways Hamlet avoids being paralyzed by tragic wisdom.

What is this knowledge that Hamlet has gained? In his first soliloquy, he laments,

*How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on’t, ah fie, ’tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. That it should come to this!* (1.2.133-137)

Nothing is worthwhile for Hamlet anymore, the world and its pleasures are now useless to him. Furthermore, in the world, the wicked and disgusting prevail; Hamlet compares this to a garden overrun with weeds. Finally, the
last exclamation reveals that things have come to such a pass; the world, and life in it, was not always so. What has changed? The king is dead; his brother has taken his place, both at court and in the bedchamber. One could see this as merely a political succession, done for reasons of realpolitik. Hamlet doesn’t see it this way, though. For him, what has happened has disclosed the painful truth about the way the world really is: ‘things rank and gross,’ such as his uncle, such as sexual desire and ambition, make the world their playground. It wasn’t always this way for Hamlet; life was fine when his father ruled. But, to follow up on Nietzsche’s interpretation, one would say this was one of the veils of illusion that allowed Hamlet to live happily before. His family life seemed secure: a powerful father, a loving mother, a sweetheart. This security, this stability was an illusion.

Of course, the power his father wielded at the time seemed real enough. It was displayed in his victory over Norway, in the respect he commanded at home and abroad. It proved illusory, a mere phantom, because it vanished overnight through treachery. Hamlet doesn’t really know this at first, but he does, in some way, suspect it. His mother and uncle were too quick in marrying, too open in the pleasure they were sharing. This has destroyed Hamlet’s belief in any stable, lasting human relationship based on love. If his mother could prove so faithless that she sleeps with Claudius, and enjoys it, so soon after the death of her husband, and this after seeming so faithful before when she was married to Hamlet the elder. How can one have faith anymore that faithfulness itself exists? Likewise with Claudius, how could a brother, who should be mourning, be so casual about the death of his sibling; he seems so realistic about the whole affair that it’s almost unreal. This usurpation of the throne by his uncle, and his mother’s infidelity, strip away the veils of illusion that protected Hamlet before, and that allowed him to love Ophelia once upon a time.

Enough then, of the illusions that have been lost. What can we say about this tragic knowledge that Hamlet has come to possess? One virtue it has is to strip away illusions, remembering Nietzsche’s remarks above we can say that it makes one sick, and discourages or simply prevents action. As for its positive content, this tragic wisdom teaches that life is a burden: as Silenus tells King Midas, best of all for us wretched mortals is to not have been (as Qoholeth or Solomon the wise also puts it in Ecclesiastes), second best is to die soon. Hamlet himself now knows this and he wants, “To die, to sleep…” (3.1.64); the only thing stopping him is the fear that worse may be in store for him in the next world if he takes his own life. Life is a burden because the wicked prosper, the good fail, and everything is thrown together in a chaos in which Hamlet can say with sarcastic (an adjective derived from σαρξ, meaning ‘like flesh being torn to pieces by the dogs’) justice that,

…”Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel? (176-179)
This notion of Alexander the Great plugging up a bunghole might, in other hands, be comic consolation for the absurdity of human vanity and striving. For Hamlet, though, it’s a horrible realization that whether great or small we’re all, in the end, merely food for worms. What’s left of our physical substance passes through those worms and may even end up on someone else’s dinner plate.

Another aspect of this tragic wisdom has to do with what we call love. I think that both Hamlet and Nietzsche would agree with Chamfort’s diagnosis, “Love as it exists in society is merely the mingling of two fantasies and the contact of two skins” (170). Having seen through the fantasy, by observing his mother’s behavior before and after the death of his father, Hamlet can no longer love his mother, or Ophelia, now that he knows what love is really about. Love is just a trick played on us in order that we may go on perpetuating the human species. As Schopenhauer once remarked concerning it,

If the act of procreation were neither the outcome of a desire nor accompanied by feelings of pleasure, but a matter to be decided on the basis of purely rational considerations, is it likely the human race would still exist? (48)

For Hamlet, the act of procreation, and this notion of love that is inseparable from it, has become a matter of deliberation, and the human race need not, in fact ought not, to exist any more. Hamlet is through with love because women are faithless, like Gertrude. Men are faithless, as Claudius is, as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are. Claudius owed Hamlet’s father the love of a brother, but paid him in poison. Hamlet’s two former friends from the university turn out to be spies for his treacherous uncle. No one is to be trusted, not necessarily because all are wicked, but because all are, at best, frail and inconstant; perhaps, in the case of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, easily duped (having been manipulated by the king, they are frail and inconstant to Hamlet). For an exception like Hamlet, one who had integrity but has learned how little it is worth, and yet will not give it up and hypocritically play the game, this is a heartbreaking revelation. He cannot kill himself, and he takes no joy in living. Until, that is, the theater group arrives at court to put on a play.

The arrival of the players at court marks the only time that Hamlet overcomes his grief, if only for a little while. All of a sudden, he’s interested in questions of dramatic performance, of audience appreciation, and the function of art. He actually recites lines drawn from Virgil to the players, recounting the tale told by Aeneas to Dido of Pyrrhus’ quest to avenge his dead father. This story, of a son who wreaks bloody vengeance upon those responsible for his father’s death, comforts Hamlet a bit for the miseries of his current situation. A little later, after everyone has left, he ‘acts out’ the vengeance that he himself desires. Hamlet’s desire for vengeance is ambivalent, though, because he’s torn between wanting to avenge his father’s murder and accepting the fact that nothing he does will truly change the nature of things. His father had time in joint, and look what happened to him. If Hamlet were to do the same, what would prevent another Claudius from upsetting everything all over again?
Drama, though, turns all this into an aesthetic spectacle, an artistic performance. Now, the question is no longer: Is life worth living anymore? Is anyone to be trusted? Rather, how can we best put on display the injustices, the passions, the follies? How can we best represent the duplicitous machinations of the wicked, the good-natured naïveté of the innocent? Also, the curious pleasure one feels at witnessing represented tragedy. First, tragedy ennobles suffering, puts on it the clothing of dignity. Next, tragedy problematizes suffering; hopefully this leads to a greater awareness of how to prevent it. Finally, tragedy gives us the strength to go on in spite of suffering; the knowledge it conveys would kill action, if it weren’t expressed in such beautiful language.

I would like to note, too, the persistent humor, the wry wit, Hamlet frequently employs. One might think, with Samuel Johnson, that Shakespeare was simply addicted to wordplay and puns, and couldn’t help himself. With Hamlet, though, I’d like to believe his humor is another way in which he is able to go on, even when he no longer feels that anything is worthwhile. His frequent jests bring to mind a fellow misanthrope, Timon of Athens, who once is said to have addressed an assembly of his fellow-citizens in words that would not be out of place in Hamlet’s mouth:

> Men of Athens, I have a small plot of ground and a fig tree growing in it, on which many of our fellow citizens have already hanged themselves. I am now proposing to build a house on that ground and wish to give public notice of my intention, so that if any of you choose, you may hang yourselves before the fig tree is cut down. (Plutarch, 234)

The claim has frequently been made that Hamlet is lost in thought, of too melancholy a disposition, and so cannot act either in the way he ought to or when he ought to. Tragic wisdom is here conflated with thinking too much, and action itself is lumped together into a generic category, when the issue that interests me is: after gaining tragic insight, what actions are, for Hamlet, ruled out now, and what are still worthwhile? For it is hardly the case that, upon realizing his mother’s faithlessness, Hamlet can no longer do anything at all. He is not lying in his bed all day and night, an invalid, incommunicative and unwilling any longer to take an interest in life. Just as worshippers at the festival of Dionysus may have found redemption in a ritual in which the god was dismembered and then reborn, or later the tragic hero is brought low but life itself is aesthetically affirmed, so Hamlet can be seen to have been transformed as well. Tragic wisdom, then, doesn’t destroy all motives for actions. Instead what occurs is a transformation: some motives for action in certain spheres are given up, while others assume new significance.

As discussed earlier, love and ambition, the pleasure in romantic or erotic relationships based on trust and sharing of intimacy, the wielding of power as responsible action for one trying to improve social life, are no longer viable motives for Hamlet. Events at court in Denmark have shown that our reach exceeds our grasp here, even with the best of intentions these affairs
escape our control and will destroy us if we let them. Suppose a true lover were to exist, what would his or her sincerity and fidelity be worth without an object from which to receive back in kind what has been given out? Perhaps Hamlet idealizes his parents’ relationship, but if his father was faithful and true it was all for naught when Gertrude began coupling with Claudius before Hamlet senior’s side of the bed was even cold. And, suppose Hamlet’s father was a wise and strong king, an enlightened monarch who improved the lot of his people. Such an accomplishment would only make it that much harder for people to bear his drunken, loutish brother’s disjointed rule. Fortune, fate, weather, the market: whatever one calls those forces that escape our control but exercise a determining influence upon our constitution, the experience of their corrupting effect on even the best of natures counsels caution and apathy.

So, if love and politics are ruled out by tragic wisdom, what is left? In a nutshell (perhaps the same one Hamlet could be bounded in): art, wit and sport. The lovely thing about these consolation prizes is that the two motives ruled out above are reborn and transfigured by means of what has been left to us. Love is dead, and the deliberate exercise of power to effect change for the better is renounced, but they come back to life in aesthetic representation, in humor and in play, as if we are witnessing some mystic rite of palingenesis at Eleusis. Hamlet still has an interest in drama, in the theatrical representation of human interaction on the stage. He still clearly has a sense of humor, and makes frequent use of it: both with others and at their expense. And, Hamlet still cares enough about fencing that he is on the verge of teaching Laertes a lesson, before he and the others are undone by the treachery of Claudius.

As suggested above, tragedy resurrects love and politics by aestheticizing and problematizing what is, in the empirical world, blind grasping about in the dark. The playwright and the actors control the spectacle. Given this control, they transfigure what is all-too-often ugly and discordant in real life into a beautiful and moving experience that redeems life by improving it for all to see. So, for instance, at the court in Denmark, Hamlet could very well kill Claudius and probably take his place as king. However, he has learned that a king has more to fear than a madman, and that a just king can expect treachery. So, when the theater group arrives, Hamlet revises a play for them. The performance of this play at court exposes the injustice and infidelity of the usurper and his ‘wife,’ and has the added merit of catching the two off-guard: they came to be entertained, but a thinly-veiled representation of their crime is the entertainment. So, what was supposed to be diversion for them is instead a condemnation that publicly shames them. In this shaming, it is as though true love has come back to life, and chastised the two false lovers for their crime. The fact that everyone witnessing the play feels revulsion at the scene represented, even the two whose action it mimics, shows that the claims made by true love and justice cannot be so easily dismissed by treachery and faithlessness. The play is a consolation for Hamlet, a snare for Gertrude and Claudius, for the rest of the audience both a spectacle and a sort of morality play.
In conclusion, I would like to qualify my approval of Nietzsche’s interpretation of Hamlet as Dionysian man. Nietzsche has claimed that one look into the truth about things kills all motives for action. I agree that some motives for some actions are undermined, but cannot agree that all motives for action are destroyed. If Hamlet was truly as Nietzsche describes him, he would be sick of everything and would not want to do anything at all. The fact that Hamlet still takes an interest in theater, humor and sport, shows that not all is lost for him. Perhaps critics have focused too much on the renunciation of love and political ambition, as if, without these motives, no real action is possible. However, the attention Hamlet devotes to the play he modifies, his excitement when advising the players and his delight at catching the conscience of the king demonstrate that dramatic representation and its effect on an audience are still important concerns for the prince. One could almost imagine Hamlet leaving the court with the theater group, becoming their director, as if he were an early version of Wilhelm Meister.

Hamlet’s continual punning and wordplay also suggest he still has motives for action. He still wants to get the better of knaves, such as Polonius and Claudius, mock the foolish, such as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern or Osric, and share mirth when possible with Horatio (the scene with Osric springs to mind). The continued friendship with Horatio, in fact, might seem to argue against my claim that Hamlet has lost all trust in his fellow human beings. My reply to this is that the friendship appears more to be one between a master and a valet or a ‘good slave’ than between equals. Horatio is not a slave, but there’s a significant status difference between Hamlet and him that makes Horatio almost seem a Eumaeus to Hamlet’s Odysseus. I’m not sure that poverty has taken away half of Horatio’s virtue, but he seems limited in what he can offer Hamlet.

Hamlet’s continued fondness for fencing is supported by Claudius’ testimony to Laertes, and the fact that Hamlet was winning when both he and Laertes were poisoned. Someone with no motive for action would not have been able to win in a contest against such a motivated opponent as Laertes. The tragic wisdom Hamlet has gained has revealed that while one cannot hope for either true love or a just political order, there are consolation prizes to be had that allow life to be affirmed in spite of its shortcomings. Furthermore, such consolations can preserve the memory of what was lost, and resurrect them (at least potentially, through dramatic representation). Humor and sport serve as coping mechanisms, with the former also a goad by which one productively stings others and the latter a model for ‘complete’ action that is beyond the realm of fortune. Although, of course, for Hamlet the fencing contest was a competition that was wagered on, in general the practice of such a sport is done (at least in some sense) for its own sake. One fences because it is fun, and because one feels one’s powers come into being and expand through such a deliberate and graceful practice.

Hamlet, then, is not quite as nauseated as Nietzsche makes him out to be. Tragic knowledge does not kill action; it merely limits its scope. One
renounces the expectation of holding onto, and hence the desire to gain (or at least possess), love or power, since blind fortune and blind love make this impossible. Yet, in spite of this, there are still worthwhile motives for action. A desire to hold a mirror up to others, by means of theater and humor, to expose and potentially correct their confused and wicked behavior, is one motive. The pleasure of humor and theatrical performance is also affirmed, as is the pleasure taken in cultivating mastery of a sport. So, tragic art, dark or satiric humor, and refined sport are all ways in which the misery of actual life is transfigured, rescued and made tolerable, if not actually redeemed. I do not mean by this to make light of the horror and shock of tragic wisdom, as if all one has to do is know a simple medicinal recipe (take a little theater, mix in some wit, add a little fencing…voila!) to cure the nausea. Just that one can, as Hamlet did, choose to be, even if one would rather not; there are consolations and ways of coping, as well as motives for action.

Works Cited

This essay has been awarded the prize for Interdisciplinarity
LITTLE TOWN JOY

Siamak Alipanah

Little town joy

On the road to a choice,
   At the edge of a sunset
walk

Far of the old gate
   Bit by bit...,
   I joy it all...,
Be in a small town
   Or,

High on a mountain top

I joy, with you
My passage,
   Other side is nothingness...

53
WHAT COULD A PHILOSOPHER TEACH?¹

Michael Malone

Do not take the question lightly. A friend of mine heard a professor in an applied science program say, sarcastically, “Wouldn’t it be nice to teach a class in philosophy, where anything you say is right?” The sentiment expressed in this remark is more widespread than advocates like to admit, and unless we can show that it involves a misunderstanding, the fires of the skeptics have all the fuel they need.

Certain experiences we had when hiring a junior faculty member illustrate the seriousness of the question in another way. All of the top candidates had begun to publish, but few if any had given thought to the point of having students learn philosophy. A colleague asked one candidate if a person could become good by taking a course in ethics. When the candidate said, “Of course not,” my colleague asked, “Then what could be the point of such a course?” Several answers are possible, some better than others, but all worth considering. The candidate had no answer! In fact, he was flabbergasted by the question. Later I mentioned this to several chairs of graduate programs in philosophy who each admitted having noticed the same phenomenon. None of them, though, recognized this as an indictment of his or her own graduate program.

I was asked recently to participate in a panel discussion on the topic, “What Does Philosophy Teach?” One of the participants was irritated by the topic and began with what he regarded as two “smart aleck” answers. The first was “Philosophy!” and the second was “Nothing!” It is important that the questions can be given a “smart aleck” answer. It would not occur to the scholars in other areas—the natural or social sciences, for example—to treat their own disciplines with such irreverence. This is not because they are humorless where their fields are concerned. They have a subject matter, and it defines what they teach. In philosophy this is not so clear. Philosophy seems never to settle anything, and yet it is the one discipline which, in the final analysis, one cannot circumvent. To ignore it is to be unreflective and to criticize it is to engage in it. But does it have a subject matter as the sciences do? The first smart aleck answer appears to ignore this problem.

The second is by far the more interesting. It, too, is inadequate, though, because it does not go far enough. Surely, however, this must be crazy! How can there be something beyond nothing? I have an answer for this, but it requires some introduction.

Consider for a moment the first smart aleck answer, “Philosophers teach philosophy.” Students in philosophy classes are normally expected to read and criticize the classics, and they often say that philosophy makes them think. We might say, accordingly, that the study of philosophy should cultivate respect for reason by teaching students to respect the classics.
present the classics, then, as the high points of the use of reason: the best of which humans are capable, the thinking that has created and defined who we are as a civilization. Ignorance of the classics is ignorance of one’s “people” and thus, in an important sense, of oneself. At the same time, though, we expect the students to cut their teeth by learning to criticize the ideas encountered in the classics. Thus, ideally, we are teaching respect for reason in two senses at once.

Philosophy, in both of these aspects, could not be taught from the perspective of any version of relativism—moral, perceptual, psychological, cultural, egoistic, or whatever. Respect has nothing to do with “appreciation,” tolerance, or pluralism. Students are to read the classics as the pursuit of wisdom, which is unrelentingly critical, and to reflect on them in the same critical spirit.

Respect for reason, the presupposition that some ideas are better than others, and that critical reflection concerning the presumed meanings and implications of the ideas can show us which are better and which are worse—and possibly even which can be given sense and which not—is an essential feature of an education. In the contemporary university, philosophy may well be the only discipline in which students can be assured of encountering such respect. In a conversation about differences in our ways of thinking, a sociologist friend of mine said indignantly, “Do you want some kid reading Mein Kampf believing that there is such a thing as truth and that he might find it in there?” What could I reply except, “Would you rather that he not read it at all, or that he read it presuming that no idea is worse than any other?” The same fellow thought it crazy to speak of carrying on a dialogue with a book. “Imagine some idiot talking to a book!” This fellow, by the way, reads constantly, and I know he has read much more than I have. Anyone with philosophical training must wonder about the intellectual posture he takes toward what he reads. I mention him here because his way of thinking (or should I say not thinking?) is far more common among university faculty than respect for reason as I defined it.

What counts as a classic? Before the twentieth century it would not have been difficult to answer that question. Philosophy took its own history to be the pursuit of wisdom and hence partly definitive of its subject matter. Logical positivism and its aftermath changed that. Many contemporary philosophers have little or no interest in the history of philosophy. In fact, there are even well-known and highly respected graduate programs granting the doctorate in philosophy in which students spend no time whatever reading philosophical classics. I would argue against this, in graduate or undergraduate curricula alike. What is a student to learn, however, from the study of the classics? If the only answer to this is that college graduates ought to know what Plato and “them guys” said, then the case for the skeptics is strengthened. Such study is fodder for the persiflage of cocktail parties, and the striving of great minds for understanding is reduced to items for Trivial Pursuit.

Suppose one were to reply, wanting to avoid this indictment of shallowness, that students need to become familiar with the ideas, values, and
traditions of our culture and its predecessors. When I began to discuss respect for classics I did, after all, say something that sounded a little like this. As it stands, though, it will not do for a number of reasons. In the first place, such knowledge cannot be an end in itself. None of the philosophers would have accepted the classification of his or her views as information about, or an expression of, culture. Furthermore, none of the philosophers would have been pleased to see his or her views treated as merely a moment in some tradition or other. Wisdom has no tradition.

Most philosophers thought of their own views as the truth (the final word, so far as they got) about whatever their writings addressed. Even Hegel, whose ideas celebrate the logic of the unfolding of traditions, places his at the absolute top. Can we assert frankly and confidently, then, that in the classics one learns the truth about humanity, nature, knowledge, God, and so forth? This will not do, not just because there are so many different and mutually antagonistic views in the classics. We expect students to criticize the ideas of the philosophers, to become participants in the dialogue. In so doing, we are treating the writings of the philosophers as if students were to get more from reading them than intellectual history.

Respect for radical criticisms

At this point I must introduce a third task, respect for the radical criticisms of the twentieth century. In working out the implications of adding it to the other requirements, I hope to show why the idea that philosophy teaches nothing does not go far enough.

Philosophy has always called itself into question. Well-known illustrations are the Socratic question, “Can virtue be taught?”, Descartes’s decision to doubt, Hume’s condemnation of all previous metaphysics, and Kant’s challenge to empiricists to show how synthetic a priori propositions are possible. A peculiarity of philosophy is that it, of all the disciplines, must call itself into question. In each of these examples, though, the philosopher is rejecting or condemning naïve predecessors or benighted contemporaries rather than philosophy per se. The philosopher eventually introduces his or her own new conception of method or set of distinctions or way of talking which restores or reinstates the possibility of philosophical knowledge—albeit of an unexpected or unfamiliar type. The criticisms of certain twentieth century philosophers are much more radical. They see philosophy as nothing but conceptual confusion. Philosophical discourse cannot result in something called “philosophical knowledge.” If a philosopher ever gets so far as to talk sense, he or she is no longer talking philosophy but something else—science, maybe.

This basic theme arises throughout twentieth century philosophy. In the English-speaking word, it is at the heart of the logical atomism of Russell and the early Wittgenstein, of logical positivism, and of ordinary language philosophy as it is found in later Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin, O. K. Bouwsma, Norman Malcolm, and a few others. It takes different forms in different
movements, and the reasoning on which it rests is different for different
movements, but it has been a dominant theme in twentieth century philosophy.
Even if one were to maintain that it is not at the heart of mainstream
contemporary philosophy one would have to admit that it has had considerable
impact in philosophy throughout the century. For one who believes there is
something to it, as I do, the theme creates tensions of a whole new order of
magnitude in his or her conception of the reasoning found in the classics. How
can I teach students to have respect for reason if philosophy, the exemplar of
reason, is to a large extent nonsense?

But here I must digress. I am writing this from the perspective of what
I know about philosophy and not from the perspective of an undergraduate who
encounters philosophy for the first time. Before we can discuss the ideas in the
classics, students must first learn to read them. The average entrance scores of
the freshmen at my university fall right at the mean for the United States as a
whole. Some faculty members in our English department learned that about
two-thirds of the 100 students in a freshman history class were reading the
text for the course at or below the frustration level. This means that they were
unable to follow the logic of the sentences they were reading, even with the help
of an instructor. They were not reading history, mind you, but a history text
written for college freshmen. My first task, then, is to teach them to read. The
ultimate goal is that they become mature, informed readers capable of reading
a piece of discourse sympathetically but critically. Initially, though, the goal
is much more basic, I must get them to see the connections between linguistic
patterns in what they read and the linguistic distinctions they display in their
own unreflective daily speech. It is only with students who have begun to show
this type of awareness that one can take the next step.

Students come to the university believing, without ever having
thought about it, that all discourse divides neatly into facts and opinions. They
have never had an introduction to what an idea is, let alone to the place of ideas
in people’s lives. I often ask students, for example, if they believe that all men
are created equal. Virtually none of them admit that they do. They tell me
about differences in intelligence, wealth, power, and so forth. I remind them
of how obvious these differences are and get them to admit that no one would
have meant to deny them. When I ask then in what way the remark could have
been meant if not as a statement of fact they sometimes say it is opinion. They
say this hesitantly, of course, because at that point it does not sound right. But
these two options seem to exhaust the possibilities for them. Unfortunately,
many faculty elsewhere in the university reinforce this type of innocence, if
only by doing nothing to combat it. To combat innocence one must criticize.
But criticism is “not nice” in an age dominated by those incompatible spirits,
“tolerance of ambiguity” and “professionalism.”

It is also the case that students come to the university never having
written dialectically. They have done some simple research and written reports,
and they have tried their hands at stories or poems. They might even have
written essay answers in history or social studies exams and in a few cases
have been asked to express their opinion or their own hypothesis about the reasons for or the importance of some historical or current phenomenon. But even the brightest and best-prepared students are taken aback by the request that they explain and defend an author’s ideas in their own words and then pursue some line of criticism of their own choosing in relation to those ideas. For at least the first two essays one can expect questions such as, “Do you just want our opinions?” and objections such as, “I don’t see how you could grade something like that.” The first subheading under the task of teaching respect for reason is to get them to see why questions and objections such as this are misguided. Once again, many faculty elsewhere in the university reinforce the misunderstandings from which these questions and objections arise.

The first stages in introducing students to the classics, then, amount to helping them to learn to read, in the most basic sense of all, and getting them to think about what an idea is, how it differs from an opinion, and what it has to do with understanding—or living—a person’s life, or being a participant in a culture. As they begin to recognize ideas in what they and the others around them say, one can begin to get them to reflect on how an author might present the logic of an idea in a literary form and how someone might engage in a dialogue with the author. It is only at this level of understanding that they can begin to respect the classics, because it is only at this point that they have comprehension of what they are about. Only then, for example, can they begin to appreciate the classics as eloquent, articulate, subtle, and forceful presentations of ideas we have heard or discovered to be latent in our own thinking.

Students must learn to read the classics before they can ever understand the radical perspective of the twentieth century. I am reminded here of the lines with which Wittgenstein began his remarks on Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*: “One must start with error and from it approach the truth. That is, one must discover the source of the error, otherwise we gain nothing from hearing the truth. The more plausibly and forcefully the error presents itself the more significant the discovery is that it is an error.” The better the students can read and the better they understand what an idea is, the more they will acquire respect for the classics and for reason. Also, although it might sound paradoxical, the better they can read, the better prepared they are to understand the grounds for the charge that philosophy is nonsense. To the uninitiated, this might sound like a justification for getting rid of the philosophy department. But this is not what is implied at all. The student who says he or she cannot make heads or tails out of anything in Marx or Kant could not understand the Wittgensteinian notion that philosophy is nonsense, even though that student might say, “Yep! That’s what I would’ve said, too.”

I do not wish to deemphasize the obstacles discussed in the previous few paragraphs, but they are not my central concern here. Suppose that our students had none of the deficiencies I have mentioned. It would still not be an easy thing to say what they were to acquire from reading and trying to criticize the classics (the first two of my three requirements). It becomes almost
that philosophy is nonsense (my third requirement). Hopeless as I have made it sound, though, I must say something further.

There are three keys that relieve some of the tension. First, apart from the metaphysical core to a philosopher’s thinking, one can often find exquisite bits of wisdom. One of the beauties of “the unexamined life is not worth living” is that one does not need the allegory of the cave, nor the theory of forms, nor even definitions to see the truth and importance of it. Neither does one require any of the techniques of modern psychology to engage in the examination. To cite another example, imagine how little today’s image-mongers (you pick the occupations) would have to say if they were to be guided by Spinoza’s adage that “all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.” Even Wittgenstein himself might have allowed that philosophers have given us a number of insights. He was more concerned, I believe, that we see that these insights never required the metaphysical trappings the production of which was the primary occupation of the philosophers.

The second key grows out of the first. Wittgenstein and Austin always emphasized that although philosophy is nonsense, it was not (necessarily) written by fools. On the contrary, it is the product of intelligence. Austin says, “In philosophy, there are many mistakes it is no disgrace to have made: to make a first-water, ground floor mistake, so far from being easy, takes on [one] form of philosophical genius.” In a footnote he cites Plato, Descartes, and Leibniz as examples of this philosophical genius. Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* contains many passages along these lines. Philosophical systems are “houses of cards,” or “bumps the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language.” We get these bumps by giving in to the natural inclinations of healthy intellects. We ask certain questions and adopt certain prejudices…. The prejudices are “not stupid” and “anyone free from the temptation to ask the questions is either lucky or a monster or a stone.” Philosophy (in Wittgenstein’s new conception of it) turns out to be a lifelong “battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.”

Philosophical classics can serve as models of the false turns and blind alleys that brilliant minds take as they give expression to ways of thinking latent and in crude form in all of us. They do this in their attempt to understand the most important things—in their attempt, that is, to acquire wisdom. It takes a certain refinement of reason to create Plato’s theory of forms, but this refinement is applied to predilections of reason we all have in common. It takes a different and further refinement of reason to see why the theory is unintelligible, why it makes nonsense of the very things it was to explain, and why, in any case, nothing of the kind was required. This is what I had in mind at the outset when I used the expression “beyond nothing.” It was this sort of realization—not that Plato had the wrong theory, but that no theory was required—that led Wittgenstein to speak of his later ideas as one of the heirs of philosophy rather than as a new philosophy. I submit that this conception of the great philosophers will, in the long run, lead to a far deeper respect for them than the alternatives, which appear to require that we label them uninformed,
passé, or stupid.

But on this way of thinking what becomes, one might ask, of the idea that there are philosophical problems to be solved? It does not deny that the world is full of confused ways of thinking, talking, and acting. It does deny, however, that these constitute problems for philosophy to solve by means of a theory. As I have tried to show in another essay on Wittgenstein, Bouwsma, and Malcolm, it even denies the centrality of arguments. It dismisses these traditional ways of conceiving of the business of philosophy on the grounds that they themselves are an important source of the confusion.

A third key follows from the second. There will always be work for philosophy departments because people will always be taking the first step; they will always be giving in to their natural philosophical inclinations. This applies not only when they reflect on the traditional subjects of philosophy—goodness, beauty, free will, knowledge—but also when they reflect on the foundations or starting points of their special disciplines. Norman Malcolm’s book *Memory and Mind* illustrates this in one way. In the first several chapters he reviews philosophical conceptions of memory from Aristotle to the present, draws out the presuppositions concerning the nature of language on which they rest, and criticizes these presuppositions from a Wittgensteinian perspective. In the last few chapters he shows that contemporary neurophysiological theories of memory rest on the same presuppositions clothed in quasi-scientific jargon. What were once the philosophical confusions about memory have become physiological or psychological confusions about memory.

Similar charges could be made good for many topics and many academic disciplines. O.K. Bouwsma’s essay contrasting Ryle’s and Wittgenstein’s conceptions of what is wrong with philosophy illustrates it in another way. Ryle’s term is “category mistake”; Wittgenstein’s is “confusion.” It is in the nature of a mistake that the one who makes it can be shown that, and why, he or she is mistaken. That person is then, in theory at least, freed once and for all from the temptation to make that mistake again. If philosophy consists of, say, 150 mistakes, then in some finite period one could become free of it altogether. Regarding Wittgenstein’s view, Bouwsma maintains, being in the condition of philosophical confusion is analogous to being in the condition of sin. There is no such thing as overcoming once and for all the state of sin. The concept of sin pertains to our most basic natural inclinations, the things we are most tempted to do. The life of the sinner must be a continuous struggle against these inclinations—for a lifetime. On this analogy, then, there is always something to occupy philosophy (or rather the Wittgensteinian “heir” of philosophy) even for those of us who think in this way. We can continuously discipline and restrain the metaphysical urge in ourselves in order to avoid getting caught up in confusion and the production of nonsense. We can also attempt to get others to see philosophy as we do. In an important sense, then, a philosopher can never be anything but a teacher.
Undergraduate philosophy courses can yield critical perspective

By taking this line of thought one step further we can see what might be the single most important contribution a philosophy course could make in an undergraduate’s education. It could begin to prepare them to take a critical perspective on the things they read and are told in other courses.

We are often reminded that many of the separate disciplines in the modern university emerged from the “vagueness” of philosophical speculation. Each of the sciences, both natural and social, is an example. We are not so often reminded that the practitioners of these newly formed disciplines cultivated an ignorance of historical roots, even of their own disciplines, at least through disinterest and in some cases through contempt. Consequently, as a few contemporary philosophers have insisted, most scientists know very little about the history of their own discipline. (At least they have very little firsthand exposure to the writings that constitute their history. Often what they know is the “didactic” history written in scientific texts.) Malcolm’s book illustrates in two ways at once how students’ critical faculties can be ignited and refined by a good philosophy course. They can learn about the historical roots of the ideas they encounter in other disciplines, and they can become skeptical of the claims of the practitioners of these disciplines to have left philosophy behind altogether or to have so greatly improved upon it. When they hear a biologist, for example, present the “evidence” that refutes creationism, they can wonder whether the issue is really one to be settled by evidence. They can even become skeptical of certain claims that might be made by historians themselves—for example, that historians merely present and interpret the facts. Students will encounter a variety of statements or positions that cry out for philosophical criticism, and their philosophy courses are likely to be the only part of their curriculum that presents this type of criticism as even a possibility, let alone as one foundation of an education.

The most typical approaches to teaching philosophy fail to take seriously at least one of the three requirements I have discussed. On the one hand, there are the texts. Many are smorgasbords intended to make money for their editors precisely because they may be used in an indefinite variety of “rap sessions.” They usually contain token specimens of serious philosophy and “applications” to contemporary (read “trendy”) issues concerning sexuality, substance abuse and control, and exploitation of minorities. Books and sessions of this kind encourage sophistry and contempt for reason, and they perpetuate the popular images of philosophy. One of those is that anything one says is all right. Another is that philosophy is to the rest of the university what a delicatessen is to a supermarket—the place where you get the esoteric stuff such as solipsism, the forms, the transcendental unity of appreciation, and the absolute. Other texts are popularizations and compromises with the students’ inability to read the classics. They are neither primary sources in their own right nor secondary sources on the ideas found in the traditions. They are to philosophy what secondary school social studies texts are to real history, sociology, and political science. In philosophy, however, they are even worse, if
possible, because philosophy is nothing but words (so to speak), whereas those other disciplines, as they never tire of telling us, at least have some information to impart. Philosophical thinking cannot be made more “readable.” Texts of this type are a very poor substitute for the classics, even though the students find the language of the classics almost insurmountable.

On the other hand, there are approaches and styles. Some would shrug off the skeptics with the claim that we can, at least, teach logic. Whether we take this word “logic” in its strictest sense, meaning a formal discipline akin in some ways to mathematics, or in a much looser and vaguer sense, where it means critical reasoning, this will not do. Contrary to the view of many contemporary philosophers, I would maintain that logic in its strictest sense is not philosophy and philosophy in its most interesting (humanistic) aspects is not logic. To say this is not to deny the importance of training in formal logic. Perhaps we should speak of logic as “pre-philosophy,” the intellectual discipline with which we must become familiar in order to understand philosophy well. (One is in no position to understand why arguments are not central to philosophy unless one first understands what an argument is, how arguments can fail, and where they are appropriate). The problems with identifying the teaching of philosophy with teaching critical reasoning are of a different sort. Although there is something very important and correct in thinking of philosophy in this way, it is difficult to explain to someone who has not been through a philosophy course or two what this means. Consequently, since the expression “critical reasoning” connotes a desideratum in an academic institution, everyone else in the university claims to be teaching it, too.

For example, in my university we have begun to implement a new general studies curriculum. The old program consisted of roughly 100 specially designated courses, which were to emphasize the interconnectedness of the various disciplines. The new system designates well over 400 courses as appropriate, on the grounds that, among other things, they purport to teach critical reasoning. When the guidelines for the new system were first publicized, I expressed enthusiasm to some colleagues in a coffee lounge. I was pleased because they emphasized the teaching of concepts and the importance of analysis of ideas and arguments rather than “relevance” or “trends” or “integration” or “application.” How naïve I was. I was asked contemptuously, by the chair of the mathematics department of all people, whether I taught critical reasoning—or philosophy! Either our new program makes sense, and anything whatsoever teaches critical reasoning, or it does not make sense, and almost nobody at my university knows what the expression means. I am afraid I know which of these is the case.

Although it is difficult to explain, as I have said, the sense in which philosophy teaches critical reasoning, one can get a glimpse of it by considering why teachers in other disciplines do not do what I mean by teaching critical reasoning. Many of the disciplines in the contemporary university are so obviously committed to career preparation (engineering, business, dental hygiene, fashion merchandising, and so forth) that they seldom claim to be
teaching critical reasoning, so I am not talking about them here. I am talking instead about the great variety of disciplines which, at some point in their history, were either a part of or allied with philosophy. This would obviously include all of the social and natural sciences, history, rhetoric and composition (as found in English departments), “communications” programs of all types, and even mathematics.

There are several reasons why none of these disciplines teaches critical reasoning in the sense that philosophy does. To be perfectly blunt if not outright abrasive, I would say that many of the professors I have met from these disciplines have not the foggiest notion of what an idea is let alone what it would mean to criticize one. This is, in part, due to their ignorance of philosophy. It is, however, a de facto reason rather than a conceptual one. The conceptual reason is that each of the disciplines I have noted acquired a subject matter in its separation from philosophy, and in doing so committed itself to accomplishing or settling some things. (As a parody of this, one sees practitioners in some contemporary departments at least committed to a few “isms,” ideologies).

Philosophy remains, then, as the one subject that does not need to settle anything, has nothing at stake in settling or accomplishing anything, has no subject matter other than criticism per se. To pursue it is to learn to acquire a critical attitude or habit of mind in all that one learns, thinks about, or in a sense even does—and nothing more! Teachers in the other disciplines do not teach this, at least in the fullest sense of the word, because all of their disciplines are defined either in terms of a subject matter they have acquired by getting beyond pure criticism (as in the cases of chemistry, biology, and physics) or at least by the hope or promise of accomplishing something and thereby acquiring a subject matter by getting beyond pure criticism (as in the cases of sociology and psychology).

To define philosophy as conceptual criticism per se is not, however, to restrict it to the invention and criticism of arguments. Most of the applicants for our recent vacancies seemed to be able to produce 17 bona fide arguments for or against just about anything at the drop of a hat. A faculty member at a sister university told some of us, only partly facetiously but with pride, how he had constructed a utilitarian argument to convince John Rawls that the philosophy department at Harvard should put a soft drink machine in the graduate student lounge and another utilitarian argument to convince Rawls of the opposite. I do not take this as a demonstration of Rawls’s thickheadedness. I take it instead as an illustration of the counterintuitive point that arguments are not, in the final analysis, as central as most philosophers think. In the course of philosophy at large or in an individual’s understanding, very little hangs on arguments. They too often serve as challenges to our cleverness rather than aids to our understanding. Any argument-monger will ultimately wind up like my example’s caricature of himself. The argument-monger is not the exemplar of respect for reason but the Molièresque parody of it.

The last failure I will mention begins with a matter of technique but ends with a bit of psychology. On occasion we encounter a smart aleck student
who makes wise cracks, who is not learning anything, and who is preventing others from learning. The student is ripe to be set up, to be made a patsy. The rest of the class will love it, and it may very well be the only thing that will ever lead that student to think. It will also serve to illustrate the manner and the consequences of failing to think (we make fools of ourselves whether we or others realize it or not). Most of us can set up a patsy. Anyone who does not cultivate the art to a certain extent is missing a grand opportunity. To use this art judiciously and where appropriate is a good thing. To make it the cornerstone of one’s pedagogy, however, is another. If I as the teacher come to need it, then it is no longer serving any of the three tasks I have discussed.

How to take the tasks seriously

What is required to teach philosophy in a responsible manner, and what could students learn from it? I have discussed three central tasks, shown something of the tensions they create, maintained throughout the importance of taking all three of them seriously, and discussed briefly some of the common ways of failing to take one or another of them seriously. But I have not addressed directly the matter of how to take them seriously. This is surely not a matter of some technique or other. It might better be construed as a matter of one’s attitude toward one’s teaching and of one’s understanding of the point of the teaching. The finest discussion of this that I have seen is by O. K. Bouwsma in his review article of Wittgenstein’s Blue Book. He labels Wittgenstein’s new philosophy an “art” and characterizes it in various ways. It is the art of attacking certain questions, the art of disentangling, the art of cure, of discussion (to show differences), of exposure (of hidden analogies), of scrutinizing the grammar of a word, of freeing us from illusions of sense where there is no sense, and so on. He then concludes that:

The object is to assist some individual, always an individual, to help him discover what misleads and has misled him. And what misled him is to be seen only when he is no longer misled. When he says: “Now I see” and breathes a sigh of relief, even though it may be a bit sheepishly, that is the moment to which the art is directed.13

Thomas Jefferson speaks of the mark of an education as profound discretion. Philosophy ought to teach (could teach?) discretion. I have commented on the difficulties of saying just what that comprises and includes. I am certain that philosophy will eternally be the only discipline in universities that takes this as its primary pedagogical task. It is what ought to be meant when one says of philosophy that it teaches you to think. To the extent that an individual teacher, or a department full of them, loses sight of this task, he, she, or it has lost any raison d’être.

Endnotes

This essay was originally published in 1986 by the Association of American Colleges Journal, Liberal Education. We are reprinting it here with the permission of its author, to whom rights have since returned.
I am indebted to the colleagues in my department, especially David Sherry and William Nietmann, for their robust criticism of this essay.

In “To Reclaim a Legacy” (Chronicle of Higher Education, 28 November 1984), William Bennett urges humanities teachers to return to the classics. In a subsequent issue of Chronicle (“A Misguided Call to Spiritual Renewal,” 9 January 1985, 128), Norman Birnbaum indicts Bennett’s proposal for its stiff-frozen, relativist-fundamentalist notion of tradition and authority. If Bennett had been advocating the uncritical teaching of the classics as authority, Birnbaum might have had a point. Bennett was not, of course.

In citing Wittgenstein, Malcolm, Ryle, and Bouwsma, I am not placing myself at the heart of twentieth century philosophy. Convincing cases can be made that the majority of philosophers never understood what Wittgenstein, Austin, Bouwsma, and Malcolm were up to. John Cook has a fine essay on this in which he says that “the revolution got off to a false start and/or ordinary language philosophy still remains largely untried.” He then cites a similar remark of Frank Ebersole’s: “I think that ordinary-language philosophy was never given more than a most cursory consideration. And, far from learning a lesson from it, most philosophers merely used it to mildly reshape some of their preconceived misconceptions.” (John Cook, “The Fate of Ordinary Language Philosophy,” Philosophical Investigations, Vol. 3, No. 2: [Spring 1980], 1). Even though it is obvious to many of us that there is no turning back, there are many others who try. They engage in metaphysical business as usual, compounding nonsense with trivia. Quine, for example, conceives of ordinary language philosophy as essentially an appeal to philology and, thus, beside the point that interests him (W. V. O. Quine, “Logic and the Reification of Universals,” From a Logical Point of View [New York: Harper and Row, 1963], 106). He then does his own work presupposing just what Wittgenstein found to be the source of the nonsense in philosophical views such as empiricism. For instance, Quine presupposes that language, taken as a whole, is a theory and, therefore, is about something, namely, irritations of the sensory receptors. (W. V. O. Quine, Word and Object [Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1960], 1-3). Other big names such as Putnam and Davidson have stumbled 40 years late into the relevance of the Wittgensteinian insight that language and thought are by nature public rather than private. (Donald Davidson, “What is Private about Beliefs?”, an address at a conference at the University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, 25 February 1984.) Their difficulty with this insight stems from the clumsiness of the jargon of contemporary logic (“sets of beliefs,” “Jones believes that p,” “truth conditions,” and so forth) in articulating this issue.


From an unpublished set of notes ostensibly taken at Wittgenstein’s lectures on philosophical psychology, author unknown.


I suspect that many universities may offer credit merely for sitting through the PBS series, “The Constitution: That Delicate Balance,” as they did for Bronowski’s “The Ascent of Man.” There is even less justification in the more recent case since, if the viewing were not grounded in some reading of history and some critical conceptual reflection, the viewer would be justified in concluding that the series illustrates perfectly well how these conflicting views on so-called “fundamental” constitutional issues are just a matter of opinion.

Much more hangs, I maintain, on persuasiveness of other kinds, as I am trying to be persuasive in thesis essay without becoming sophistical.
