THE PRIMACY OF THE PRACTICAL IN THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

A Dissertation

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Philosophy is something that we do: it is a way of dealing with the questions and concerns that arise as we live our lives. Because of this, philosophy inevitably reflects our perspectives; these perspectives make philosophy possible—even as they constrain what philosophy can say. This is the tension at the heart of philosophy; the point of this dissertation is less to resolve this tension than to explore it—specifically, by recovering insights from Plato, Immanuel Kant, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Alasdair MacIntyre.

First, this dissertation explores the insight that our perspectives constrain what philosophy can say. For we are situated within the world that our philosophical theories describe—and so those theories must describe a world in which, one way or another, we arrive at justified theories. Our theories must presuppose this regardless of how the world is—lest our practice of philosophy undermine itself. Contemporary philosophers often
forget to reflect on their own practice in this way—and so forget that philosophy is a practice; because of this, they fall into performative contradiction.

Second, this dissertation explores the insight that our perspectives make philosophy possible. For philosophy is a practice—and, because practices are irreducibly normative, no practice occurs outside of some linguistic perspective or other. Now, these linguistic perspectives sometimes contradict one another—but, because our linguistic perspectives inevitably constrain our conclusions, there is no neutral way to decide among them. Nonetheless, the decision of one rather than another is sometimes justified.

Third, this dissertation refutes an objection to its foundation. Many contemporary philosophers hold that philosophy should not reflect any perspective at all—and certainly should not address the questions and concerns that arise as we live our lives. Even if philosophy could avoid reflecting our perspectives, however, it should not do so: it is because contemporary philosophy does not address the questions and concerns that arise as we live our lives that it so often seems irrelevant to our students—and to our society. If philosophy is to survive the crisis in the humanities, it must recover this relevance; my dissertation strives to do precisely this.
For Jane, who sacrificed two years of her life for this dissertation.

I pray to God that it might yet prove worth it.
All interest is ultimately practical and even that of speculative reason is only conditional and is complete in practical use alone.

—Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*
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PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

Originally, it was my intention to bring all this together in a book whose form I thought of differently at different times. But... after several attempts to weld my results together into such a whole, I realized that I should never succeed.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

Immanuel Kant and Ludwig Wittgenstein inspire this dissertation if anyone does.

The two were, of course, wildly different; certainly they wrote in wildly different ways—and certainly they reached wildly different conclusions. Nonetheless, each insisted *about* his work precisely the same thing—or, rather, the same three things:

1. *The style is not all that it could be.*
2. *The substance is irrefutable.*
3. *This substance reveals just how little philosophy can achieve.*

In hindsight, the first conviction seems a ridiculous understatement, the second a ridiculous overstatement, and the third downright oracular. Regarding this dissertation, though, I would echo all three.
P.1. Style

Regarding the style of his own *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein was not especially charitable:

> If this work has a value it consists in two things. First that in it thoughts are expressed, and this value will be the greater the better the thoughts are expressed. The more the nail has been hit on the head.—Here I am conscious that I have fallen far short of the possible. Simply because my powers are insufficient to cope with the task.—May others come and do it better.¹

Nor was Kant, regarding the style of his own *Critique of Pure Reason*, any more charitable:

> To… deserving men, who combine well-groundedness of insight so fortunately with the talent for a lucid presentation (something I am conscious of not having myself), I leave it to complete my treatment, which is perhaps defective here and there in this latter regard.²

Unfortunately, both Wittgenstein and Kant are right: neither the *Tractatus* nor the *Critique* is especially lucid. Nor is the style of this dissertation all that it could be.

Perhaps this is not surprising. For one thing, I have adopted the decimal outline of the *Tractatus*.³ For another thing, I have sometimes adopted the oracular style of Kant. While the former was a matter of preference, the latter was not: Kant wrote as he did

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³ Though I made a few modifications. Wittgenstein should have started the outline with “0”, not “1”—since every subsection starts, implicitly, with a “0” in the relevant place. On that note, Wittgenstein should have put a period between every number in the section headings: his failure to do this means that there could not have been more than ten subsections in a section. I have corrected both mistakes.
because he sought a degree of abstraction that no philosopher had ever achieved—and it is a Kantian insight that this dissertation strives to articulate.

For my style of writing, though, I can blame only myself. Some find that style too choppy—or at least too reliant on the emdash. And certainly italics do too much of the heavy lifting. Nonetheless, I have sought to render this dissertation as readable as I could—not only to philosophers but also to everyday individuals. Indeed, this is demanded by the thesis of this dissertation: it is only if philosophy can be rendered relevant to the lives of everyday individuals—only if it can speak, in other words, to perennial human questions and concerns—that it is worth doing.

P.2. Substance

For philosophy is something that we do: it is a way of dealing with the questions and concerns that arise as we live our lives. Because of this, philosophy inevitably reflects our perspectives; these perspectives make philosophy possible—even as they constrain what philosophy can say.

Just this is the thesis of this dissertation. I admit that I do not fear its refutation. In this, I suppose, I echo the pride of Wittgenstein:

On the other hand the truth of the thoughts communicated here seems to me unassailable and definitive. I am, therefore, of the opinion that the problems have in essentials been finally solved.\(^4\)

Wittgenstein, for his part, echoes Kant:


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For... the danger is not that I will be refuted, but that I will not be understood.\textsuperscript{5}

I certainly hope that no philosopher would deny the thesis of this dissertation: it is just obvious that theories are the result of theorization, and that theorization is a practice—something, in other words, that we do. And it is just obvious that we do whatever we do for reasons.

Nonetheless, philosophers tend to forget this—tend to forget, in other words, that the practical is primary. Because of this, I strive in this dissertation to remind philosophers—in the end, to remind myself—that the practical is primary. Of course, the problem of forgetting is never solved—at least not finally: every generation must assume anew the task of renewal.

P.3. Poverty

The thesis of this dissertation is, I am convinced, the insight at the heart of philosophy. Though “tension” might be a better word than “insight”: at the heart of philosophy is our insight into the limitations of our insight. In this, I suppose, I echo the humility of Wittgenstein:

And if I am not mistaken in this, then the value of this work secondly consists in the fact that it shows how little has been done when these problems have been solved.\textsuperscript{6}

Wittgenstein, for his part, echoes Kant:

\textsuperscript{5} Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, Bxliii.

\textsuperscript{6} Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, Preface.
Philosophy consists precisely in knowing its bounds.\(^7\)

There is a *limit* to philosophy—a point where further argument would achieve nothing. The task of Kant and Wittgenstein—and, for that matter, of Plato and MacIntyre—is to discern this limit. But none of these four surrender to despair—to what contemporary philosophers call “skepticism”:

I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith.\(^8\)

Plato, Kant, Wittgenstein, and MacIntyre discern the limit of philosophy only so that this limit might be overcome by something *other* than philosophy.

For contemporary philosophers to admit that this is their task would demand some humility. But it would begin the renewal of philosophy. And this would be no small thing.

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\(^7\) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A727/B755.

\(^8\) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxxx.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

All men by nature desire to know.

—Aristotle, *Metaphysics*

What is the insight at the heart of philosophy?

1.1. Introduction

Well, what *is* philosophy?

1.1.1. MacIntyre

According to Alasdair MacIntyre, philosophy is just a way of dealing with certain perennial questions and concerns:

All human beings, whatever their culture, find themselves confronted by questions about the nature and significance of their lives: What is our place in the order of things? Of what powers in the natural and social
world do we need to take account? How should we respond to the facts of suffering and death? What is our relationship to the dead? What is it to live a human life well? What is it to live it badly?9

These questions and concerns are perennial because they are aspects of the human condition—that is, our condition. For we are indeed conditioned by the world: we are the particular way that we are because of what is beyond us. This is so both literally and metaphorically: we are the particular way that we are not only because of our immediate surroundings but also because of our biology and our culture. The paradigm for our conditioning by the world is, of course, birth: we are as we are because of what came before us—both literally and metaphorically. It is no surprise, then, that certain questions—specifically, those about the particular way that we are—are perennial.

Moreover, because we are the particular way that we are, there are particular things that we should do. Precisely because we are the particular way that we are, though, we sometimes fail to do the particular things that we should do: we often lack the relevant strength—and, just as often, the relevant wisdom. The paradigm for our failure to do what we should do is, of course, death—but there are several ways that our integrity might be shattered, and death is far from the worst. It is no surprise, then, that certain concerns—specifically, those about the particular things that we should do—are perennial.

Philosophy is not, of course, the only way of dealing with these questions and concerns; certainly art, religion, and science are others. But philosophy strives to distance

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itself from the relevant questions and concerns in a way that none of these other practices do.\textsuperscript{10} Herein lies a perennial hazard:

One danger confronting philosophers is that they may forget that their enquiries begin from and extend the enquiries of plain persons and that they are exercising their philosophical skills on behalf of those same plain persons.\textsuperscript{11}

Like art, religion, and science, philosophy is something that we do. Precisely because philosophy strives to distance itself from the relevant questions and concerns, though, doing philosophy tends to lead us to forget that we are doing philosophy—indeed, that we are doing anything at all.

\textbf{1.1.2. Korsgaard}

Or so one might gather from contemporary philosophy:

Philosophers who conceive the subject theoretically characteristically suppose that philosophical problems arise from gaps or unclarities in our theories—from something we don’t know. Although it never happens exactly this way, such philosophers aspire to solve these problems by arguing from something like unassailable premises, and by showing that something else connected to these premises may be established—either as their logical consequence, or as their most natural interpretation, or as the best explanation for them. The philosopher’s proposal is supposed to win the reader’s assent by showing her first that the premises really are unassailable, and then that this commits her to the rest of the philosopher’s view.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10} Obviously, this is another spatial metaphor—but more on this in a moment.

\textsuperscript{11} MacIntyre, \textit{God, Philosophy, Universities}, 10.

Call this the “Primacy of the Theoretical.” Certainly it seems the assumption of contemporary philosophy. Nonetheless, it misses something crucial—or so Christine Korsgaard insists:

Philosophy conceived practically by contrast takes its start not from a premise but from a plight. Philosophical problems are seen to arise not from a gap in our theoretical views but from a problematic position in which we find ourselves. The philosopher’s job is to describe that position and the problem to which it gives rise in a way that enables the reader to recognize it as her own problem, and he wins the reader’s assent by exhibiting his proposal as the best or the only solution to it.\(^\text{13}\)

Those who insist that the theoretical is primary are right that philosophy is about asking and answering questions. What they miss is that philosophy is about asking not just any questions but our questions. And we can answer these questions only if we remember the concerns that made them mean something to us: abstracted entirely from the perspective that motivated our questions—the perspective that we share as humans—no premises are unassailable, and so no conclusions demand assent.

1.1.3. Kant

It is not often that Christine Korsgaard echoes Alasdair MacIntyre. Of course, both are merely echoing Immanuel Kant:

The field of philosophy in this cosmopolitan sense can be brought down to the following questions:

1. *What can I know?*

2. *What ought I to do?*

\(^{13}\) Korsgaard, “Rawls and Kant,” 1168.
3. What may I hope?

4. What is man?

Metaphysics answers the first question, morals the second, religion the third, and anthropology the fourth. Fundamentally, however, we could reckon all of this as anthropology, because the first three questions relate to the last one.\textsuperscript{14}

It is crucial that Kant does not ask these questions:

1. What is true?

2. What is right?

For these questions mean nothing at all—not, anyway, if they mean something other than these questions:

1. What should I believe?

2. What should I do?

Korsgaard puts the same point this way:

What we are seeking in philosophy is fundamental laws for the employment of our mental powers, laws to guide our proceedings, not laws whose primary aim is to explain some realm of phenomena.\textsuperscript{15}

It is not that one cannot seek laws that explain some realm of phenomena. Rather, it is that these laws are not fundamental—at least not in the relevant sense: laws that explain the world are just laws that tell us how we should think about the world. They are a species within a genus—that of laws that tell us what we should do. For thinking is just one kind of doing.


\textsuperscript{15} Korsgaard, “Rawls and Kant,” 1169.
1.2. The Practical Proof

Korsgaard puts the same point this way:

We do not regard our thoughts and choices merely as things that happen in us; rather, thinking and choosing are things that we do.\(^{16}\)

In this, of course, she echoes Kant:

One cannot possibly think of a reason that would consciously receive direction from any other quarter with respect to its judgments, since the subject would then attribute the determination of his judgment not to his reason but to an impulse. Reason must regard itself as the author of its principles independently of alien influences; consequently, as practical reason… it must be regarded of itself as free.\(^{17}\)

One may hold that another does whatever he or she does because something causes him or her to do so. But is a contradiction to hold that one oneself does whatever one does because something causes one oneself to do so: among the things that one does is hold doctrines—and among the doctrines that one holds is this one. Call this contradiction “performative”: because the doctrine speaks also of itself, to hold the doctrine is to deny it justification.

One must not hold, therefore, that one oneself does whatever one does because something causes one oneself to do so. Rather, one must hold that one oneself does what one does—at least some of the time—for reasons: one must hold that one is, in the relevant sense, free. One must hold this, Kant notes, whether or not it is true:

\(^{16}\) Korsgaard, “Rawls and Kant,” 1168.

We could not even prove the latter as something real in ourselves and in human nature; we saw only that we must presuppose it if we want to think of a being as... endowed with consciousness of his causality with respect to actions.¹⁸

We must *presuppose* that we are free. Admittedly, it might be that we are *not* free: it might be that philosophy only imprisons us in delusion. We must presuppose it nonetheless.

Call this the “Practical Proof”: its premise is just the fact of our philosophical activity—and this is a premise that we *cannot* deny without performative contradiction. It is *only* in this way—only, that is, when we recall that philosophy is something that we *do*—that any premise can be rendered unassailable. For we *ourselves* are the only foundation that our doubt cannot shake.

1.3. Conclusion

Philosophy is something that we *do*: it is a way of dealing with the questions and concerns that arise as we live our lives. Because of this, philosophy inevitably reflects our *perspectives*: these perspectives make philosophy possible—even as they constrain what philosophy can say.

Call this the “Primacy of the Practical.” It is the insight at the heart of philosophy. Indeed, it is what marks philosophy—literally, the love of wisdom—as something other than wisdom itself: it is, in the end, our insight into the limitations of our insight. There is a tension in this, obviously, but it is not a tension that we can dissolve— not, anyway, without dissolving philosophy itself.

This dissertation will not seek to demonstrate that the practical is primary. Indeed, precisely because this is the insight at the heart of philosophy, we cannot demonstrate it—not, anyway, from any insight more obvious than itself. Rather, this dissertation will seek to show that, again and again, it is those philosophers who remember that the practical is primary who achieve insights into the human condition—insights, in other words, that might matter to us.

19 Note that “practical” is not to be contrasted with “impractical”; rather, “practical” is to be contrasted with “theoretical.” Again, though, this is not to imply that our theories are secondary—only that theory is one kind of practice.

20 Again, I hope that no philosopher would deny that the practical is primary. Nonetheless, philosophers tend to forget that the practical is primary. But more on this later.
CHAPTER 2

PROTAGORAS AND PARMENIDES ON PERSPECTIVES

Truth is in the depths.

—Democritus, The Little Cosmology

How should we see ourselves?

2.1. Introduction

For there are, it seems, several ways to see ourselves.

2.1.1. Some History

Or so Plato has his Socrates imply in the Phaedo. Consider what Socrates says of Anaxagoras:

It seemed to me that his position was very much as if someone... said first of all that the reason I’m sitting here now is that my body is composed of bones and sinews, and that the bones are hard and separated from each
other by joints, while the sinews—along with the fleshy parts, and the skin that holds everything together—cover the bones, and have the capacity to tighten and slacken; so, with the bones suspended in their sockets, the sinews slacken and tighten and somehow make me able to bend my legs as I’m doing now—and that’s the reason why I’m sitting here with my legs bent as they are. The reasons he’d give in explaining my conversation with you would be more of the same, putting it down to things like articulate sound, air, hearing, and countless more of them, all the time omitting to mention the true reasons, namely that, since the Athenians decided it was better to condemn me, for that very reason I’ve decided that it’s the better thing for me to sit here, and more just for me to stay and submit to whatever penalty they impose on me.  

The words of Socrates are striking: though there are at least two ways to see his behavior—specifically, to explain his refusal to run from death—one of those ways is wrong.

Or is it? Socrates immediately throws this interpretation of his words—their most obvious interpretation—into doubt:

True, unless I had such things—bones, sinews, and all the other bits of me—I wouldn’t be able to do the things I decide to do; but to say that I do because of these things… and not by my choice of what is best, would be an extremely lazy way to talk.  

The problem with explaining the behavior of Socrates in terms of his bones and sinews is not, then, that such explanations are false: it is true that Socrates does not run from death because his sinews pull his bones. But then what is the problem with such explanations?

Well, consider his jab at those who mistake his courage for frailty:

I swear to you by the Dog these sinews and bones of mine would long since have been… in the vicinity of Megara or Boeotia, carried along by what appeared best to them, if I didn’t think it more just, and finer, to

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submit to the city and whatever penalty she imposes than become a fugitive.\footnote{Plato, \textit{Phaedo}, 99a.}

The problem with such explanations—those in terms of matter—is that they are often \textit{unfalsifiable} in a way that other explanations—those in terms of the good—are not: had Socrates run from death rather than standing his ground, it would have been \textit{wrong} to explain his behavior by noting that he thought it best to stay—but it still would have been \textit{right} to explain his behavior by noting that his sinews pulled his bones. And an explanation that cannot be falsified is, of course, no explanation at all:

How absurd, not to be able to tell the two things apart: the real reason for something, and that without which the reason wouldn’t ever be able to operate as a reason at all! It’s the second thing ordinary people appear to me to be latching on to as they grope around in the dark, calling it a “reason” when the name actually belongs to something else.\footnote{Plato, \textit{Phaedo}, 99b.}

Though not without value, explanations in terms of matter leave things scarcely less mysterious than they were: like Socrates, we are haunted by the insight that superficially similar explanations often would have explained precisely the opposite behavior. And this is so, Socrates implies, no matter the scope of such explanations:

One person puts a whirl round the earth and makes it stay in place under the influence of the heavens, while something else puts air under it as a base, treating it like some kind of flat kneading-trough; as for the capacity of earth or anything else to be placed here and now in the best possible way for it to be placed, \textit{that} they don’t look for, and neither do they think it has any special power… That what truly binds and holds things together is the good… they don’t believe at all.\footnote{Plato, \textit{Phaedo}, 99b–99c.}
Just as there are several legitimate ways to see ourselves, Socrates implies, so there are several legitimate ways to see our world: just as it is legitimate to explain myself in terms of matter, so it is legitimate to explain our world in terms of matter.

But this is only half of the story. For just as one way to see ourselves is more legitimate than others, Socrates implies, so one way to see our world is more legitimate than others: just as it is more legitimate to explain myself in terms of the good than in terms of matter, so it is more legitimate to explain our world in terms of the good than in terms of matter.²⁶

Socrates does not bother to state the obvious: there are several ways to see ourselves—some more legitimate than others—because there are several ways to see our world—some more legitimate than others. For we are parts of our world: we are within it, and therefore it is—in a partial way—within us.

Indeed, it is because we are within our world that there are several ways to see that world: were we outside the world—were we utterly other than it—there would be only one legitimate way to see it. But it is not so.

2.1.2. Some Metaphor

Consider a mountain. When one stands at its summit—when, that is, one has transcended it entirely—there is only one legitimate point from which to see it: to speak of how the

²⁶ My interpretation of the Phaedo is indebted to Catherine Zuckert, Plato’s Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 182–189, though my focus is not quite the same as hers.
mountain looks from any other point on the mountain is to speak distractions. But while
one is climbing the mountain—while, that is, one is still on it—one cannot see the
mountain from its summit. It is therefore legitimate to speak of how the mountain looks
from whatever face one has decided to climb: to speak of how the mountain looks to one
so far is not to speak distractions but is, rather, to do the justice to it—and, by extension,
to one’s fellow climbers—that one can. This is so even if the mountain looks quite
different from its different faces. Nonetheless, it might be that one can see the mountain
in its entirety more clearly from one face than from another.

This is a metaphor. But it is as good an explanation of subjectivity and objectivity
as any: “subjectivity” and “objectivity” cannot be defined in terms more fundamental
than themselves. Fortunately, we do not need to define “subjectivity” and “objectivity” in
terms more fundamental than themselves: they are deeply intuitive to us. They are
intuitive to us because they define us: it is our transition from subjectivity to objectivity
that makes us rational animals—assuming, of course, that this is what we are.

Our metaphor is, of course, only a metaphor: subjectivity and objectivity are in
themselves neither spatial nor visual. Nonetheless, our metaphor is an intuitive one: our
paradigm of objectivity is the sight of an object from above. It seems salient that, unlike
most other animals, we walk upright—just as, unlike all other animals, we move from
subjectivity to objectivity.27

27 I am hardly the first to suggest that our reliance on vision, our bipedalism, and our rationality
are connected: the suggestion seems almost mythological—especially since, in reality, many other sighted
animals are bipedal. If, more significantly, reliance on vision and bipedalism by themselves somehow
courage rationality, this is surely only because taller animals can see farther than shorter animals—
because, in short, they have more to gain from rationality. Yet ostriches, though taller than we are—and
even bipedal—are not nearly as intelligent as Eurasian magpies; indeed, our mythological suggestion
implies that we should expect many flying animals to be orders of magnitude more intelligent than we
are—since, after all, many fly to heights orders of magnitude above even the tallest of us. In any case,
Our paradigm of objectivity is the sight of an object from above because—given that we walk upright—it is the closest that we can come to the sight of that object from every side. To see an object from every side is, of course, impossible: we too are objects—are, that is, parts of the world—and so we stand at a determinate point in space no less than they do. This point implies that our metaphor is flawed: while we cannot see any object from every side, nonetheless we can apparently know an object from every side—that is, objectively.

The same point implies that our metaphor is flawed in another way: we can, after all, entirely transcend mountains—can, that is, summit them. But we cannot entirely transcend our world—cannot, that is, stand entirely beyond it. If the sight of an object from above allows us to know that object objectively, then we can know a mountain objectively—specifically, once we reach its summit. But we cannot ever come to know the world in the same way: since we are parts of the world, we carry it, however partially, within us—and so, no matter how far we go, we are still within it.28

28 A more literal way to put this point is that, no matter our location, we are still within space: because we too are objects, we bear spatial relationships to other objects—no matter how far away they might be. Indeed, theories of space—and, for that matter, time—contradict themselves whenever they forget that our spatiotemporal perspective is just that, a perspective—a view, that is, from within; I take it that this is the point that Kant tries to make in his First Antinomy. See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A426/B454–A433/B461.

several explanations—everything from thermal regulation to foraging in coastal waters—have been proposed for human bipedalism; if there is a connection among our reliance on vision, our bipedalism, and our rationality, it surely runs through the fact that bipedalism frees our hands for manipulation and carrying. Another way to put this point is that theoretical rationality and practical rationality—that is, science and engineering—apparently come as a package or not at all. It might not be a coincidence that, though quadrupedal, elephants—intelligent enough, it seems, to mourn and bury their dead—can manipulate and carry objects with their trunks.
2.1.3. Some More History

Consider again the two Socratic doctrines—that there are several legitimate ways to see things, and that one of them is nonetheless more legitimate than the others: these are, together, the Theory of the Forms. According to this doctrine, it is legitimate to see Socrates as bony or sinewy, but it is more legitimate to see him as wise: it is his wisdom—his conviction, born of deliberation, regarding what is good for him—that determines Socrates to behave as he does.\(^{29}\) Just so, it is legitimate to explain our world in terms of the whirl of heaven, the base of air, or whatever else happens to be its matter, but it is more legitimate—perhaps—to explain our world in terms of divine justice: Plato has his Socrates hint, again and again, that it is this—the Form of the Good—that determines the world to look as it does from whatever other perspective.

It is crucial to see just how counterintuitive it is to affirm both of these doctrines at once—to be both a pluralist and a monist with regard to modes of explanation. It is more intuitive to affirm either doctrine and deny the other: it is more intuitive to hold that, of the several legitimate ways to see things, none is more legitimate than any other—or that, aside from the most legitimate way to see things, none is legitimate at all.

Plato found both positions among those who came before him.

\(^{29}\) To put the point in the traditional vocabulary, Socrates is *essentially* wise—compared to other animals, anyway—but only *accidentally* sinewy and bony. Technically, these accidents are *necessary* accidents: that Socrates has bones and sinews is not what is *most* relevant about him, but he nonetheless must have them insofar as he is a rational *animal*. Presumably his bowed legs and snub nose are *not* necessary accidents in the same way: he could be a rational animal without having them. For making clear to me the traditional vocabulary—which seems, at times, almost deliberately confusing—I owe Joe Brutto, my colleague and my friend.
2.2. Protagoras

Protagoras, for example, seems to have held the former position—that there are several equally legitimate ways to see things:

Of all things the measure is man—of things that are, that they are, of things that are not, that they are not.  

There is, it seems, no measure—no reality that our words might meet or fail to meet—beyond ourselves: if we say, for example, that “the wind is cold,” then the wind is cold.

2.2.1. Moderate Relativism

Now, one might have thought that the wind is hot or is cold regardless of what we say—and that, more generally, things themselves are the reality that our words might meet or fail to meet. Nonetheless, Plato has his Socrates interpret Protagoras in precisely this way. Indeed, Socrates makes the relativism of Protagoras even more radical:

As each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for you—you and I each being a man.

It is not just that if we say that “the wind is cold,” then the wind is cold: it is that if I say that “the wind is cold,” then the wind is cold—even if you say that “the wind is hot.” For “hot” and “cold” mean, respectively, hot to me and cold to me—or, colloquially, seems

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hot and \textit{seems} cold. But Socrates argues that even relativism this radical is not so implausible:

\begin{quote}
Doesn’t it sometimes happen that when the same wind is blowing, one of us feels cold and the other not? … In that case are we going to say that the wind itself, by itself, is cold or not cold? Or shall we listen to Protagoras, and say it is cold for the one who feels cold, and for the other, not cold?\footnote{Plato, \textit{Theaetetus}, 152b.}
\end{quote}

Our experience is often subjective—is, in other words, relative to the perspective that we bring to reality: to one cloaked, for example, the wind seems hot—even as it seems cold to one naked. Only a pedant, Socrates hints, would insist that the wind is either hot or cold \textit{in itself}: it is not somehow more legitimate to wear a cloak, for example, than not to wear one. And so it is, Socrates continues, for all experiences:

\begin{quote}
There comes to be an offspring infinite in multitude but always twin births, on the one hand what is perceived, on the other, the perception of it, the perception in every case being generated together with what is perceived and emerging along with it. For the perceptions we have such names as sight, hearing, smelling, feeling cold and feeling hot; also what are called pleasures and pains, desires and fears… And on the other side there is the race of things perceived, for each of these perceptions perceived things born of the same parentage, for all kinds of visions all kinds of colors, for all kinds of hearings all kinds of sounds; and so on, for the other perceptions the other things perceived, that come to be in kinship with them.\footnote{Plato, \textit{Theaetetus}, 156b–156c.}
\end{quote}

Just as the wind is not cold \textit{in itself} but only to one naked, so a dog is not frightful \textit{in itself} but only, for example, to a thief:

\begin{quote}
This… you’ll observe in dogs… and it’s a thing in the beast worthy of wonder… When it sees someone it doesn’t know, it’s angry, although it never had any bad experience with him. And when it sees someone it knows, it greets him warmly, even if it never had a good experience with him.\footnote{Plato, \textit{Republic}, 2nd edition, ed. and trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 376a.}
\end{quote}
Whether or not this doctrine is shocking depends on how far one takes it. All admit, for example, that heat and cold are relative: the same wind, for example, interacts with the naked man and the cloaked man in different ways. Just so, all admit that fear and desire are relative: the same dog, for example, threatens the thief and the master with different fates.

2.2.2. Radical Relativism

These admissions are not shocking because within them is an insistence: though our experiences are often subjective—are, in other words, relative to our perspectives—nonetheless reality is not subjective. Insofar as our experiences are of that reality in itself, they are objective. Thus, though the wind is not in itself cold, it is still in itself wind; just so, though a dog is not in itself frightful, it is still in itself a dog. But Protagoras goes further—or so Socrates insists:

There is nothing which in itself is just one thing—nothing which you could rightly call anything or any kind of thing. If you call a thing large, it will reveal itself as small, and if you call it heavy, it is liable to appear as light, and so on with everything, because nothing is one or anything or any kind of thing.\(^{35}\)

After all, Protagoras insists that we are the measure of all things: our experience is not just often but always subjective. We do not bring our perspectives to reality, for there is no reality: there are only our perspectives. Objectivity is an illusion.

\(^{35}\) Plato, *Theaetetus*, 152d. I have modified the punctuation for clarity.
To be fair, it is not obvious that Protagoras means to go this far: his work survives, after all, only in a few fragments. Nonetheless, one of those fragments seems to demand this interpretation:

The being of things that are consists in being manifest.

There is, Protagoras seems to suggest, nothing to things beyond what we take them to be: our experience of them—in all of its contradiction—exhausts them.

This doctrine is shocking indeed. On reflection, though, it is far from absurd: when, after all, are our experiences not relative to our perspectives? Certainly they are never relative to perspectives other than ours. Could our experiences be relative, then, to no perspective whatsoever? Well, we certainly cannot see from no perspective: what we see is conditioned by our eyes. And sight is, in this, like hearing, smell, taste, and touch:

The instruments through which you perceive hot, hard, light, [and] sweet things… all belong to the body.

What we hear, smell, taste, and touch is conditioned, respectively, by our ears, noses, tongues, and hands. If some of our experiences are objective—if, that is, they are experiences of reality—then those experiences are somehow unlike sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch: they are somehow unconditioned.

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36 It is somewhat troubling that, though the Protagoras of the Theaetetus—and, for that matter, of the Euthydemus and the Cratylus—is a radical relativist, the Protagoras of the Protagoras does not mention this doctrine: it is not obvious that Plato interprets Protagoras consistently—much less that he interprets Protagoras correctly. See Plato, Euthydemus, trans. Rosamond Kent Sprague, Cratylus, trans. C. D. C. Reeve, and Protagoras, trans. C. D. C. Reeve, in Plato: Complete Works, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).


38 Plato, Theaetetus, 184e.
Admittedly, some experiences are more objective than others—for conditioning is often a matter of degree. My sight of a mountain from the north is conditioned by the location of my eyes to the north, for example, while my sight of that mountain from the south is conditioned by the location of my eyes to the south—but my overall sight of the mountain is not conditioned by any particular location. Still, my overall sight of the mountain is conditioned by my eyes.

Admittedly, my eyes are not the only instruments at my disposal: my overall experience of the mountain is not conditioned by my eyes, my ears, my nose, my tongue, or my hands in particular. Still, my overall experience of the mountain is conditioned by all of these together.

Admittedly, my instruments are not the only instruments at our disposal: our overall experience of the mountain is not conditioned by my instruments in particular. Still, our overall experience of the mountain is conditioned by all of our instruments together.

This example recounts three of the most obvious ways to move toward objectivity: one can experience a thing from different positions in space and time and through different sensory modalities—and one can ask others about their own experiences. But these three ways yield experiences that are more objective, not utterly objective: they yield objectivity no more than addition yields infinity.
2.3. Parmenides

Nonetheless, Parmenides seems to have held that there is only one legitimate way—that of utter objectivity—to see things. Or so it seems from the surviving fragments of his *On Nature*.39

In hymn—in, that is, the dactylic hexameter of Homer and Hesiod—Parmenides recounts what seems his initiation into a mystery religion:

> The mares which bear me as far as my desires might reach were conveying me, when they led me into the [renowned] way of the [goddess], who leads the knowing mortal straight on through all things.
> By this way was I borne, for by this way the well-discriminating mares bore me as they drew the chariot, and the maidens guided the way.
> And the axle in the [wheels] would screech like a pipe as it blazed (for it was driven by two whirling wheels, one on each side), when the maiden daughters of the Sun hastened to escort me, having left the House of Night for the light, having pushed back their veils from their heads with their hands.40

Flanked by the daughters of the Sun, Parmenides is drawn by chariot to the House of Night:

> There stand the [gates of the ways] of Night and Day, and a lintel spans them and a stone threshold; and the ethereal gates themselves are filled with grand doors; and much-avenging Justice holds [the keys that fit them].

Persuading her with gentle words the maidens

39 There is significant disagreement about what, precisely, Parmenides argues: his position is clear neither in its details nor overall—and it seems that, even were his position clear in its details, it would still not be clear overall. For better or worse, my point regards the overall position of Parmenides; in interpreting his overall position, I interpret its details as best I can—though my interpretation rises or falls on the former, not the latter.

skillfully convinced her that she should push away
the bolted bar quickly from the gates. And they made
a yawning gap in the doorway as they flew open, causing the two bronze
hinges fitted with rivets and pins to rotate
in tandem in their sockets; here then
the maidens [led] the chariot and mares straight through them on the
wagon road.⁴¹

Parmenides is invoking, of course, the *Theogony* of Hesiod:

[There is] no way out, since Poseidon has set bronze
doors upon it and a wall runs in both directions…
[This] dread house of dark Night
stands covered in black clouds…
[Before it,] Night and Day draw near
and greet each other as they cross the great threshold
of bronze. The one will descend while the other
goes out, and the chamber never contains both at once,
but one is always outside,
wandering over the earth, while the other is within
and waits for the time of her own journey to arrive.⁴²

The House of Night is, in other words, the underworld: Justice guards its entrance
because it is the place of death and judgment. Nonetheless, Parmenides endures neither
death nor judgment—for Night welcomes him,⁴³ offers him her own immortal wisdom:

O youth, companion to immortal charioteers,
and to mares which bear you, as you arrive at our abode,
hail! Since no evil fate sent you forth to travel
this way (for indeed it is far from the track of men),
but Right and Justice. It is right for you to learn all things,
both the unshaken heart of persuasive Truth,
and the opinions of mortals, in which there is no true reliance.

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⁴¹ Parmenides, *On Nature*, § 1.11–21. I have modified the translation for clarity—inspired by the
translation of McKirahan.

754.

⁴³ Apparently there is some disagreement about the identity of the goddess, but Palmer identifies
her as Night: after all, he notes, she welcomes Parmenides to her abode—the House of Night. It is Palmer,
by the way, who suggests that *On Nature* recounts an initiation into a mystery religion. See John Palmer,
Research Lab, 2012).
But nevertheless you shall learn this too, [what] beliefs should have been acceptable, [were all things as they seem].

Just so, what follows is divided into two sections: Night explains in detail the origin and order of reality—but only after she explains that all of this is illusory, since reality can have neither origin nor order. Of course, this leaves the second section of the poem rather mysterious: why does Night bother to explain in detail the origin and order of reality if both are illusions? This mystery has inspired several reinterpretations of On Nature wherein the origin and order of reality are not illusions—but these reinterpretations seem to run aground on the words of Night:

It is right to say and to think that what-is is, for being is and nothing is not. These things I bid you consider. [Down] this first way of inquiry I [will lead] you, but then [down] this one, which mortals knowing nothing wander, two-headed. For helplessness in their breasts directs a wandering mind.

The initiated—those who follow the former way of inquiry—escape illusion because they see their object, reality, as it is. The uninitiated—those who follow the latter way of inquiry—remain in illusion because they confuse this object with another:

They are borne
both deaf and blind, dazed, undiscerning tribes,
by whom to be and not to be are thought to be the same and not the same, and the path of all is backward-turning.

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44 Parmenides, On Nature, § 1.24–32. I have modified the translation for clarity—though it should be noted that there is significant disagreement about how to translate this line.

45 Parmenides, On Nature, § 6.1–6. Apparently there is some disagreement about whether Parmenides means to distinguish in this fragment two or three ways of inquiry; I have modified the translation under the assumption that he means to distinguish only two. Either way, though, his position itself seems clear: there are three ways of inquiry—one legitimate, another utterly illegitimate, and the third illegitimate insofar as it is a confusion of the first and the second.

The uninitiated fail to see that reality is utterly other than unreality. Just so, the uninitiated fail to see that inquiry into reality is utterly other than inquiry into unreality; the uninitiated try to follow both of these ways of inquiry at once—and so find themselves going in circles.

This latter way of inquiry—that of the uninitiated—is not really a way of inquiry at all: it is merely a confusion of inquiry into reality and inquiry into unreality. That the way of the uninitiated is not really a way of inquiry—that it is, rather, a mere confusion of inquiry into reality and inquiry into unreality—is confirmed by the insistence of Night that these two are the only two ways of inquiry:

Come now and I shall tell, and do you receive through hearing the tale, which are the only ways of inquiry for thinking: the one: that it is and that it [should not not] be, is the path of Persuasion (for she attends on Truth); the other: that it is not and that it [should] not be, this I declare to you is an utterly inscrutable track.  

If one inquires but does not inquire into reality, one cannot but inquire into unreality—just as, if one inquires but does not inquire into unreality, one cannot but inquire into reality. Of course, inquiry into reality is rather more secure than inquiry into unreality—for our words can find no purchase on unreality:

Neither could you know what is not (for it cannot be accomplished), nor could you declare it.

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47 Parmenides, *On Nature*, § 2.1–6. I have modified the translation for clarity—inspired by John Palmer, who takes Parmenides to be contrasting what contemporary philosophers call “necessity” with what they call “impossibility.” I suspect that there is something to this—though I also suspect that Palmer is overinterpreting Parmenides slightly: while Parmenides does hold that reality must exist—and exist as it does—eternally, this seems the conclusion, not the premise, of his argument. Since the argument is entirely *a priori*, however, the distinction between its premise and its conclusion is a slight one. See Palmer, “Parmenides.” Note the ethical language—“should... be” and “should not be.” But more on this in a moment.

To speak of unreality is to say *something* of *nothing*—and so to speak of unreality, *whatever* one says, is to speak falsely; the only way to *avoid* falsehood is to say of unreality nothing at all. But this leaves only the first way of inquiry—that into reality.

2.3.1. The Argument

What, then, does inquiry into reality reveal?

2.3.1.1. Reality Neither Begins Nor Ends in Time

Well, first of all, reality neither begins nor ends in time:

Never was it, nor shall it be, since it now *is*, all together, one, continuous.\(^{49}\)

In order to demonstrate that reality neither begins nor ends in time, Night must demonstrate four conclusions—that reality did not begin at some point in the past, that it will not begin at some point in the future, that it did not end at some point in the past, and that it will not end at some point in the future.

2.3.1.1.1. Reality Did Not Begin at Some Point in the Past

Suppose, first, that reality began at some point in the past. This leads, Night argues, into immediate contradiction:

What birth would you seek of it?
Where, whence did it grow? Not “from what-is-not” will I allow you to say or think; for it is not sayable or thinkable that it is not.\(^\text{50}\)

If reality began at some point in the past, then there \textit{was}—before that point in time—only unreality.\(^\text{51}\) But unreality is hardly a \textit{reason} for reality to begin.\(^\text{52}\) The conclusion is obvious: if there \textit{was}—\textit{before} this point in time—only unreality, then there is \textit{still}—at \textit{this} point in time—only unreality. Or, to invert the argument:

What need would have stirred [what-is] later [rather than] earlier, starting from nothing, to grow?
Thus it must be completely or not at all.\(^\text{53}\)

If reality began at some point in the past, then there \textit{was}—before that point in time—only unreality. So whatever reason there was for reality to begin at \textit{that} point in time, there \textit{also} was for reality to begin at every earlier point in time. The conclusion is obvious: if there \textit{is}—at \textit{this} point in time—only reality, then there always \textit{was}—\textit{before} this point in time—only reality.

\footnotesize

50 Parmenides, \textit{On Nature}, § 8.6–9. I have added the quotation marks.

51 This is, of course, an invocation of the Law of Noncontradiction—a premise that Night makes explicit. But more on this in a moment.

52 This is, of course, an invocation of the Principle of Sufficient Reason—a premise that Night leaves implicit. But this is hardly surprising: the Principle of Sufficient Reason is, if anything, even more fundamental than the Law of Noncontradiction.

Reality, then, did not begin at some point in the past. For if unreality was, then it still is—and, if reality is, then it always was:

The decision concerning these things [therefore] comes to this: [what-is] is or it is not.\(^{54}\)

This is not, of course, a terribly difficult decision—not, anyway, for the initiate:

Thus the decision is made, as is necessary, to leave the one way unthought, unnamed—for it is not a true way—[while] the other [way is] and [is] true.\(^{55}\)

Since the initiate should assume that reality is—lest his words find no purchase—he should assume that reality did not begin in the past.

2.3.1.1.2. Reality Will Not Begin at Some Point in the Future

Nor is this the only conclusion that the initiate should draw from this assumption:

And how would what-is be hereafter? [And] how would it have [been]? For if it [was], it is not, and similarly if it is ever about to be.\(^{56}\)

If reality will begin at some point in the future, then there will have been—before that point in time—only unreality. But this means that now there is only unreality—a conclusion forbidden to the initiate.


2.3.1.3. Reality Did Not End at Some Point in the Past

Just so, if reality ended at some point in the past, then there was—after that point in time—only unreality. But this means that now there is only unreality—again, a conclusion forbidden to the initiate.

2.3.1.4. Reality Will Not End at Some Point in the Future

Parmenides leaves implicit his argument that reality will not end at some point in the future. But it is not terribly difficult to make this argument explicit: just as, if there was a reason for reality to begin at some point in the past, then there was the same reason for reality to begin at every earlier point in time, so, if there will be a reason for reality to end at some point in the future, then there will have been the same reason for reality to end at every earlier point in time. So, if unreality will be, then unreality already is. And, again, this is a conclusion forbidden to the initiate.57

2.3.1.2. Reality Does Not Change over Time

The conclusion is obvious:

57 Or, to invert the argument: just as, if there was no reason for reality to begin at some point in the past, then there is still no reason for reality to be now, so, if there is no reason now for reality to end, then there will still be no reason for reality to end in the future. So reality will be if reality is—and, again, this is a conclusion obligatory for the initiate.
Thus coming to be is quenched and perishing unheard of.\textsuperscript{58}

Of course, if reality neither begins nor ends in time, then neither does it change over time:

Further, motionless in the limits of great bonds
[what-is] is without starting and stopping, since coming to be and perishing
wandered very far away, and true faith banished them.
Remaining the same in the same by itself it lies
and thus it remains steadfast there.\textsuperscript{59}

Night invokes the conclusion of the previous argument as a premise in this argument: reality does not change over time, she says, \textit{because} reality neither begins nor ends in time. Her argument is fallacious unless she assumes two things: first, reality changes over time whenever one of its properties begins or ends in time, and, second, any property of reality is \textit{itself} reality—lest that property be what is \textit{other than} reality, namely unreality.

And so no property of reality begins or ends in time—which just means that reality does not change over time.\textsuperscript{60}

\footnotetext{58}{Parmenides, \textit{On Nature}, § 8.21.}

\footnotetext{59}{Parmenides, \textit{On Nature}, § 8.26–30. Parmenides seems to have in mind change \textit{in place}—that is, local motion—as the paradigm of change over time, but his argument militates against \textit{all} change over time.}

\footnotetext{60}{Apparently there is some disagreement about whether Parmenides means “to be” in what contemporary philosophers call an “existential” sense or in what they call a “predicative” sense. But this particular argument is only valid if Parmenides does not distinguish between these two senses: if reality does not change over time \textit{because} reality does not begin or end in time, then for reality to exist \textit{at all} and for reality to exist \textit{as it does} are the same thing. One implication of the Theory of the Forms is, of course, that these are \textit{not} the same thing: an accident of something is quite other than the essence of that thing—and so the former might begin or end at some point in time without the latter beginning or ending at that point in time.}
2.3.1.3. Reality Does Not Change over Space

Just as every property of reality is itself reality, so every part of reality is itself reality—lest that part be what is other than reality, namely unreality. And so, just as no property of reality begins or ends in time, so no part of reality begins or ends in space—which just means that reality has no parts:

Nor is [what-is] divisible, since it is all alike, nor is there any more here, which would keep it from holding together, nor any less, but it is all full of what-is. Thus it is all continuous, for what-is cleaves to what-is.

Parmenides seems to mean this: no spatial division is legitimate, since on either side of every spatial division is only reality—lest on one side of some spatial division there be what is other than reality, namely unreality. This presupposes, of course, that a division is legitimate only if what is on one side of that division is other than what is on the other side of that division—but, then, Plato has his Socrates presuppose what is more or less the same thing:

[One should] be able… to cut apart by forms, according to where the joints have naturally grown, and not to endeavor to shatter any part, in the manner of a bad butcher.

Parmenides agrees—but exchanges the modus ponens of Socrates for a modus tollens: since to cut reality is to shatter it—to divide it, that is, from itself—reality has no joints.

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61 Parmenides, On Nature, § 8.22–25. Parmenides seems to have in mind changes in density—presumably of the kind suggested by Anaximenes—as the paradigm of change over space, but his argument militates against all change over space.

62 Plato, Phaedrus, ed. and trans. James H. Nichols Junior (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 265e. Of course, Socrates is speaking here of cutting conceptual space at its joints—cutting, that is, a genus into its species—but only if one cuts conceptual space at its joints can one cut material space at its joints: only if one distinguishes the rationality of Socrates from his sheer materiality, for example, can one meaningfully distinguish the material object that is Socrates from the material object that is the air around him. For more on this, see below.
2.3.1.4. Reality Is Spherical

It is tempting, of course, to interpret this argument in another way: it is tempting to conclude not just that no spatial division of reality is legitimate but also that space is irrelevant to reality—just as time is irrelevant to reality. But this would require one to draw a further conclusion: just as time is irrelevant to a reality that neither changes over nor begins nor ends in time, so would space be irrelevant to a reality that neither changed over nor began nor ended in space. Night has already argued for the former conclusion—that reality does not change over space; one might expect her to conclude by arguing for the latter conclusion—that reality neither begins nor ends in space. And indeed, the argument for this latter conclusion seems fairly obvious: for the same reasons that reality has a limit neither in the past nor in the future, reality has a limit neither to the left nor to the right. Melissus, a follower of Parmenides, seems to have argued precisely this:

Just as [what-is] is always, so also it must be always unlimited in size.63

But Night argues for a rather different conclusion:

Mighty Necessity
holds [what-is] in the bonds of a limit, which confines it round about.64

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63 Melissus, On Nature, in The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Daniel W. Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), § 3. Italics mine. That Melissus concludes that reality is limitless in space seems beyond question: it is, after all, the premise of his argument that there cannot be another reality—for that reality would limit this reality spatially. But the fragments as we have them—quoted by Simplicius—suggest that Melissus did not so much argue that reality is limitless in space as confuse limitless in space with limitless in time; whether this confusion is in Melissus or merely in his interpretation by Simplicius is somewhat unclear.

Instead of arguing that reality is limitless in its spatial *extension*, Night argues that reality is limitless in its spatial *regularity*—or, in other words, that reality is *regular in shape*:

> It is not right for what-is to be incomplete;  
> for it is not needy; if it were it would lack everything…  
> [Thus there is not] what-is in such a way that there would be of what-is here more and there less, since it is all inviolate.  
> For being equal to itself in every direction, it equally meets with limits.  

Were reality irregular in shape, it would—or so Night seems to imply—have along its surface some regions that were convex and others that were not. Yet every part of reality is indistinguishable from every other part—and so whatever reason there is for one region of the surface of reality to fail to be convex, there is for every region of the surface of reality to fail to be convex. Were reality irregular in shape, then, every region of its surface would fail to be convex—which is just to say that reality would have no spatial extension in any dimension at all. Or, to invert the argument:

> It is not right  
> for [what-is] to be any greater nor any smaller here or there.  
> For… there [is not] what-is-not, which might stop it from reaching its like.

Were reality irregular in shape, it would—or so Night seems to imply—have along its surface some regions that were convex and others that were not. Yet those regions that were not convex would be filled, so to speak, with unreality—lest they be filled with what is *other than* unreality, namely reality—and this is a conclusion forbidden to the initiate. But if no region of the surface of reality fails to be convex, then reality is *spherical*:

> Yet since there is a final limit, [what-is] is complete

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from every direction, like to the mass of a well-rounded ball, equally resistant from the center in all directions.\textsuperscript{67}

A cynic might ask, of course, what lies beyond reality altogether—beyond, that is, even those regions of the surface of reality that are convex. But there are those—even those who otherwise disagree with Parmenides—who refuse this question as nonsensical:

Some things are… in place, namely every body which is movable either by way of locomotion or by way of increase is… somewhere, but the world… is not anywhere as a whole, nor in any place—[assuming], that is, [that] no body contains it.\textsuperscript{68}

Of course, Aristotle does not mention Parmenides here. Elsewhere, however, he not only mentions Parmenides but also goes out of his way to interpret Parmenides charitably:

Parmenides seems to fasten on that which is one in \textit{form}, Melissus on that which is one in \textit{matter}, for which reason the former says that [what-is] is limited, the latter that it is unlimited.\textsuperscript{69}

Unfortunately, this interpretation seems to be an overinterpretation: it seems to get Parmenides and Melissus precisely backward. For though Melissus certainly seems to argue that reality is limitless in space, he later seems to argue that reality is not spatial \textit{at all}:

Now if it exists, it must be one. But if it is one, it must not have a body. For if it had solidity it would have parts, and it would consequently not be one.\textsuperscript{70}

It is unclear how Melissus means to reconcile this conclusion with his conclusion that reality is limitless in space. What is clearer is that, on that point, he disagrees with his


\textsuperscript{70} Melissus, \textit{On Nature}, § 9.
teacher: Parmenides never indicates that his conclusion that reality is limited in space—specifically, that reality is spherical—is meant to be anything other than literal.\textsuperscript{71}

Given this—given, really, most of On Nature—it is tempting to interpret Parmenides uncharitably. But this is, Plato suggests, a temptation that we should resist:

If the father of the... tale were alive... he would find plenty of means of defending it. As things are, it is an orphan we are trampling in the mud. Not even the people... appointed its guardians are prepared to come to its rescue... In the interests of justice, it seems that we shall have to come to the rescue ourselves.\textsuperscript{72}

To interpret an argument uncharitably is the work of cowards: anyone can best the weak, but only the strong can best the strong. Rather than assault Parmenides, then, we should help him:

Do not be unjust in your questions... [Rather,] keep controversy distinct from discussion; [do not forget] that, in controversy, [a man] may play about and trip up his opponent as often as he can, but that, in discussion, he must be serious [and] keep... helping his opponent to his feet again.\textsuperscript{73}

Nor are we unable to help Parmenides. For his insistence that reality is spherical—implausible as that conclusion is—provides the key to interpreting On Nature charitably: if taken literally, the conclusion that reality is spherical hints at a way to interpret On Nature such that both of its sections are broadly plausible.

\textsuperscript{71} McKirahan suggests that this conclusion is a metaphorical reiteration of the previous conclusion—specifically, that reality has no parts; in support of this, he notes that “the language of bonds, shackles, justice, and routes” is also metaphorical. I nonetheless interpret this conclusion literally—but more on this in a moment. See McKirahan, Philosophy Before Socrates, 163.

\textsuperscript{72} Plato, Theaetetus, 164e. Of course, Socrates speaks here of Protagoras, not Parmenides—but the point is a general one.

\textsuperscript{73} Plato, Theaetetus, 167e–168a.
2.3.2. The Conclusion

I have used the vocabulary of “reality” and “unreality” despite—indeed, because of—its awkwardness: its awkwardness is due to its neutrality. For “reality” could refer to particular objects, properties of particular objects, or even the world itself: all are, after all, real.

Parmenides himself uses the awkward vocabulary of “ἐόντος” and “μὴ ἐόντος”—a vocabulary that Graham translates as the awkward “what-is” and “what-is-not.” It seems plausible that Parmenides—like Graham—uses the vocabulary that he does precisely because of its neutrality: one might apply his arguments not only to particular objects but also to properties of particular objects and even to the world itself.

2.3.2.1. The Divided Line

From the fragments of *On Nature* that survive, it seems that Night spends most of her time explaining the origin and order of the things around us—even as she insists that it is somehow a mistake to investigate such things. But if one can investigate the origin and order of the things around us—and, lest we blaspheme Night, we must assume that her explanations are not false—then why is it a mistake to do so? Plato, with his Divided Line, suggests an answer:

74 Graham—and I—might have used the equally awkward, because equally neutral, “being.” But “being” and its derivatives no longer sound as awkward as they are: they have become mere technical terms in English—just as “ἐόντος” and its derivatives became mere technical terms in Greek.
Now, in terms of relative clarity and obscurity, you’ll have one segment in the visible part for images. I mean by images first shadows, then appearances produced in water and in all close-grained, smooth, bright things, and everything of the sort, if you understand.\textsuperscript{75}

Yet it is not wisdom to investigate, for example, particular shadows: these are fleeting and inconsistent—for they are apt to appear, move, and disappear with the movement of the sun. Particular shadows are real only insofar as they are manifestations of what is \textit{really} real—the relatively permanent and consistent particular objects that explain their appearances, movements, and disappearances:

Then in the other segment put that of which this first is the likeness—the animals around us, and everything that grows, and the whole class of artifacts.\textsuperscript{76}

Yet it is not wisdom to investigate, for example, particular animals: these are fleeting and inconsistent—for they are apt to be born, grow, and die. Particular animals are real only insofar as they are manifestations of what is \textit{really} real—the relatively permanent and consistent biological laws that explain their births, growths, and deaths:

A soul in investigating [the intelligible] is compelled to use hypotheses, and does not go to a beginning because it is unable to step out above the hypotheses. And it uses as images [or models] those very things [which themselves make images] below, and in comparison with which they are opined to be clear and are given honor.\textsuperscript{77}

Yet it is not wisdom to investigate, for example, particular laws of nature: these are fleeting and inconsistent—for they are countless and apt to admit of countless exceptions. Particular laws of nature are real only insofar as they are manifestations of what is \textit{really}

\textsuperscript{75} Plato, \textit{Republic}, 509d–510a.

\textsuperscript{76} Plato, \textit{Republic}, 510a.

\textsuperscript{77} Plato, \textit{Republic}, 511a.
real—the relatively permanent and consistent fundamental law that explains their diversity and admission of exceptions:

By the other segment of the intelligible I mean that which argument itself grasps with the power of dialectic, making the hypotheses not beginnings but really hypotheses—that is, steppingstones and springboards—in order to reach what is free from hypothesis at the beginning of the whole. When it has grasped this, argument now depends on that which depends on this beginning and in such fashion goes back down again to an end; making no use of anything sensed in any way, but using forms themselves, going through forms to forms, it ends in forms too.  

It is not wisdom to investigate particular shadows when one could investigate the particular objects that cast them. Just so, it is not wisdom to investigate particular animals when one could investigate the particular biological laws that they follow. Just so, it is not wisdom to investigate particular laws of nature when one could investigate the fundamental law from which those particular laws are derived. Compared to any relatively permanent and consistent reality, the relatively fleeting and inconsistent manifestations of that reality are distractions—are not, in other words, quite real.

2.3.2.2. The One

Night explains the origin and order of particular objects because one can, after all, investigate distractions. But they are still distractions: to consider any particular object in abstraction from all others—all those that determine it to be as it is, and all those that it determines to be as they are—is to leave it no less mysterious than it was.

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78 Plato, Republic, 511b–511c.
To consider instead all particular objects in relation to one another—to consider, that is, the world—is to explain why those particular objects are as they are: it is to see them as manifestations of what is relatively permanent and consistent—the laws that they obey, especially the one law fundamental. It seems no coincidence that Parmenides has a reputation for precisely this position:

Against the whole party of the Heracliteans… [Parmenides and Melissus] insist that all things are One, and that this One stands still, itself within itself, having no place in which to move.79

As McKirahan notes, it is now fashionable for interpreters to contradict Plato—to assert, in other words, that Parmenides is not a monist.80 According to this interpretation, Night explains to Parmenides not that reality is numerically one but rather that, however many realities there are, each of them is one:

[“What-is”] is [merely] a short way of referring to anything that is, whatever is. If there is only one thing, then [“what-is”] refers only to it; if there are more things, then [“what-is”] refers to each of them. But in that case too what-is (each of them) is one: anything that is is a single thing.81

In itself, this interpretation does no violence to On Nature: again, one might apply its arguments not only to the world itself but also to particular objects. For the same reason that investigators should forsake shadows for the particular objects that cast them, however, those investigators should forsake those particular objects for the world itself: in each case, the latter are the relatively permanent and consistent reality that explain the

79 Plato, Theaetetus, 180e.

80 McKirahan suggests that Plato misinterprets Parmenides because he assimilates Parmenides to Melissus: the latter is indeed a monist, McKirahan argues, but the former is not. But even if Plato is wrong to assimilate Parmenides to Melissus—and indeed, Melissus seems to thoroughly misunderstand the relationship between the two sections of On Nature—monism is precisely the conclusion that Parmenides should draw. And On Nature is sufficiently unclear that we should surely attribute to Parmenides the conclusion that he should draw. See McKirahan, Philosophy Before Socrates, 165.

81 McKirahan, Philosophy Before Socrates, 165.
former. Again, just as shadows are *really* real only insofar as they are manifestations of particular objects, so particular objects are *really* real only insofar as they are manifestations of the world itself—specifically, of its laws, especially the one law fundamental.\(^2\) One who investigates anything less has misunderstood what *any* investigation seeks:

Nothing else [is or] shall be beside what-is, since Fate shackled it to be whole and unmoved. In relation to this [all other things are mere names], which mortals established, trusting them to be true—[things] coming to be and perishing, being and not being, changing place, and exchanging bright color.\(^3\)

To consider particular objects other than as a causally interlocking totality—no less across time than across space—is to falsify them. For it is only insofar as they are a causally interlocking totality—no less across time than across space—that they *are* at all: since reality *just is* permanence and consistency, only what is *utterly* permanent and consistent—the totality *as* totality—is *really* real.

It is *this* reality—really, the *only* reality—that is spherical. The second section of the poem—that wherein Night explains the origin and order of reality—confirms that Parmenides means this conclusion quite literally:

The [wreaths within] are full of unmixed fire, those [within] these [of] night, and [those between them only partially of fire].\(^4\)

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\(^2\) Or, to invert the argument: if it is as legitimate to investigate particular objects as it is to investigate the world itself, then it is as legitimate to investigate shadows as it is to investigate the particular objects that cast them.

\(^3\) Parmenides, *On Nature*, § 8.36–41. I have modified the translation, including the punctuation, for clarity—though it should be noted that there is significant disagreement about how to translate this line.
At least several of what Parmenides calls “wreaths” are, of course, the orbits of the sun, the moon, and the stars—circular orbits around a spherical earth. For this fragment is apparently the fulfillment of a promise that Night made to her initiate:

You shall know the ethereal nature and all the signs in aether, and the unseen works of the pure torch of the blazing sun, and whence they came to be, and you shall learn the revolving works of the round-[faced] moon and her nature, and you shall know surrounding heaven, whence it grew and how Necessity led it in shackles to keep the limits of the stars.  

Though the lighted face of the moon is always round, we often see this lighted face only partially: the moon always faces the sun—even at night, when the sun is unseen. Elsewhere, Night makes this point explicit:

[The moon shines] by night, wandering around the earth with borrowed light… ever peeking toward the rays of the sun.

Parmenides was, it seems, the first to realize that the light of the moon is merely the reflected light of the sun. With this insight came another: the moon seems to wax and wane because it is spherical—and because the sun and moon orbit the earth at different

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84 Parmenides, *On Nature*, § 12.1–2. I have modified the translation—inspired by the translation of Finkelberg, who interprets the first wreaths as the aether, the second as the surface of the earth, and the third as the sky between them. Whether this interpretation is correct in its details is not, however, relevant to my argument. See Aryeh Finkelberg, “The Cosmology of Parmenides,” *The American Journal of Philology* 107, no. 3 (1986): 303–317. Fire and night are, of course, the two elements that the uninitiated should recognize—but more on this in a moment.

85 Parmenides, *On Nature*, § 10.1–7. I have modified the translation for clarity—inspired by the translation of McKirahan. Simplicius quotes a similar fragment as though it is another promise to the same effect—but it seems plausible that Simplicius misstates its location: it seems not a promise of what will be explained but rather a summary of what has been explained. See Parmenides, *On Nature*, § 11.1–4.


87 This insight led, of course, to another: if the light of the moon is merely the reflected light of the sun, then an interruption in the light of the moon is merely an interruption of that reflection. Anaxagoras and Empedocles saw precisely this: lunar eclipses occur whenever something—paradigmatically, the earth—blocks the light of the sun. See Daniel Graham, *Science before Socrates: Parmenides, Anaxagoras, and the New Astronomy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
speeds. This is, of course, an astonishing astronomical insight—enough by itself to indicate that the way of inquiry of the uninitiated is far from entirely illegitimate.

As Night reminds Parmenides at the conclusion of *On Nature*, however, that way of inquiry is still not entirely *legitimate*:

Thus you see *according to opinion* these things arose and now are, and hereafter when they have been nurtured, will they pass away. And on them men imposed a distinguishing name for each.\(^{88}\)

Plurality is an illusion that we, with our language, impose on ourselves; what is real—*really* real—is one.

Though we no longer see the world as spherical—or even Euclidean—such monism remains plausible. Or so our own initiates insist:

Fundamental physics does not need to explain why, for example, the geometrical properties of material objects are a perfect fit for the geometrical properties of the spacetime regions they occupy, for the equations do not posit [material objects] distinct from [those] regions. On the face-value reading of the equations, there is the spatiotemporal manifold, and the fundamental properties are pinned directly to it. Nothing more.\(^{89}\)

Jonathan Schaffer—prominent among contemporary initiates—insists that all that is *really* real is spacetime: the equations of general relativity, in their permanence and their consistency, are wisdom. If this is so, then particular objects, while not quite *unreal*, are nonetheless distractions—are but ripples on an ocean, vast and still.

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2.3.3. The Premise

But why does Parmenides assume that the world is not utterly fleeting and inconsistent?

2.3.3.1. The Identity of Opposites

After all, he would hardly have been the first to maintain the opposite:

Homer and Heraclitus and all their tribe [maintain] that all things flow like streams.\(^{90}\)

Or so Plato has his Socrates interpret the most infamous fragment of Heraclitus:

Upon those who step into the same rivers, different and again different waters flow.\(^{91}\)

Superficially, the Platonic interpretation seems the right one: what seems permanent and consistent—a river—is revealed to be fleeting and inconsistent—rushing water. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes obvious that the same example can be used to make precisely the opposite point: what seems fleeting and inconsistent—rushing water—is revealed to be permanent and consistent—a river. Other fragments make it clear that the second point is at least as important to Heraclitus as the first:

By changing, it is at rest.\(^{92}\)

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\(^{90}\) Plato, *Theaetetus*, 160d.


\(^{92}\) Heraclitus, *On Nature*, § 84.A. For clarity, I adopt one of two translations suggested by McKirahan.
It is not just that—strange enough—the fleeting is also permanent, the inconsistent also consistent: it is that— stranger still—the permanent is permanent by being fleeting, the consistent consistent by being inconsistent. To take the most obvious example, there would be no river—that is, no permanent and consistent reality—if its waters were still—that is, if they were themselves permanent and consistent.\(^{93}\)

Nonetheless, one might forgive Plato his misinterpretation of Heraclitus—for he implies that it was, in his own day, the orthodox interpretation:

[You can’t discuss] these Heraclitean doctrines… with any of the people at Ephesus who profess [them], any more than you could with a maniac. They are just like the things they [describe] in their books—always on the move. As for abiding by what is said, or sticking to a question, or quietly answering and asking questions in turn, there is less than nothing of that in their capacity… If you ask any one of them a question, he will pull out some little enigmatic phrase from his quiver and shoot it off at you; and if you try to make him give an account of what he has said, you will only get hit by another, full of strange turns of language. You will never reach any conclusion with any of them, ever; indeed, they never reach any conclusion with each other, they are so very careful not to allow anything to be stable, either in an argument or in their own souls. I suppose they think that if they did it would be something that stands still—this being what they are totally at war with, and what they are determined to banish from the universe, if they can.\(^{94}\)

Admittedly, these are not the words of Plato himself—nor even the words of his Socrates: he puts this interpretation of Heraclitus—or, more accurately, of his Ephesian imitators—into the mouth of Theodorus. Even so, Plato never hints that Theodorus has misinterpreted the Ephesians—or, for that matter, that the Ephesians have misinterpreted Heraclitus.

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\(^{94}\) Plato, *Theaetetus*, 179e–180b. This critique finds its echo—probably not coincidentally—in contemporary critiques of what is inaptly called “continental” philosophy; it is no easier to assess the justice of these latter critiques than it is to assess the justice of the former critique.
Perhaps Plato—or, at any rate, the Ephesians—misinterpret Heraclitus as they do because the relevant misinterpretation is so interesting: Plato has his Socrates, Theodorus, and Theaetetus take quite seriously the suggestion—whatever its provenance—that what we can investigate is fleeting and inconsistent. In the end, however, they conclude that this suggestion contradicts itself:

We were most anxious to prove that all things are in motion, in order to make that answer come out correct; but what has really emerged is that, if all things are in motion, every answer, on whatever subject, is equally correct, both “it is thus” and “it is not thus”—or if you like “becomes,” as we don’t want to use any expressions [that] will bring our friends to a standstill.95

If we can investigate only what is fleeting and inconsistent, then there is no measure—no permanent and consistent world, no reality, that our words might meet or fail to meet: it is no more legitimate to conclude one thing—most relevantly, that what we can investigate is fleeting and inconsistent—than it is to conclude its opposite—most relevantly, that what we can investigate is permanent and consistent.

It might well be, of course, that we can investigate only what is fleeting and inconsistent. But then our words will fail to be legitimate no matter what we say. For our words to have even a chance at legitimacy, we must presuppose that there is some measure—some permanent and consistent world, some reality, that our words might meet or fail to meet.

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95 Plato, Theaetetus, 183a.
2.3.3.2. The Law of Noncontradiction

“Permanence” and “consistency” mean, respectively, “temporal” and “spatial noncontradiction.” As I hope is obvious, however, I use permanence and consistency as metaphors: temporal noncontradiction and spatial noncontradiction are paradigms of unqualified noncontradiction—just as seeing an object from above is a paradigm of seeing it objectively. Though they are only metaphors, temporal and spatial noncontradiction are as good explanations of unqualified noncontradiction as any: “noncontradiction” can no more be defined in terms more fundamental than itself than can “subjectivity” and “objectivity."

Fortunately, we no more need to define “noncontradiction” in terms more fundamental than itself than we need to define “subjectivity” and “objectivity” in terms more fundamental than themselves: noncontradiction is deeply intuitive to us—if anything, more intuitive than are subjectivity and objectivity. Noncontradiction is intuitive to us because it defines us:

That its principles and affirmations must not contradict one another… is… the condition of having reason at all.⁹⁶

If it is our transition from subjectivity to objectivity that makes us rational animals, then it is noncontradiction that makes us rational—assuming, of course, that this is who we are.

For Night to assume that our world is not utterly fleeting and inconsistent, then, is just for her to assume the Law of Noncontradiction. And she does precisely this:

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Never shall this prevail, that things that are not are.\textsuperscript{97}

Night does not make explicit her reason for assuming this. Presumably, though, her reason is the same as that of Plato: if the Law of Noncontradiction is false, then it is no more legitimate to conclude one thing—most relevantly, that the Law of Noncontradiction is false—than it is to conclude its opposite—most relevantly, that the Law of Noncontradiction is true. We should conclude, therefore, that the Law of Noncontradiction is true.\textsuperscript{98}

This is, of course, a transcendental argument—specifically, a transcendental argument about the legitimacy of our words: it is rooted neither in our experience of the world nor in the testimony of others. Evidence that Night makes some such transcendental argument—even if only implicitly—is that she warns her initiate to ignore both sources of evidence:

\begin{quote}
Withhold your thought from this way of inquiry, 
nor let habit born of long experience force you along this way, 
to wield an unseeing eye and echoing ear 
and tongue.\textsuperscript{99}
\end{quote}

Rather than what he sees himself or hears from others, the initiate need consider only consideration itself—that is, his own thoughts:

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{98} One might interpret the Law of Noncontradiction as a rule of inference. (More formally: one might interpret the Law and its violation as }p \rightarrow \neg \neg p\text{ and }p \rightarrow \neg p\text{, respectively.) One who does this might interpret this argument as a dilemma: whether it is false or true, the Law of Noncontradiction is true. For if, on the one hand, the Law of Noncontradiction is false, then—by the violation of the Law of Noncontradiction—the Law of Noncontradiction is not false. (More formally: if }p \rightarrow \neg p\text{, then }\neg (p \rightarrow \neg p)\text{ by }p \rightarrow \neg p\text{ itself.) If, on the other hand, the Law of Noncontradiction is true, then—by the Law of Noncontradiction—the Law of Noncontradiction is not true. (More formally: if }p \rightarrow \neg \neg p\text{, then }\neg \neg (p \rightarrow \neg \neg p)\text{ by }p \rightarrow \neg \neg p\text{ itself.) The latter argument is, of course, rule-circular: it demonstrates a rule of inference by using that rule of inference. But such circularity is hardly \textit{vicious}: compared to the former argument—which demonstrates the \textit{falsity} of a rule of inference by using that rule of inference—this argument seems downright \textit{virtuously} circular.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}
[Rather.] judge by reasoning the very contentious examination uttered by me.$^{100}$

The initiate need consider only his own thoughts because, unlike most propositions, the Law of Noncontradiction is not justified by evidence about the world: neither that provided by firsthand experience nor that provided by the testimony of others is relevant to its evaluation. The Law of Noncontradiction is justified, rather, because justification itself presupposes it.

2.3.3.3. Justice

Like every transcendental argument, this one is rooted in our anxieties. This becomes obvious when one considers the rhetoric of Night:

Neither to come to be
nor to perish did Justice permit [what-is] by loosening its shackles,
but she holds it fast.$^{101}$

Reality does not begin or end in time because such reality would temporally contradict itself—and contradictions are, Night implies, unjust. Noncontradiction is, in other words, a law for the world: the divine does not permit the world to contradict itself. Nor does Night limit this rhetoric to the first section of her initiation:

[The innermost wreath] is [Justice,] who steers all things.
For she rules over frightful childbirth and copulation of all things,
sending the female to mingle with the male and again contrariwise,
the male to mingle with the female…
[for] first of all the gods she devised Eros.$^{102}$

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Procreation—obvious evidence that we are not eternal—is nonetheless a manifestation of justice: particular males and females are desperate to mate so that their lives are not stolen from them—so that, in other words, they live on in their progeny. Or so Plato has his Diotima insist:

Mortal nature is capable of immortality only in this way, the way of generation, because it is always leaving behind another that is young to replace the old... For in this way every mortal thing is preserved; not by being absolutely the same forever, as the divine is, but by the fact that that which is departing and growing old leaves behind another young thing that is as it was.103

One might even conclude that death—equally obvious evidence that we are not eternal—is nonetheless a manifestation of justice: each particular thing, when it begins in time, steals its reality from another—and so must return that reality when it ends in time. Day, for example, steals the sky from night—and so must return it; just so, plants and animals are born of dust—and so must return to dust. For justice insists that, over time, every ratio remain as it is; the violation of any ratio merely prompts its reestablishment. This is, of course, the insight of Anaximander:

The things that are perish into the things from which they come to be, according to necessity, for they pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice in accordance with the ordering of time.104

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102 Parmenides, *On Nature*, §§ 12.3–6, 13. I have modified the translation—inspired by the translation of Finkelberg, who interprets the goddess as a ring of fire below the surface of the earth. Again, though, whether this interpretation is correct in its details is not relevant to my argument.

103 Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Seth Benardete (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 207d–208b. Whether Plato means Diotima to be a fiction in her own right—like his Socrates—or a fiction within a fiction—that is, an invention of his Socrates—is an interesting question, though its answer is not relevant to my argument.

One might object that all of this rhetoric is just that, rhetoric: such talk of justice is, one might object, merely metaphorical—no less metaphorical, indeed, than talk of Night herself. But this risks anachronism:

The legal language may strike us as no more than a colorful metaphor, but that response reveals our distance from Anaximander. To assume that it is a metaphor presupposes a radical difference between the world of nature (where injustice and the like are not really found) and the world of humans (where they are): humankind is somehow distinct from nature and the two realms operate according to different principles. [But] this interpretation, though congenial to [modernity] … is inappropriate for Anaximander and the other Presocratics, who place humans squarely in the natural world.  

Even if—at risk of anachronism—we grant that talk of justice is metaphorical rather than literal, the question does not disappear: why this metaphor? It seems no coincidence that Parmenides is himself a lawgiver:

Parmenides organized his own country with laws so excellent that every year the officers bound the citizens by oath to abide by [his] laws.  

As is Elea, so are our words ruled by justice—specifically, by what even today we call “justification”: we may not speak arbitrarily—for to speak utterly arbitrarily is not to speak at all. And so, Night infers, our world is ruled by justice: it may not be fleeting and inconsistent—for to be utterly fleeting and inconsistent is not to be at all. No less than Elea, our world is home to us.

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105 McKirahan, Philosophy before Socrates, 45.

2.3.3.4. Anxiety

There is in all this something that should worry us.

Night apparently infers the truth of the Law of Noncontradiction from its justification: since we should believe it, she infers, it is true. And this inference is usually legitimate: if I should believe \( p \), it is usually because I have some evidence for \( p \)—some indication, in other words, that \( p \) is true. For example, if I should believe that the wind is cold, this is likely because the wind seems cold; just so, if I should believe that a dog is frightful, this is likely because the dog seems frightful.\(^{107}\)

But our case is not usual: I should believe the Law of Noncontradiction not because I have some indication that it is true but rather because there can be no reason to disbelieve it. For if the Law of Noncontradiction is false—if there is no measure, no permanent and consistent world that my words might match or fail to match—then there are no reasons to believe or disbelieve anything.

Most arguments reveal how things are: if some condition obtains, then another condition obtains—and, since the former condition obtains, the latter condition obtains as well. Because transcendental arguments are reflexive, however, they reveal not how things are but rather how we must presuppose them to be: some condition obtains if our words are legitimate—and, since these are words, we must presuppose that our words are legitimate—and so we must presuppose that the condition obtains, whether or not it does. This seems to be the point that Aristotle is trying to make regarding the Law of Noncontradiction:

\(^{107}\) I use the word “evidence” colloquially: the evidence for \( p \) might well be a proposition that implies \( p \)—including, perhaps, the degenerate case of \( p \) itself.
Some indeed demand that [the Law of Noncontradiction] be demonstrated, but this they do though want of education… For it is impossible that there should be demonstration of absolutely everything; there would be an infinite regress, so that there would still be no demonstration. But if there are things of which one should not demand demonstration, these persons cannot say what principle they regard as more indemonstrable than the present one. We can, however, demonstrate… that this view is [obligatory], if our opponent will only say something.\textsuperscript{108}

Barry Stroud makes the point even more explicit:

The most that could be proved by a consideration of the necessary conditions of language is that, for example, we must believe that there are material objects… if we are to be able to speak meaningfully at all.\textsuperscript{109}

This point seems far beyond Parmenides. Indeed, he has Night deny it:

The same thing is there for thinking and for being.\textsuperscript{110}

Still, this is a mistake that we might forgive Parmenides. After all, he apparently invents transcendental arguments; it seems awfully ungrateful to demand that he understand them as thoroughly as we do.

2.3.4. The Aftermath

There are, of course, other legitimate interpretations of \textit{On Nature}—especially since it survives only in fragments. Nonetheless, my interpretation has an influential imitator:

There are two kinds of judgment, one legitimate and the other bastard. All the following belong to the bastard: sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch. The

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{108} Aristotle, \textit{Metaphysics}, 1006a7–12. Italics mine.
\item \textsuperscript{110} Parmenides, \textit{On Nature}, § 3. “Thinking and being are the same thing” would be, Graham notes, a more literal translation.
\end{itemize}
other is legitimate and separate from this. When the bastard one is unable to see or hear or smell or taste or grasp by touch any further in the direction of smallness, [we nonetheless need to go still further] toward what is fine. [And the legitimate one can do this].

Democritus thus distinguishes two ways of inquiry—sensation and thought. Thought is more legitimate than sensation: sensation is always conditioned by our instruments—our eyes, ears, noses, tongues, and hands—while thought is not. This means that, while sensation reveals only how things seem, thought reveals how things are—reveals, that is, reality:


Democritus thus insists that only what is permanent and consistent is real. All things other than atoms and void are mere names: particular objects are illusions that we, with our language, impose on ourselves.

2.3.4.1. Democritus

Except for the reality of atoms and void, Parmenides agrees with the conclusions of Democritus. It is no surprise, then, that Aristotle sees atomism as an elaboration of monism:

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111 Democritus, *The Little Cosmology*, in *Philosophy Before Socrates: An Introduction with Texts and Commentary*, 2nd edition, ed. and trans. Richard D. McKirahan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2010), § 11. This fragment is partially corrupt; my modification of it—based on that of McKirahan—is limited to those parts that are corrupt.

112 Democritus, *The Little Cosmology*, § 9. I have added the quotation marks.
Conceding to the monists that there could be no motion without a void, [Democritus] states that void is [what-is-not], and no part of [what-is] is [what-is-not]; for [what-is] in the strict sense of the term is [absolutely full]. This [fullness], however, is not [numerically] one: on the contrary, it is a many infinite in number and invisible owing to the minuteness of their bulk. The many move in the void (for there is a void); and by coming together they produce [the appearance of] coming-to-be, while by separating they produce [the appearance of] passing-away… From the [numerically] one, on the other hand, there never could have come-to-be a [many], nor from the [numerically] many a one: that is impossible.¹¹³

Democritus is, like Parmenides, inspired by the Law of Noncontradiction: reality is—just as unreality is not—eternally. While things seem to begin, change, and end in time, therefore, thought reveals that this experience is illusory.

What Democritus adds is an explanation of this illusion: what seem beginnings and endings in time and changes over time are changes not in reality but rather in the spatial arrangement of reality. Thus what seems the birth of a dog is really the collection of some atoms—just as what seems the death of that dog is really the dispersal of those atoms; just so, what seems to be the life of the dog—the series of changes that it undergoes—is really just the continual rearrangement of those atoms. Such changes are so superficial that they are not really changes at all; apparently, we mistake them for changes in reality because our instruments—our eyes, ears, noses, tongues, and hands—are just too big to discern the unchanging atoms themselves.

For reality to change in its spatial arrangement, of course, the world must change over space—must, that is, have parts that are somehow other than one another: only if the parts of reality differ from one another is it meaningful to suggest that they might switch

places with one another. To his credit, Democritus sees this: he maintains that, while *some* parts of the world—specifically, atoms—are, *another* part of the world—specifically, void—is *not*.

This seems an obvious violation of the Law of Noncontradiction. By the time of Democritus, Melissus had already noted this:

Nor is there any void, for the void is [what-is-not], and [what-is-not cannot] be. Nor does [what-is] move, for it does not have anywhere to withdraw... If there were void, [what-is could] withdraw into the void. But... there is no void.\(^{114}\)

No doubt Parmenides would have agreed with Melissus on this point. Graham expands on it:

Before Parmenides the Presocratics tended to analyze reality in terms of opposites; [for example,] Heraclitus had emphasized change as an alternation between opposite states. But Parmenides attacked such thinking by arguing that being and not-being cannot be treated as alternatives: there is a fundamental asymmetry between what-is and what-is-not. The former is intelligible; the latter is not. But all other contraries, insofar as they exemplify a contrast, embody a distinction between what-is and what-is-not. Contrariety itself proves to be unintelligible and [therefore] impossible. There is only qualitative uniformity and (by parity of reasoning, since the dense and the rare are contraries) quantitative consistency. All this is achieved... by reducing being to existence and non-being to nonexistence. Ontologically speaking, existence and nonexistence are not equal but opposite states: existence is everything, nonexistence nothing.\(^{115}\)

Initially, the response of Democritus seems somewhat underwhelming:

Democritus [says] that the full and the empty are the elements, calling the one ["what-is"] and the other ["what-is-not"]—the full and solid ["what-is"], the empty ["what-is-not"]. ([This] is why [he says] that [what-is] is


\(^{115}\) Graham, *Explaining the Cosmos*, 264.
no more than [what-is-not is], because body no more is than the void is.)
And [he makes] these the material causes of things.\textsuperscript{116}

At first, it seems like Democritus is merely biting the bullet. But Graham suggests that his response is subtler than it seems:

What [Democritus has] done is to go back to thinking in terms of contrasts. [He lines] up atoms and the void as contraries and then [makes] the ultimate leap: [he identifies] one of them with being and one with not-being. The obvious inference is that [he is] not thinking in terms of existence and nonexistence at all, but in terms of some other more subtle contrast.\textsuperscript{117}

To interpret Democritus charitably is to interpret him as anticipating Plato: there are, he seems to hold, aspects of reality. Existence is one aspect of reality: atoms and void are the same insofar as they are both reality—and, since they are both reality, one can speak of both. But another aspect of reality is density: atoms and void are different insofar as they have different densities—a maximal and a minimal density, respectively.

If this interpretation of Democritus is correct, then his relationship to Parmenides is subtler than many suppose. On the one hand, Democritus attacks Parmenides—or, at any rate, his radical interpretation of the Law of Noncontradiction: a thing, Democritus insists, can both be and not be in a way—since there are at least two aspects, existence and density, to each thing. On the other hand, Democritus maintains this in order to defend Parmenides—or, at any rate, the Parmenidean conclusion that reality does not change over time: Democritus admits that reality changes over space so that he can explain that what seems change over time is not really change over time—thus rendering

\textsuperscript{116} Aristotle, \textit{Metaphysics}, 985b4–10. I have modified the punctuation for clarity. This is, of course, a discussion of both Leucippus and Democritus—but, again, this is irrelevant: rightly or wrongly, Aristotle assimilates Leucippus to Democritus.

\textsuperscript{117} Graham, \textit{Explaining the Cosmos}, 264. This is, of course, a discussion of both Leucippus and Democritus—but, again, this is irrelevant: Graham assimilates Leucippus to Democritus—at least until a later article. But more on this in a moment.
far more plausible the rejection of sensation, shared by Parmenides and Democritus, in favor of thought.

2.3.4.2. Leucippus

Monism and atomism are both reductive: they seek to explain what is fleeting and inconsistent in terms of what is permanent and consistent—and thus reveal that what is fleeting and inconsistent is but a distraction.

Whether or not one finds atomism more plausible than monism seems to depend on how one considers time. On the one hand, those who see time as analogous to space seem likely to be monists: if one abstracts from time no less than from space, then changes over time are no less distractions than are changes over space. On the other hand, those who see time as disanalogous to space seem likely to be atomists: if one abstracts from space but not from time, then changes over time are not distractions. If time is real, then any changes over time are also real; the only way to avoid the conclusion that changes over time are real is to insist that there are no changes in reality over time—that what seem changes in reality over time are really changes in something more superficial, such as the spatial arrangement of reality, over time. One who maintains this must admit changes in reality over space—but this admission is not fatal to reductionism: since the atomist, like the monist, abstracts from space, changes over space—that is, differences among particular objects—are distractions, barely real.
Even for the atomist, though, it is an open question just how real such differences are. Consider the position of Democritus: some differences among particular objects are more real than others. On the one hand, the difference between, say, Socrates and the air around him is quite unreal: both are atoms and void, albeit in slightly different proportions. On the other hand, the difference between atoms and void is quite real: while not total—since both atoms and void exist—nonetheless the difference between atoms and void is as real as any difference among existents can be.

But this question admits of other answers: even the difference between atoms and void is, another atomist might maintain, fairly superficial—not quite unreal, but nonetheless a distraction. Indeed, this is the position of Leucippus, who is usually assimilated—wrongly—to Democritus. The false assimilation of Leucippus to Democritus is caused by the false assimilation of Parmenides to Melissus—a false assimilation that began with Melissus himself. Or so Graham maintains:

Melissus understands the Alethia in Parmenides’ poem as putting such strict conditions on what-is that the cosmology of the Doxa cannot meet them. [In other words, Melissus interprets the Doxa not as] a model cosmology, but [rather as] an object lesson in how even the best cosmology must fail… In the court of public opinion, Melissus would win the argument about how to read Parmenides. Henceforth, Melissus would be seen as an Eleatic, and [atomists like Leucippus] as anti-Eleatic; but that is not how they saw themselves, for they thought of themselves as genuine heirs of Parmenides. In the new scheme of things, the atomists would be seen as at least post-Eleatic in some sense; now atoms and the void represented not the dense and the rare of the Doxa, but the what-is and what-is-not of the Alethia. Now atomism constituted not an essay in Eleatic cosmology but a rejection of Eleatic metaphysics.118

The atomism of Democritus is, to some degree, an attack on Parmenides: though void is not—more specifically, is not dense—nonetheless, in another way, void is—more

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specifically, is real. If Graham is correct, then the atomism of Leucippus is not an attack on Parmenides—not even to the limited degree that the atomism of Democritus is an attack on Parmenides: both atoms and void are—and thus any difference between them is merely a distraction. If my interpretation is correct, of course, Parmenides holds this too; it is just that Leucippus is more tolerant of distractions than is Parmenides.

In my interpretation of Parmenides, the second section of the poem—the cosmology that Graham calls “Doxa,” or “Opinion”—has a subtle relationship to the first section of the poem—the metaphysics that Graham calls “Alethia,” or “Truth”: the cosmology is neither an elaboration of the metaphysics nor a parody of the metaphysics but rather a distraction from the metaphysics. The cosmology is no less true than the metaphysics; because the cosmology is less fundamental than the metaphysics, however, it is less relevant than the metaphysics. The relationship between the cosmology and the metaphysics is therefore analogous to the relationship between a shadow and the particular object that casts it.

If Graham is correct, then Leucippus differs from Parmenides neither in his metaphysics nor in his cosmology: Leucippus differs from Parmenides only in that he holds their cosmology to be slightly more relevant than does Parmenides. Graham concludes this because he sees clear precursors of atoms and void in the cosmology that Night offers her initiate:

Here I cease from faithful account and thought about truth; from this point on learn mortal opinions, hearing the deceptive order of my words. For they made up their minds to name two forms, [even though that is one name too many]—this is where they have gone astray—and they distinguished contraries in body and set signs apart from each other: to this form the ethereal fire of flame,
being gentle, very light, everywhere the same as itself, 
not the same as the other; but also that one by itself 
contrarily unintelligent night, a dense body and heavy. 
I declare to you this arrangement to be completely likely, 
so that no judgment of mortals will ever surpass you.\(^{119}\)

What Leucippus calls “atoms” and “void” are apparently what Parmenides calls, 
respectively, “night” and “fire”: night is dense—like atoms—and fire is rare—like void.

With fire and night, Graham argues, Parmenides offers the first *elemental* cosmology:

[If elements are] realities of fixed nature [that] continue in existence but 
interact to produce different products... [then] Parmenides seems to be the 
first thinker to explain the multiplicity of phenomena by deriving things 
from elements. Our modern chemical theory is a conceptual descendent of 
Parmenides’ theory.\(^{120}\)

Like the doctrine that the light of the moon is the reflected light of the sun, the doctrine 
that macroscopic changes are rearrangements of microscopic elements is a profound 
discovery. Nonetheless, Parmenides reiterates that this discovery is a distraction:

But since all things [have been named] light and night 
and [what accords with] their powers [is attributed] to these things and 
those, 
[each thing] is full at once of light and dark night, 
both [together, though] neither has [in itself any] share [of the other] in 
it.\(^{121}\)

Like all particular things, fire—here called “light”—and night are *mere names*: they are illusions that we, with our language, impose on ourselves. We impose them on ourselves, 

McKirahan suggests, when we note the contrast between them:

The cosmology depends not just on there being two [elements] but on their 
being opposites. I propose that their opposition rather than their duality is

\(^{119}\) Parmenides, *On Nature*, § 8.50–61. I have modified the translation for clarity—though it should be noted that there is significant disagreement about how to translate this line.

\(^{120}\) Graham, *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy*, vol. 1, 240.

\(^{121}\) Parmenides, *On Nature*, § 9.1–4. I have modified the translation for clarity—inspired by the translation of McKirahan.
both where the goddess’s account is superior to previous accounts and where it goes astray. Whereas… the Milesians were monists… Parmenides thinks that no single principle can give rise to the plurality and opposition observed in the world. [For] a theory that holds that all things were generated from or composed of a single kind of entity with certain definite characteristics… has a hard time accounting for things that lack those characteristics or, worse, that have the opposite characteristics. [But] the principles of the goddess’s cosmology are not just two different kinds of matter but are explicitly kinds of matter endowed with definite [and opposite] qualities.\textsuperscript{122}

The contrast between fire and night explains the plurality of particular objects. Nonetheless, neither the contrast nor the resulting plurality is quite \textit{real}: when we contrast fire and night—or, for that matter, atoms and void—we imply that what is fundamental about them is their \textit{opposition}. But what is \textit{really} fundamental about them is, of course, what they \textit{share}: they are both \textit{reality}. And any contrast that tempts us to forget this—even for a moment—is dangerous.\textsuperscript{123}

\textbf{2.3.4.3. The Many}

Whether atomism is a refinement of monism or a corruption of monism is not obvious even today: just as there are contemporary monists, so there are contemporary atomists. While Jonathan Schaffer maintains that only spacetime is real, for example, Theodore

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{122} McKirahan, \textit{Philosophy Before Socrates}, 169.

\textsuperscript{123} My interpretation of Parmenides is deeply indebted to those of Graham, McKirahan, and Palmer. Nonetheless, I suspect that neither McKirahan nor Graham nor Palmer would identify my interpretation with his own.
\end{footnotesize}
Sider counters that only fundamental particles are real. What seem to be macroscopic changes are really rearrangements of microscopic elements:

Denying that [a composite object] exists in addition to [its elements] is no more absurd than denying that holes exist in addition to perforated things, or denying that smirks exist in addition to smirking faces. [More generally,] denying the existence of persons, animals, plants, and the rest is not absurd if one accepts subatomic particles that are “arranged person-wise” (to use van Inwagen’s phrase), animal-wise, plant-wise, and so on.

Even if only atoms and void are real, however, our talk of composite objects is not false:

We’re trying to find our way in a world [wherein] we know little if any particle physics… and… certainly don’t have enough computational power to derive useful conclusions from what we do know about particle physics. It’s useful to say things like “there is a chair” when there are some subatomic particles arranged chair-wise, even if there really aren’t any chairs… [And so it is no surprise that] creatures like us… adopt a system of conventions or norms that prescribe saying things like “there is a chair” in appropriate circumstances.

Composite objects are, just as Democritus maintains, conventional—illusions that we, with our language, impose on ourselves; in reality, there are only atoms and void. This does not mean, of course, that composite objects are utterly unreal—only that they are, like shadows, distractions from what is really real:

More and more ontologists are coming around to the view that taking their subject seriously requires making some sort of distinction between ordinary and ontological understandings of existence-claims. It’s not only defenders of minimal ontologies who find the distinction useful. Even defenders of fuller ontologies sometimes deny the existence of some

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124 In the end, Sider concedes the reality of spacetime—or, at any rate, of regions of spacetime. However, he maintains that these regions are not composite objects: they are not fusions of spacetime points but rather sets of spacetime points. But this seems an odd admission to make: whatever reason Sider has for maintaining that fusions are unreal, he also has for maintaining that sets are unreal. In any case, Sider insists that he is a compositional nihilist—what I call an “atomist.” See Theodore Sider, “Against Parthood,” in Oxford Studies in Metaphysics, vol. 8, ed. Karen Bennett and Dean Zimmerman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 282–288.

125 Sider, “Against Parthood,” 238.

ordinary things… such as holes and shadows… [even as they admit] that ordinary claims about such ordinary things are true.\footnote{127} There are, just as Parmenides maintains, two ways of inquiry—that of the initiated and that of the uninitiated. The uninitiated concern themselves with the fleeting and inconsistent—with the holes, shadows, and other objects of everyday life—but they are \textit{wrong} to do this:

It’s not enough merely to distinguish ordinary language from the ontologist’s language; ontologists also need an asymmetry between them. If there’s nothing special about the ontologist’s language—if it’s just one language among many—then why make such a big deal over what’s true in it? Ontologists have therefore tended to say that their language is distinguished by being \textit{fundamental}. It gets at the facts more “directly” or “perspicuously” than do nonfundamental languages; it expresses the facts that “underly” all other facts.\footnote{128}

The language of everyday life is, just as Democritus maintains, bastard. No matter that it is everyday life that all of us—even initiates—must live:

[Belief in the objects of everyday life] is appealing insofar as norms of reasoning are conceived in a distinctive way: as being practically implementable. [But in] foundational inquiries… such as those undertaken by philosophers, we submit ourselves to demands that would be out of place in ordinary epistemic life, in full realization of the practical difficulties in doing so.\footnote{129}

But there is in this something that should worry us: we ourselves are objects of everyday life. Even Sider admits this:

A familiar Cartesian idea is that one can be certain of one’s own existence… [The truths of everyday language, such as] “there is a table”… and so on, demand nothing more than appropriately arranged particles; but… the [truth] of “I am thinking” [seems to demand] more. It [seems to demand] that there be a thinker that is me… But why think this? What is

\footnote{128} Sider, “Against Parthood,” 251.
\footnote{129} Sider, “Against Parthood,” 246.
wrong with saying that the [everyday truth] of “I think” is a matter of arrangements of particles?\textsuperscript{130}

But this misses the point: that I exist is not just true. It is fundamental—is, indeed, the \textit{most} fundamental: my existence is the condition of any theory that I hold—lest I not hold it after all.

The theory that I do not exist is performatively contradictory: \textit{I} cannot be justified in holding it—for, if I hold it, \textit{I exist}. This argument is, of course, what is sometimes called the “Cogito” of René Descartes:

If I [am convinced] of something then I certainly [exist]. [Even if] there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me… I undoubtedly exist, [since] he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as \textit{I} think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, “\textit{I am},” “\textit{I exist},” is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.\textsuperscript{131}

This is, of course, another transcendental argument. What Descartes seems not to see is that, since it is reflexive, his argument reveals not how things are but rather how one must presuppose them to be—lest there be no \textit{one} to presuppose. Yet even if I must presuppose—or, better, even if it must be presupposed—that I exist, nonetheless I might not exist: perhaps I am—somehow—an illusion. If I do not exist, though, I am hardly justified in holding that I do not exist—since \textit{I} am not justified in holding any theory at all. It must therefore be presupposed that I exist—whether or not I do.

\textsuperscript{130} Sider, “Against Parthood,” 268.

2.4. Conclusion

The suggestion that I do not exist strains the bounds of thought: that I not exist—not potentially, but actually—is quite literally inconceivable. Indeed, that just is the transcendental argument. But my nonexistence is not inconceivable in the way that, say, the existence of a square circle is inconceivable: only the former is a performative contradiction—a contradiction not of itself but of its articulation.

In this, it is like the denial of the Law of Noncontradiction: it is quite literally inconceivable that we inhabit a contradictory world. But articulating this—articulating, indeed, anything at all—implies that we do not. For our words are words—rather than mere sounds—only because they are ruled by something beyond themselves.

It is performative contradiction that is, in the end, fatal to both Protagoras and Parmenides. It might be intuitive to hold that, of the several legitimate ways to see things, none is more legitimate than any other; just so, it might be intuitive to hold that, aside from the most legitimate way to see things, none is legitimate at all. Nonetheless, both intuitions are false—or are, rather, performative contradictions, and so must be presupposed to be false.

Or so Plato has his speakers argue.
CHAPTER 3

PLATO ON PROTAGORAS AND PARMENIDES

Some words are too strong for us.

—Philolaus, On Nature

Any theory that denies a condition of its own articulation is performatively contradictory: one cannot be justified in holding it—for, if one holds it, it is false. This is one implication—probably the most obvious—of the insight that our theories are the product of theorization, and theorization is a practice—something, in other words, that we do.

3.1. Introduction

In the Cratylus, Plato has his Socrates make this point—albeit in passing: it is a premise in his argument that our words are ruled by something beyond themselves. Assume, he says, that the Law of Noncontradiction is true:

If it isn’t the case that everything always has every attribute simultaneously or that each thing has a being or essence privately for each person, then it is clear that things have some fixed being or essence of their own. They are not in relation to us and are not made to fluctuate by
how they appear to us. They are by themselves, in relation to their own being or essence, which is theirs by nature.\(^{132}\)

For the Law of Noncontradiction to be true, of course, is for there to be a measure—a permanent and consistent world, a reality—that we might meet or fail to meet:

And if things are of such a nature, doesn’t the same hold of actions performed in relation to them? … So an action’s performance [should accord] with the action’s own nature, and not with what we believe. Suppose, for example, that we undertake to cut something. If we make the cut in whatever way we choose and with whatever tool we choose, we will not succeed in cutting. But if in each case we choose to cut in accord with the nature of cutting and being cut and with the natural tool for cutting, we’ll succeed and cut correctly.\(^{133}\)

Only if we cut as the world demands—with a saw, for example, rather than a spoon—will we avoid frustration. And something similar is true, Socrates notes, of all of our practices—even speaking:

\(\textit{Now isn’t speaking or saying one sort of action?} \text{ … Then will someone speak correctly if he speaks in whatever way he believes he should speak? Or isn’t it rather the case that he will accomplish something and succeed in speaking if he says things in the natural way to say them… but if he speaks in any other way he will be in error and accomplish nothing?}\(^{134}\)

Thus does Socrates argue from the objectivity of the \textit{practical} to the objectivity of the \textit{theoretical}.\(^{135}\) His argument depends, of course, on a premise: theories are the product of

\(^{132}\) Plato, \textit{Cratylus}, 386d–386e.

\(^{133}\) Plato, \textit{Cratylus}, 386e–387a.

\(^{134}\) Plato, \textit{Cratylus}, 387b–387c. Italics mine. Of course, Socrates is arguing not only that \textit{propositions} are objectively true or false but also that \textit{names} are objectively true or false. This is apt to strike us as slightly absurd—names might be entirely conventional even if propositions are not—but there is no indication that Socrates means his argument ironically. Thankfully, this distinction between propositions and names is not relevant to my overall point.

\(^{135}\) Today, of course, most of us take the theoretical to be \textit{trivially} objective; our anxiety is that the \textit{practical} seems to be less than objective. Our attempts to prove that the practical \textit{is} objective usually involve the assimilation of the practical to the theoretical: the practical is objective, it is argued, when it is \textit{instrumental}—when, that is, it seeks what the theoretical says are the conditions of what it desires and avoids what the theoretical says are the conditions of what it fears. The practical is \textit{subjective}, on the other
theorization, and theorization is a practice—something, in other words, that we do. This—the Primacy of the Practical—is the key to the defeat of both Protagoras and Parmenides: both Protagoras and Parmenides articulate their theories—and this articulation contradicts those theories. Or so Plato has his Socrates argue.

3.2. Against Protagoras

Socrates notes that the doctrine of Protagoras—that man is the measure of all things—and the doctrine of the Heracliteans—that all things flow like streams—are two sides of the same coin: according to each doctrine, there is no measure—no permanent and consistent world, no reality, that our words might meet or fail to meet—beyond ourselves. To hold this is, of course, to deny the Law of Noncontradiction—and, again, this is performatively contradictory:

If Protagoras is telling the truth… that things are for each person as he believes them to be, how is it possible for one person to be wise and another foolish? … [On the contrary], if wisdom exists, and foolishness likewise, then Protagoras cannot be telling the truth. After all, if what each person believes to be true is true for him, no one can truly be wiser than anyone else… But [then one must also] reject Euthydemus’ doctrine that everything always has every attribute simultaneously. For [from this] … it follows once again that it is impossible for some people to be [wise] and others to be [foolish].

Remember that, if the Law of Noncontradiction is false, then there is no reason to deny it: if it is false, then our words have no chance at legitimacy—and so it is no wiser to deny

hand, when it desires and fears. Kant argues, of course, that the practical can be objective even in this. See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals.*

136 Plato, *Cratylus,* 386c–d. Italics mine.
any proposition than to hold that proposition. But both the Protagoreans and the Heracliteans articulate their doctrines: they imply that it is wiser to deny the Law of Noncontradiction than to hold it. It is in this—their articulation—that the doctrines contradict themselves.

3.2.1. The Argument

There is an echo of this argument in the *Euthydemus*:

> The fact is that I have heard this particular argument from many persons and at many times, and it never ceases to amaze me. The followers of Protagoras made considerable use of it, and so did some still earlier. *It always seems to me to have a wonderful way of upsetting not just other arguments, but itself as well.*¹³⁷

The doctrine of Protagoras upsets arguments not insofar as it contradicts particular propositions but rather insofar as it renders unjustified *all* propositions. But as Socrates reminds Euthydemus and Dionysodorus—his opponents—the doctrine is itself among the propositions that it renders unjustified.

3.2.1.1. The First Attack

The argument of Socrates is this:

> The [doctrine] amounts to claiming that there is no such thing as false speaking, doesn’t it? … [But] if it is impossible to speak falsely… then

there is no possibility of making a mistake… [And] if no one of us makes
mistakes… what in heaven’s name do you two come here to teach?\textsuperscript{138}

Words are \textit{spoken}. This is not nearly so trivial a point as it seems: we do what we do for
\textit{reasons}—in the case of speaking, in order to avoid falsehood. Socrates merely reminds
Euthydemus and Dionysodorus of this: if the Law of Noncontradiction is false—as they
maintain—then their \textit{saying} so is unjustified—for no one can \textit{fail} to avoid falsehood. For
\textit{whatever} anyone says is true.

Euthydemus and Dionysodorus call themselves “sophists”—literally, “\textit{σοφιστά},”
or “wise men”; they have come to Athens in order to teach those not yet wise. As
Socrates reveals to them, however, they have come a long way for nothing: according to
what they call their “wisdom,” no one can teach anyone anything—for, according to what
they call their “wisdom,” all are wise already. Plato has Socrates repeat this charge in the
\textit{Theaetetus}:

I was delighted with [Protagoras’] general statement of the theory that a
thing is for any individual what it seems to him to be; but I was astonished
at the way he began. I was astonished that he did not state at the beginning
of the \textit{Truth} that “Pig is the measure of all things” or “Baboon” or some
yet more out-of-the-way creature with the power of perception. That
would have made a most imposing and disdainful opening. It would have
made it clear to us at once that, while we were standing astounded at his
wisdom as though he were God, he was in reality no better authority than
a tadpole—let alone any other man.\textsuperscript{139}

If no one can fail to avoid falsehood, then it is not just that Euthydemus and
Dionysodorus are no wiser than those who live in Athens: they are no wiser than
\textit{anyone}—even the most foolish animal. Nor is Protagoras himself immune to this charge:

\textsuperscript{138} Plato, \textit{Euthydemus}, 286e–287a.

\textsuperscript{139} Plato, \textit{Theaetetus}, 161c–161d.
If whatever the individual judges by means of perception is true for him; if no man can assess another’s experience better than he, or can claim authority to examine another man’s judgment and see if it be right or wrong; if, as we have repeatedly said, only the individual himself can judge of his own world, and what he judges is always true and correct: how could it ever be, my friend, that Protagoras was a wise man, so wise as to think himself fit to be the teacher of other men and worth large fees; while we, in comparison with him the ignorant ones, needed to go and sit at his feet—we who are ourselves each the measure of his own wisdom?¹⁴⁰

The doctrine of Protagoras contradicts not itself but rather its articulation. This is because words are spoken in order to avoid falsehood—but, if the doctrine of Protagoras is true, then there are no falsehoods to avoid. Neither Euthydemus nor Dionysodorus nor Protagoras himself has any justification for speaking at all: they are no wiser than those they would teach.

3.2.1.2. The Counterattack

But the Theaetetus goes further than either the Cratylus or the Euthydemus. For Socrates suddenly defends Protagoras—or, rather, has Protagoras defend himself:

I take my stand on the truth being as I have written it. Each one of us is the measure both of what is and of what is not; but there are countless differences [among] men for just this very reason, that different things both are and appear to be to different subjects. I certainly do not deny the existence of both wisdom and wise men: far from it. But the man whom I call wise is the man who can change the appearances—the man who in any case where bad things both appear and are for one of us, works a change and makes good things appear and be for him.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Plato, Theaetetus, 161d–161e. Italics mine.

¹⁴¹ Plato, Theaetetus, 166d. Italics mine.
Socrates has assumed what Protagoras denies—that wisdom is *truth*. On the contrary, Protagoras insists, wisdom is the power to *change* the truth: though all experiences are equally *true*, some are nonetheless *better* than others.\(^{142}\) Consider the example of medicine:

To the sick man the things he eats both appear and are bitter, while to the healthy man they both appear and are the opposite. Now what we have to do is not to make one of these two *wiser* than the other—that is not even a possibility—nor is it our business to make accusations, calling the sick man *ignorant* for judging as he does, and the healthy man *wise*, because he judges differently. What we have to do is to make a change from the one to the other, because the other state is *better*.\(^{143}\)

It is perverse to insist that the sick individual—he or she for whom food seems bitter—is afflicted by *error*: he or she is afflicted by *pain*—specifically, by the discomfort of eating bitter food. Just so, wisdom is not the insistence that the sick individual is *wrong* but rather the power to *change* his or her perception into a *better* perception—one, that is, less painful. It is precisely the *doctor* who knows how to do this—how, that is, to make the sick individual *healthy*:

I look for wisdom, as regards animal bodies, in doctors.\(^{144}\)

Wisdom, according to Protagoras, is *technological*: it is the possession of *experts*. It is not healthy laymen but rather *doctors* who know how to save lives—just as it is not virtuous laymen but rather *politicians* who know how to save failing states:

The wise and efficient politician is the man who makes wholesome things seem just to a city instead of pernicious ones. Whatever in any city is

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\(^{142}\) If Protagoras is to avoid contradiction, then “better” had better mean “*seems* better”: if truth is nothing more than what *seems* true—that is, what one is inclined to hold—then goodness is nothing more than what *seems* good—that is, what one is inclined to seek. As the following example indicates, this seems to be what Protagoras means.

\(^{143}\) Plato, *Theaetetus*, 166e–167a. Italics mine.

\(^{144}\) Plato, *Theaetetus*, 167b.
regarded as just and admirable is just and admirable, in that city and for so long as that convention maintains itself; but the wise man replaces each pernicious convention by a wholesome one, making this both be and seem just.\textsuperscript{145}

We do \textit{not} speak, according to Protagoras, in order to avoid falsehood: we speak in order to achieve what we desire. For wisdom is not \textit{justice}—not, that is, speaking with justification: there is no reality that our words could meet or fail to meet. Rather, wisdom is \textit{power}—that is, the ability to achieve what we desire. We should speak only those words that serve us—and only so long as they serve us: there is nothing beyond us that our words might serve.

3.2.1.3. The Second Attack

Or so Socrates argues on behalf of Protagoras. Socrates insists that Protagoras himself would have done better:

\begin{quote}
[This is] the best I can do, with my resources, and little enough that is. If [Protagoras] were alive himself, he would have come to the rescue of his offspring in a grander style.\textsuperscript{146}
\end{quote}

One might suspect that Socrates means this apology ironically: he has articulated the most plausible interpretation of radical relativism that one can—has articulated, indeed, what we today call “pragmatism.” Certainly \textit{Theodorus} suspects that Socrates means his apology ironically:

\begin{quote}
That must be a joke, Socrates. It was a very spirited rescue.\textsuperscript{147}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{145} Plato, \textit{Theaetetus}, 167c.

\textsuperscript{146} Plato, \textit{Theaetetus}, 168c.
But Socrates has rescued Protagoras only to renew his assault:

What else can we say but that men do believe in the existence of both wisdom and ignorance among themselves? ... And [that] they believe that wisdom is true [judgment, while] ignorance is... false judgment? ... [So] are we to say that all men, on every occasion, judge what is true? Or that they sometimes judge truly and sometimes falsely? Whichever we say, it comes to the same thing, namely, that men do not always judge what is true; that human judgments are both true and false.148

Protagoras denies that wisdom is avoiding falsehood: there are, he insists, no falsehoods to avoid. But others insist that wisdom is avoiding falsehood: there are, they insist, many falsehoods to avoid. If Protagoras is right that there are no falsehoods to avoid, then those who insist that there are many falsehoods to avoid are also right. And among the falsehoods is, it seems, the doctrine of Protagoras himself:

Protagoras admits, I presume, that the contrary opinion about his own opinion (namely, that it is false) must be true, seeing as he agrees that all men judge what is... [But] in conceding the truth of the opinion of those who think him wrong, he is really admitting the falsity of his own opinion.149

Protagoras insists that everything that everyone holds is true—but many insist that this is false. If they are right, of course, then Protagoras is wrong—but, even if they are wrong, Protagoras is wrong: his doctrine is, after all, that no one is ever wrong.

147 Plato, *Theaetetus*, 168c.


3.2.2. The Implications

This argument depends on the premise that theories are the result of theorization, and that theorization is a practice—something, in other words, that we do. More specifically, the argument depends on the premise that what Protagoras says about our theories is itself a theory—something no less spoken than our other theories—and that it therefore speaks even of itself.

It would be otherwise had Protagoras said “man is the measure of all things except whether man is the measure of all things.” It would be otherwise had Protagoras said—somewhat more plausibly—“man is the measure of all things perceptual.” But Protagoras was apparently a man of courage: he risked falsehood in order to speak of all things—in order, that is, to achieve insight. Unfortunately, his conclusion was that one cannot achieve insight—that, indeed, there is no insight to achieve.

We might forgive Protagoras this conclusion. After all, his doctrine does not contradict itself—indeed, it might be true. Nonetheless, the doctrine is performatively contradictory: if it is true, then there is no reason to say so—for its contradiction is no less true. The doctrine would avoid performative contradiction, of course, were it not a performance: were it something fundamentally different from our other doctrines—were it not commensurable with them—it would not apply to itself. As Plato sees, however, every doctrine is a performance—something, that is, that we speak for a reason.

It is no coincidence that Plato is a playwright. Indeed, the argument of Socrates depends on the fact that the Cratylus, Euthydemus, and Theaetetus are plays—are, in other words, the speeches of characters with motivations: the doctrine of Protagoras
could escape the argument if it could stand apart from those who would *speak* it—could stand, that is, utterly outside of our practices of justification. Indeed, contemporary philosophers—Schaffer and Sider apparently among them—tend to see their treatises as standing apart from them in precisely this way.

But they delude themselves. For every treatise is, in the relevant sense, a play: every treatise is the speech of a character with some motivation. Of course, that character is almost always the *author*—and he or she tends not to *reflect* upon his or her motivation. But that changes nothing.

### 3.2.2.1. Pragmatism

Of course, there *is* a way for the doctrine of Protagoras to escape the argument: he might admit that his doctrine is no *truer* than that of his opponents—but insist that it is nonetheless *better* than theirs. This, in turn, can mean only that it *seems* better—that, in other words, he prefers it.

Pragmatism is the doctrine that we should hold only those doctrines that serve us. If pragmatism is not to be performatively contradictory, then it cannot insist that we should hold it because it is *true*: it can insist only that we should hold it because it *serves* us. The pragmatist Richard Rorty—one of the few contemporary philosophers who *does* reflect upon his motivation—acknowledges this:

The difficulty faced by a philosopher who, like myself, is sympathetic to [pragmatism] … is to avoid hinting that [it] gets something *right*, that my sort of philosophy corresponds to the way things *really are*. For this talk of correspondence brings back just the idea that my sort of philosopher
wants to get rid of… To say that we should drop the idea of truth as out
there waiting to be discovered is not to say that we have discovered that,
out there, there is no truth. It is to say that our purposes would be served
best by ceasing to see truth as a deep matter.\textsuperscript{150}

Apparently \textit{this} defense of Protagoras did not occur to Plato. But we might forgive him
this. For Rorty does not hold his position—that pragmatism serves us—because it is \textit{true}:
he holds it only because it \textit{serves} him to hold it. Indeed, Rorty acknowledges this:

This claim about relative profitability, in turn, is just the recommendation
that we in fact \textit{say} little about these topics, and see how we get on.\textsuperscript{151}

Pragmatism avoids performative contradiction only if it insists that it serves us. But
usually, when we insist that something serves us, we mean that it \textit{really} serves us—that it
is, in other words, \textit{good}. According to pragmatism, however, there is nothing that \textit{is} good
beyond what \textit{seems} good—beyond, that is, what we prefer: we should hold that
pragmatism serves us, Rorty admits, only because holding \textit{this} serves us in turn. In the
end, Rorty is a pragmatist because he \textit{likes} pragmatism.

3.2.2.2. Perspectivism

This is not \textit{in itself} contradictory. It is not even \textit{performatively} contradictory.
Nonetheless, there is a problem: \textit{different people prefer different things}. If they are to
avoid performative contradiction, pragmatists must admit that those who do \textit{not} prefer
pragmatism are guilty only of speaking other than \textit{they}—that is, the pragmatists—prefer.


\footnote{\textsuperscript{151} Rorty, \textit{Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 8.}
Rorty prefers not to admit this. There is a difference, he insists, between a conflict of mere *preferences* and a conflict of *perspectives*:

To say that there is no place for [other perspectives] is not to say that [those perspectives] are... logically incoherent or conceptually confused. Nor is it to say that they are based on an incorrect theory... Nor is it *just* to say that our preferences conflict with theirs. It is to say that the conflict between [our enemies] and us is so great that “preferences” is the wrong word... Rather, we... think of [our] enemies... as [crazy].^152

Right away, though, Rorty implies that “crazy” can mean nothing more than “holding doctrines other than those we prefer”:

[Our enemies] are not crazy because they have mistaken the ahistorical nature of human beings. They are crazy because the limits of sanity are set by what we can take seriously. This, in turn, is determined by our upbringing, our historical situation.^153

If they are to avoid performative contradiction, pragmatists must admit that *all* conflicts among perspectives are merely conflicts among preferences: they cannot be resolved by *reasons*—that is, by appeal to some reality that both sides acknowledge. And this leaves only *coercion*. Rorty admits as much:

Within a set of agreements about what is possible and important, we can usefully distinguish *reasons* for belief from *causes* for belief, which are *not* reasons... However, once we raise the question of how we get from one [set of agreements] to another... the distinction between reasons and causes begins to lose its utility... [Such disagreement is] treated as beneath the level of conversation—a matter to be turned over to psychologists or, if necessary, the police.^154

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If they are to avoid performative contradiction, pragmatists must admit that the only way to arbitrate among perspectives is violence—whether the obvious violence that Athens perpetrated against the Greeks or the subtler violence that Euthydemus and Dionysodorus perpetrate against Socrates. If they are to avoid performative contradiction, in other words, pragmatists must become perspectivists.

Perspectivism is not itself contradictory. Perspectivism is not even performatively contradictory. Nonetheless, there is a problem: I do not prefer it. No doubt Rorty would call me “crazy”—but this can mean only that he would prefer that I prefer pragmatism. Because we cannot resolve our conflict by appeal to some reality that we both acknowledge, there can be between us only war—albeit a subtler war than that between Athens and the Greeks.

It is precisely this outcome that Plato is so desperate to avoid.

3.2.2.3. War

At the beginning of the Republic is an exchange that captures the anxiety that drives the entire dialogue—that drives, indeed, all of the dialogues:

“Well,” [Polemarchus] said, “do you see how many of us there are?”
“Of course.”
“Well, then,” he said, “either prove stronger than these men or stay here.”
“Isn’t there [the] possibility… [of] our persuading you that you must let us go?”
“Could you really persuade,” he said, “if we don’t listen?”  

155 Plato, Republic, 327c. Italics mine.
Socrates and Polemarchus are, of course, joking with one another. But the audience knows what they do not: by the time that Plato writes the *Republic*, both will have been executed by those who refused to listen to them—Polemarchus by the Thirty, and Socrates by his jury.

Plato saw, as a boy, what happens when men and women stop *listening* to each other: nothing is left but violence—whether the violence of Athens against the Greeks, the violence of the oligarchs and the democrats against each other, or the violence of the survivors against Socrates. This exchange foreshadows all of that—foreshadows the heartbreaking insight that, at the end of the day, words might not be enough.

This should *matter* to Rorty. By his own admission, cruelty—that is, arbitrary violence—is the greatest of evils:

> This book... sketches a figure whom I call the “liberal ironist.” I borrow my definition of “liberal” from Judith Shklar, who says that liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do.¹⁵⁶

Immediately, however, Rorty admits that his hatred of arbitrary violence is *itself* entirely arbitrary:

> I use “ironist” to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires—someone [who has] abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance. Liberal ironists are people who include among [their] ungroundable desires [the] hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease.¹⁵⁷

It is noble, no doubt, to hope that cruelty will cease. But such cessation will come about *only* through violence—even if only the subtle violence that we call “liberal morality.”


¹⁵⁷ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xv.
Usually, of course, the violence that we call “liberal morality” is taken to be more than arbitrary—but Rorty denies that any morality, including his own, is more than arbitrary. If this is true—if there is no ground for liberal morality—then liberalism seeks by arbitrary violence a world without arbitrary violence.

This is not precisely a contradiction: not all arbitrary violence is equally violent—and Rorty, no doubt, prefers liberal morality to genocide. But he is a fool to think that all men and women prefer as he does.

Rorty is a hero: his commitment to liberalism bespeaks a purity of heart that is almost saintly. For liberalism is an altar on which he sacrifices all things—even sacrifice itself:

Anybody who thinks that there [is a reason not to be cruel] … is still, in his heart, a theologian or a metaphysician.\(^{158}\)

But the saintliness of Rorty blinds him to what is obvious: freed of their religious and metaphysical shackles, most men and women would not sacrifice at the altar of liberalism. They would sacrifice, rather, at other altars altogether—specifically, at altars to themselves.

Or so it seems from our own culture. For we have apparently achieved the liberal utopia for which Rorty longs—a society neither religious nor metaphysical:

One of my aims in this book is to suggest the possibility of a liberal utopia… [Such] a postmetaphysical culture seems to me no more impossible than a postreligious one, and equally desirable.\(^{159}\)

On the last point, at least, Plato would agree. But more on this in a moment.

\(^{158}\) Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xv.

\(^{159}\) Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xv–xvi.
In the *Cratylus* and *Euthydemus*, Plato has his Socrates argue that the doctrine of Protagoras—that no doctrine is truer than its competitors—is performatively contradictory: if it is true, then it is not justified. For those who teach it imply that it is *wisdom*—that it is, in other words, truer than its competitors. In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates has his Protagoras redefine “wisdom” to escape this argument: a doctrine is wise, Protagoras insists, not when it is *truer* than its competitors but when it is *better* than its competitors. But Protagoras apparently refuses to take the last step—to admit that his *own* doctrine is merely better, not truer, than its competitors.

I interpret the *Theaetetus* this way because, if Protagoras does admit that his doctrine is merely better than its competitors, then Plato misses the point entirely. Plato is apparently concerned that he has missed the point:

> It is likely that Protagoras, being older than we are, really is wiser as well; and if he were to stick up his head from below as far as the neck just here where we are, he would in all likelihood convict me twenty times over of talking nonsense, and show you up too for agreeing with me, before he ducked down to rush off again.

This is meant to be funny. But it contains no indication of irony—even dramatic irony: Plato clearly *respects* Protagoras. His attitude toward Parmenides, on the other hand, clearly goes beyond respect:

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160 Of course, it might be that Plato does miss the point entirely: Klaus Oehler argues that, in the *Theaetetus*, Plato is faithful to Protagoras—perhaps even *quotes* Protagoras—but nonetheless misunderstands the position that Protagoras articulates. See Klaus Oehler, “Protagoras from the Perspective of Modern Pragmatism,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 38, no. 1–2 (2002): 207–214.

I am afraid our criticism might be a very cheap affair. And if I feel like this before the many who have made the universe one and unmoved, Melissus and the rest of them, I feel it still more in the face of the One—Parmenides. Parmenides seems to me, in the words of Homer, to be “reverend” and “awful.” I met him when I was very young and he was a very old man; and he seemed to me to have a wholly noble depth. So I am afraid we might not understand even what he says; still less should we attain to his real thought.\footnote{Plato, Theaetetus, 183e–184a.}

Plato sees Protagoras as an adversary—a worthy adversary, maybe, but an adversary nonetheless. But Plato sees Parmenides as something more than an adversary: it is Parmenides, not Protagoras, whom Plato likens to God. If Protagoras is a comic hero—the character who gets the last laugh—then Parmenides is a tragic hero—the character who has glimpsed something beyond the merely mortal.

While the doctrine of Protagoras is courageous, the doctrine of Parmenides contains an insight. Plato apparently sees himself as the heir to this insight. Nonetheless, the doctrine of Parmenides cannot stand as it is: like the doctrine of Protagoras, it is performatively contradictory. Or so Plato argues.

3.3.1. The Superficial Argument

Superficially, the argument against Parmenides is obvious. Indeed, Plato presents this argument as the first insight of his Socrates:

If someone should demonstrate that I am one thing and many, what’s astonishing about that? He will say, when he wants to say that I’m many, that my right side is different from my left, and my front from my back, and likewise with my upper and lower parts—since I take it I do partake of multitude. But when he wants to show that I’m one, he will say I’m one
person among the seven of us, because I also partake of oneness. Thus he shows that both are true.\textsuperscript{163}

There are several ways to look at things. This is not nearly so trivial a point as it seems: two aspects of reality can be \textit{other} than one another without \textit{contradicting} one another. In the \textit{Sophist}, the Eleatic Visitor—heir, like Plato, to Parmenides—makes precisely this point:

When we say “that which is not,” we don’t say something \textit{contrary} to “that which is,” but only something \textit{different} from it… According to this account… the beautiful [is no] more a \textit{being} than the not beautiful… [Just so,] we have to say that both the not large and the large equally \textit{are}… We also have to put the not just on a par with the just, in that neither \textit{is} any more than the other.\textsuperscript{164}

To investigate what is other than reality is, Parmenides assumes, to investigate \textit{unreality}—and one cannot investigate unreality. If reality has several aspects, however, then one can investigate more than the sheer \textit{reality} of reality—that is, its existence—without investigating unreality: one can investigate the \textit{properties} of reality.

There is apparently some debate over whether Parmenides means “is” in a predicative sense or an existential sense. But those who debate this question have missed the point. For if one does not distinguish among the \textit{aspects} of reality—as Parmenides does not—then one \textit{cannot} distinguish between the predicative and existential senses of “is”: any predicate that is \textit{not} mere existence is something \textit{other} than mere existence—and, since reality has one only aspect, to predicate of reality something \textit{other} than mere


existence is to admit that reality does not exist. Aristotle makes precisely this point in his consideration of Parmenides:

[Parmenides assumes] not only that “is” has the same meaning, of whatever it is predicated, but further that it means what just is… For [every predicate] is predicated of some subject, [and] so… the subject [of] which [any other predicate] is [predicated] will not be, as [that subject will be] something different from [what just is].

If one does not distinguish among the aspects of reality, then to predicate anything of reality just is to state that it exists: one cannot distinguish between the sheer reality of reality and any of its properties. Confirmation that Parmenides does not distinguish among the aspects of reality is found in his argument that reality does not change over time because reality neither begins nor ends in time: again, this argument is valid only if one assumes that the properties of reality—which neither begins nor ends in time—are themselves just reality.

If one does distinguish among the aspects of reality, however, then one can predicate of reality more than mere existence: one can predicate of it some property—indeed, as many properties as there are aspects. Aristotle makes both points in his consideration of Parmenides:

His assumption that “is” is used in a single way only is false, because it is used in several… [But even] if we [admit] only [one predicate—for example, whiteness—and even] if [this predicate] has a single meaning, [nonetheless] what is white will be many and not one… [for] whiteness will be different from what has whiteness. Nor [would] this mean that there is anything that can exist separately, over and above what is white. For whiteness and that which is white differ in definition, not in the sense that they are things [that] can exist apart from each other. But Parmenides has not come in sight of this distinction.

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Superficially, then, the only mystery is that Plato reveres Parmenides as he does: in hindsight, his doctrine seems less an insight and more an elementary mistake.

3.3.2. The Counterargument

But this superficial argument begs the question against Parmenides: why, after all, should one acknowledge the various aspects of reality? After all, just because there are several ways to look at things does not mean that all of them are legitimate. Indeed, only Protagoras maintains this.

Parmenides is well aware that there are several ways to look at things: only if there are several ways to look at things, after all, can some of them be illusory. It is intuitive to suppose that all but one of them is illusory; it is the burden of Plato to overcome this intuition—to argue that more than one aspect of reality is more than illusory.

3.3.3. The Subtler Argument

This burden is not light. Perhaps we should not be surprised that Plato—or, rather, his Eleatic Visitor—only hints at how he shoulders it:

To dissociate [every form] from [other forms] is to destroy totally everything there is to say. [For] the weaving together of forms is what
makes speech possible for us... [And] if we were deprived of [speech],
we’d be deprived of philosophy—to mention the most important thing.\textsuperscript{167}

If only one aspect of reality—its existence—is more than illusory, then it is a mistake to
distinguish the other aspects of reality from that aspect. \textit{But the entire point of our words}
is to articulate the relations that the various aspects of reality bear to one another. “All
humans are mortal,” for example, articulates the close relation between one aspect of
reality—its intermittent humanity—and another—its intermittent mortality. This relation
is, of course, implication: if it is legitimate to look at some part of reality as human, then
it is legitimate to look at that part of reality as mortal.

Perhaps it is a mistake to articulate this—or, for that matter, anything else:
perhaps every proposition is a distraction from what \textit{really} matters—the sheer \textit{reality} of
reality. \textit{But the doctrine of Parmenides is itself a proposition:} if everything but the sheer
\textit{reality} of reality is a distraction, then one cannot be justified in \textit{saying} so—for what one
says is \textit{also} a distraction. The doctrine of Parmenides is, in other words, performatively
contradictory: to articulate it is to imply that it has some justification—a justification that
it denies to \textit{every} proposition.\textsuperscript{168}

\textsuperscript{167} \textit{Plato, Sophist}, 260a.

\textsuperscript{168} McKirahan mentions that \textit{On Nature} is performatively contradictory but suggests—rightly, I
suspect—that this did not occur to Parmenides. See McKirahan, \textit{Philosophy Before Socrates}, 172.
3.3.3.1. Theoretical Closure

Theories are the product of theorization. And theorization is a *practice*—something, in other words, that we *do*. This applies no less to *On Nature* than it does to *On Truth*: Parmenides, like Protagoras, *speaks* his doctrine.

According to that doctrine, the only legitimate speaking is that from eternity: to see the world as it really is, one must see it from the *outside*—from no particular point in space or time. But we do *not* speak from eternity: we see the world from *within*—from particular points in space and time. And it is these—our *perspectives*—that determine our words to be as they are. Night herself admits this:

> The same thing [that is the *object* of thought is the *cause* of thought].
> For not without what-is, to which it is directed, will you find thought.\(^{169}\)

Our thoughts are as they are *because* of their objects: it is our *interaction with* reality, Night implies, that causes our *thoughts of reality*. But we *interact* with reality because we are *within* reality—because, that is, we inhabit particular perspectives.

Parmenides avoids performative contradiction only if he offers some *other* explanation of his thoughts—some explanation that does not rob them of justification. Of course, he does precisely this:

> And… the goddess graciously welcomed [me], took my right hand in hers, and [addressed me with these words].\(^{170}\)

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It is not a coincidence that *On Nature* recounts an initiation into a mystery religion: it is *miraculous* that Parmenides learns what he does.

3.3.3.2. Divine Inspiration

We are *within* the world because we are *parts* of the world. When we speak of all things, we speak also of ourselves. If Parmenides is to avoid this fate, his words must be those of one who is *not* part of the world—of one who stands utterly outside it. But no mortal could do this.

It is philosophers, not theologians, who study *On Nature*: though Parmenides insists that his words are divinely inspired, this is usually dismissed as rhetorical—as an appeal, specifically, to readers of Hesiod. McKirahan notes this:

> Revealed truth tends to be truth we would disbelieve except for its unimpeachable source. The views that the goddess presents to Parmenides as the truth are indeed things we would disbelieve; [however,] he is not expected to accept them simply on the authority of his divine informant but on the strength of the arguments with which she establishes them… Accordingly some think that the prologue is just a literary show.\(^{171}\)

And so few philosophers take Night seriously. But *On Nature* avoids performative contradiction only if its words *really are* those of a goddess—of one who speaks, miraculously, from beyond the world. For only if Parmenides is divinely inspired—only if his words stand utterly outside of our practices of justification—does he escape performative contradiction: his doctrine—that all doctrines are illusory—is true only if it somehow does not speak of *itself*.

Of course, Night herself insists that her authority derives from her arguments. And so the few philosophers who do take Night seriously—McKirahan among them—tend to see her as an allegory for logic itself:

For the Greeks, many things aside from the Olympian gods were considered divine. In general, anything that exists independently of human will or effort, that is everlasting and that has effects beyond human control might be called divine—such things as rivers, love, and [the] other powers... that occupy prominent places in Hesiod’s divine genealogy... Deductive arguments have such power as well. If the premises of a valid deduction are true, the conclusion must also be true, and nothing in human power can make things otherwise... It is possible that reflection on the nature of such arguments led Parmenides to recognize their inescapable binding force, their cognitive reliability. It is difficult for us to imagine the magnitude of this discovery, but if the present suggestion is right, Parmenides considered it worthy of divine honor.172

Logic does seem to be something more than mortal: it is apparently a law that we cannot entirely violate—a law written on our hearts. But this changes nothing: for logic to speak from eternity, it would have to be fundamentally other than our other doctrines—would have to be incommensurable with them. And it is not: we speak logic—no less than we speak our other words. When Parmenides casts doubt on every perspective, he casts doubt also on his own—that of Elea in the fifth century. Logic might be something more than mortal, but it is certainly something less than divine: it links premises unshakably to conclusions—but it does not supply unshakable premises.

The history of philosophy is littered with shattered foundations: again and again, philosophers strive to reach bedrock—and fail. This is, of course, because there is no bedrock: we are thoroughly situated within practices of justification. These practices give us our words—and imprison us within them. For these are the same thing.

172 McKirahan, Philosophy Before Socrates, 153.
In their desperation, some philosophers have sought bedrock in our words themselves—that is, in logic: they have interpreted transcendental arguments as insights into the world—not as insights into our limitations. Parmenides—who infers the truth of the Law of Noncontradiction from our obligation to presuppose it—is the first to do this. But he is hardly the last.

3.4. Conclusion

The doctrine of Parmenides demands that we see the world from eternity—from the austere remove of logic itself: to say more of the world than that it is not other than it is—to dignify, in all of their diversity, our experiences within it—is to falsify it. But this doctrine is performatively contradictory: if it is true, then it is not justified. For it is itself—like every doctrine—a perspective upon the world.

On Nature is not really the speech of a goddess—not even the goddess Logic: it is the speech of Parmenides. And Parmenides no more sees the world as it is in itself than anyone else: he sees the world only insofar as it interacts with the peculiarities of his perspective. More specifically, he cannot see whether or not the world is permanent and consistent: he sees the world as permanent and consistent only because his perspective—rationality, with its insistence on noncontradiction—conditions his sight of it.

Parmenides invents transcendental arguments, but he misinterprets them: he supposes that he can infer the structure of the world from the structure of his own thoughts—that he can, in other words, attain objectivity for free. He is therefore nobler
than Protagoras—who forsakes the attainment of objectivity altogether. But Parmenides
is not as noble as he supposes: though more than a comic hero, Parmenides is still less
than a god. He is, if anything, a tragic hero: he has glimpsed something beyond the
merely mortal—but not sufficiently for that something to save him.
CHAPTER 4

PLATO ON THE ALTERNATIVE

The argument is not about just any question, but about the way one should live.

—Plato, Republic

According to the doctrine of Parmenides, the only legitimate perspective is that from eternity: particular objects are distractions from reality—from the causally interlocking totality that is the world. Unfortunately, Parmenides is a particular object within the world: his doctrine demands that he dismiss himself as a distraction. Two millennia after Parmenides, Immanuel Kant makes precisely the same point:

If [the] ideality of time and space is not adopted, nothing remains but Spinozism, in which space and time are essential determinations of the original being itself, while the things dependent upon it (ourselves, therefore, included) are not substances but merely accidents inhering in it; for, if these things exist merely as its effects in time, which would be the condition of their existence itself, then the actions of these beings would have to be merely its actions that it performs in any place and at any time.\(^\text{173}\)

Unless we acknowledge that space and time are *ideal*—unless we acknowledge, in other words, that our experience of space and time is the product of our particular perspective *within* space and time—we are obligated to dismiss *ourselves* as illusory.

Perhaps Spinoza is right: perhaps we *are* illusory—are but trivial modifications of the totality. But it is performatively contradictory for us to *articulate* that we are illusory: since we are the *conditions* of our articulations, we are obligated to hold that we are more than trivial modifications of the totality.

But if we hold *this*—that our perspectives within the world *matter*—then we are obligated to admit that we do not experience the world as a totality: we cannot see the fundamental law that rules the world—that explains why all things are precisely as they are. In the *Phaedo*, Plato has his Socrates admit this:

> If there’s anyone who can teach me exactly how it is with *my* sort of reason, I’d be overjoyed to become his pupil. But since, as things are, that wasn’t offered to me, and I haven’t either been able to discover it for myself or learn about it from anybody else… [let] me… give you a display of how I’ve engaged in my “second sailing” in search of the reasons for things.  

Seth Bernadete explains the metaphor of Socrates like this:

> When the winds fail, the sailor turns to oars.

A second sailing is not just a second undertaking: it is an undertaking by an altogether different method—one far harder than the first. Because it is harder, one undertakes a second sailing only when it was more than bad luck that fouled the first sailing: one

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174 Plato, *Phaedo*, 99c–d. Socrates speaks, of course, of some *good* that the totality might serve—though the point is a general one: even mechanistic explanations—a whirl of heaven, a base of air, or whatever—are so much empty speculation. Evidence of this is that these two explanations seem—before the thorough investigation that Socrates calls his “second sailing”—equally plausible.

undertakes a second sailing only when one sees that the first sailing had to fail—when one sees that its method cannot work.

4.1. Introduction

The method of Parmenides cannot work because we are not gods. Were we gods—utterly other than the world—we could see the world as a totality. But we are not utterly other than the world: our experience of the world is determined by our perspective within it.

This insight leads us to skepticism. As Xenophanes reveals, however, this skepticism need not be radical:

Let these things be believed as resembling the truth…
[For] by no means did the gods intimate all things to mortals from the beginning,
But in time, by searching, they discover better.\textsuperscript{176}

Parmenides is wrong: we cannot obtain objectivity for free. But Protagoras is also wrong: we might be able to attain objectivity nonetheless—if we do some hard work at the oars.

4.1.1. The Voyage

According to Socrates, this hard work is the articulation of hypotheses:

What I decided was that I must resort to reasoned accounts and look into the truth of things in the world in them... Hypothesizing on each occasion whatever account I judge to have the most explanatory power, I posit as true whatever seems to me to be in tune with this, whether about the reasons for things or about anything else, and as untrue whatever is not in tune with it.\(^{177}\)

But this is not the advocacy of empty speculation: Socrates demands that we test our hypotheses.

We cannot, of course, test our hypotheses against the world itself: we cannot see the world as it is but only as our perspectives—specifically, our hypotheses—reveal it to us. But we can test our hypotheses against themselves. The most obvious way to do this is to discern whether they contradict themselves:

If someone [holds] on to the hypothesis [at all costs]... dismiss him and refuse to answer until [you have] examined its consequences to see if they were in tune with each other, or out of tune.\(^{178}\)

Nor does our work at the oars end there: even if our hypotheses do not contradict themselves, they might nonetheless be false. In order to test them further, Socrates asks that we articulate further hypotheses that might explain our initial hypotheses:

When you [have] to give a reasoned account of the hypothesis itself... do it in the same way, that is, by positing another hypothesis, whichever appeared best of those [that might explain] the first one, until you [arrive] at something sufficient for the purpose.\(^{179}\)

Consider an example. The motions of the earth around the sun and the moon around the earth are explained by a hypothesis—specifically, Kepler’s Laws of Planetary Motion. But Kepler’s Laws are explained by a hypothesis more fundamental—specifically, Newton’s Laws of Motion and Universal Gravitation. Just so, Newton’s Laws are

\(^{177}\) Plato, *Phaedo*, 99e–100a.

\(^{178}\) Plato, *Phaedo*, 101d.

\(^{179}\) Plato, *Phaedo*, 101d–e.
themselves explained by a hypothesis even more fundamental—specifically, Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity.

Kepler’s Laws are particular manifestations of Newton’s Laws—just as Newton’s Laws are particular manifestations of Einstein’s Theory. And Einstein’s Theory is a particular manifestation of some hypothesis more fundamental still—or so we assume.

Because its method is recursive, there is no obvious end to this second sailing: every time a hypothesis survives our testing, we are obligated to articulate some further hypothesis that might explain it. We therefore never see the world as a totality: though we sail ever closer to that destination, it remains at an indefinite remove from us.

4.1.2. The Destination

Our sight of the totality is fractured: we can understand the overall causal order of the world only through the investigation of first this, then that manifestation of it. Nonetheless, this fractured sight is—or so we assume—a sight of the totality:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Holy Infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And Eternity in an hour.  

There are several ways to look at things. This is not nearly so trivial a point as it seems: though every object is—in one aspect—a part of the totality, every object is also—in another aspect—a totality onto itself.

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To see a particular object as a totality is to see it as *more* than merely material. It is to see that object as a manifestation of something more permanent and consistent than itself—that is, of some *Form*:

[Regarding fair and ugly,] justice and injustice, good and bad, and all the forms... each is itself one, but, by showing up everywhere in a community with actions, bodies, and one another, each is an apparitional many.\(^{181}\)

Perhaps Forms are illusory: perhaps it is not legitimate to look at particular objects as though each was a totality onto itself. As Plato insists in the *Phaedo*, however, this is the only method left to us: because we cannot see the world as it is, we see the totality fractured or not at all.

4.2. Some More History

Parmenides insists that only one way of seeing things is legitimate: because those who see things in other ways have not seen them precisely as they are, he insists that he can *convict* them—can convince them that they have spoken without justification.

Protagoras, on the other hand, insists that every way of seeing things is equally legitimate: because he *cannot* convict those who see things in other ways—cannot convince them that they have spoken without justification—he insists that they have seen things precisely as they are.

But Plato is subtler than either of them. He insists that, though several ways of seeing things are legitimate, nonetheless one is *more* legitimate than the others: though he

\(^{181}\) Plato, *Republic*, 476a.
cannot convict those who see things in other ways—cannot convince them that they have spoken without justification—necessarily they have not seen things precisely as they are. This is because—as Plato sees—truth goes beyond justification.

The Theory of the Forms is, at its core, the suspicion that the way we see the world is seriously misleading: it is not the conviction that we are wrong on this or that point but rather the suspicion that our whole way of looking at things is wrong. Perhaps our practices of justification are consistent within themselves: perhaps we get by speaking—and living—as we do. But it might be that our practices of justification nonetheless imprison us: it might be that we could do more than just get by—if we could, for a moment, stand outside our practices of justification and so see ourselves anew.

Plato suspects—though he cannot prove it—that there is something seriously wrong with what the Greeks have inherited from Homer and Hesiod. It is no coincidence that Plato was a boy during the Peloponnesian War—the moment when that inheritance was carried to its logical conclusion:

Words had to change their ordinary meaning and to take that which was now given them. Reckless audacity came to be considered the courage of a loyal supporter; prudent hesitation, specious cowardice; moderation was held to be a cloak for unmanliness; ability to see all sides of a question incapacity to act on any. Frantic violence became the attribute of manliness; cautious plotting a justifiable means of self-defense. The advocate of extreme measures was always trustworthy; his opponent a man to be suspected.\(^{182}\)

It is crucial that the Peloponnesian War was—like our own Great War—the fullest expression of a certain heroic code. For when power is the highest aspiration of men and women, it will not be long before all interactions are reinterpreted as struggles for power:

Oaths of reconciliation, being only offered on either side to meet an immediate difficulty, only held good so long as no other weapon was at hand; but when opportunity arose, he who first ventured to seize it and to take his enemy off guard, thought this perfidious vengeance sweeter than an open one.\(^{183}\)

It is crucial that the Peloponnesian War was—like our own Great War—inevitable: those desperate for power will, sooner or later, find an excuse to struggle for it. The Peloponnesian War could have been avoided only if the Greeks had learned to love something more than power—and it was precisely this that they would not do:

To succeed in a plot was to have a shrewd head, to divine a plot still shrewder; but to try to provide against having to do either was to break up your party and be afraid of your adversaries.\(^{184}\)

Plato suspects that the Greeks have entirely misunderstood the world and their place in it—and so could not but destroy themselves. But were his suspicion true—were men and women are born to do more than fight and die—it would not be obvious to those imprisoned within the inherited practices of justification.

4.2.1. Argumentation

As Plato reveals, the Greeks were tempted to see even justice as a struggle for power:

Justice… is a mean between what is best—doing injustice without paying the penalty—and what is worst—suffering injustice without being able to avenge oneself. The just is in the middle between these two, cared for not because it is good but because it is honored due to a want of vigor in doing injustice. The man who is able to do it and is truly a man would never set

\(^{183}\) Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides*, § 3.82.7. Italics mine.

\(^{184}\) Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides*, § 3.82.5. Italics mine.
down a compact with anyone not to do injustice and not to suffer it. He’d be mad.\textsuperscript{185}

Societies are, Glaucon worries, merely social contracts: cooperation is merely an especially clever kind of competition. Socrates admits as much when he founds his City in Speech on something more than a social contract—on, specifically, his Myth of the Metals: men and women who do not see themselves as a family—as brothers and sisters born of the same fatherland—can be nothing more than a pirate crew who will turn on one another as soon as it suits them. Their “society” is an illusion.

Of course, the struggle for power is not limited to that among men and women—or among animals more generally: even plants make war on one another—their branches struggling for sunlight, their roots struggling for water. Nor are the elements innocent: water struggles against fire, while the wind struggles against the mountains—against the very bones of the earth. Even the stars in their orbits are restless—forever fighting, it seems, to attain something that they cannot.

Once one comes to interpret the world in this way, doing so seems all but inevitable—for every interpretation then seems nothing more than an act of violence, a weapon deployed against those with alternative interpretations. In the Republic, Plato has his Socrates argue against one imprisoned within this interpretation:

Don’t you know that some cities are ruled tyrannically, some democratically, and some aristocratically? … In each city, isn’t the ruling group master? … And each ruling group sets down laws for its own advantage; a democracy sets down democratic laws; a tyranny, tyrannic laws; and the others do the same. And they declare that what they have set down—their own advantage—is just for the ruled, and the man who

\textsuperscript{185} Plato, Republic, 359a.
departs from it they punish as a breaker of the law and a doer of unjust deeds.\textsuperscript{186}

Thrasy boom has merely rendered radical the inherited heroic code: everyone, he insists, does whatever he or she does for his or her own advantage—and so politics, in the end, comes down to power.\textsuperscript{187} What we call “justice”—the establishment, interpretation, and execution of laws by our rulers—is revealed to be injustice. Against this cynicism, Socrates makes what seems a fairly feeble objection:

Are the rulers in their several cities infallible, or are they such as to make mistakes too? … When they put their hands to setting down laws, do they set some down correctly and some incorrectly? … Is that law correct which sets down what is advantageous for themselves, and that one incorrect which sets down what is disadvantageous? … But whatever the rulers set down must be done by those who are ruled, and this is just? … Then, according to your argument, it’s just to do not only what is advantageous for the stronger but also the opposite, what is disadvantageous.\textsuperscript{188}

Laws, Socrates points out, are not always to the advantage of those who make them: those who make them are, after all, only human—and, as such, they make mistakes from time to time. But Cleitophon immediately defends Thrasy machus against this objection:

He said that the advantage of the stronger is what the stronger believes to be his advantage. This is what must be done by the weaker, and this is what he set down as the just.\textsuperscript{189}

Rulers make the laws that they make, Cleitophon suggests, because those laws seem to be to their advantage—even if they sometimes get it wrong. But Thrasy machus refuses this clarification of his definition:

\textsuperscript{186} Plato, \textit{Republic}, 338d–338e.

\textsuperscript{187} Sophistry scandalized the Athenians, of course, only because the Athenians saw in sophistry a stylized portrait of themselves.

\textsuperscript{188} Plato, \textit{Republic}, 339e–339d.

\textsuperscript{189} Plato, \textit{Republic}, 340b.
Do you call a man who makes mistakes about the sick a doctor because of the very mistake he is making? Or a man who makes mistakes in calculation a skilled calculator, at the moment he is making a mistake, in the very sense of his mistake? I suppose rather that this is just our manner of speaking.¹⁹⁰

One who was really a ruler, Thrasymachus implies, would be beyond mistakes—would, in seeking his or her own advantage, always know what to do and always have the strength to do it. Men and women, insofar as they act as rulers, do not make mistakes: they act always to their own advantage. “Rulers,” insofar as they are incompetent, are not really rulers at all—just as “doctors,” insofar as they are incompetent, are not really doctors at all: we call them “doctors” and “rulers” only because they happen to work in hospitals and in Congress, respectively—not because they deserve to be there.

But Socrates turns this distinction against Thrasymachus—and so reveals his earlier objection, seemingly so feeble, as the opening move in a larger gambit:

Is the doctor in the precise sense, of whom you recently spoke, a money-maker or one who cares for the sick? … Medicine doesn’t consider the advantage of medicine, but of the body… Nor does any other art consider its own advantage—for it doesn’t have any further need to—but the advantage of that of which it is the art… But, Thrasymachus, the arts rule and are masters of that of which they are the arts.¹⁹¹

Sure, Socrates grants, our incompetent “rulers” are not really rulers—do not really deserve to be in Congress. But consider other rulers, such as those who rule sheep and sailors—that is, shepherds and captains: shepherds—insofar as they are really shepherds—do what they do for the benefit of their sheep, just as captains—insofar as they are really captains—do what they do for the benefit of their sailors. Indeed, all rulers—insofar as they are really rulers—do what they do for the benefit of those they

¹⁹⁰ Plato, Republic, 340d.

¹⁹¹ Plato, Republic, 341c, 342c.
rule; those “rulers” who establish, interpret, and execute laws for their own benefit are no
more real rulers than those who establish, interpret, and execute laws incompetently.¹⁹²

Thrasymachus offers at this point his most striking observation—one that undermines the very premise on which Socrates has founded his argument:

You suppose shepherds or cowherds consider the good of the sheep or the cows and fatten them and take care of them looking to something other than their masters’ good and their own; and so you also believe that the rulers in the cities, those who truly rule, think about the ruled differently from the way a man would regard sheep, and that night and day they consider anything else than how they will benefit themselves.¹⁹³

Okay, sure, those who are really shepherds and captains do what they do for the benefit of their sheep and their sailors—and not just because they want a paycheck. But that just means that there are no real shepherds and captains. For everything that everyone does—no matter what he or she pretends—is for his or her own benefit. And sure, sometimes the best way to benefit oneself is to get a job taking care of sheep or sailors or whatever. But these are just jobs: a person is only a shepherd accidentally, whereas he or she is essentially out for himself or herself. Initially, the Socratic response to this cynicism seems baffling:

Is any musical man who is tuning a lyre in your opinion willing to get the better of another musical man in tightening and relaxing the strings, or does he claim he deserves more? … But the better of the unmusical man? … And what about a medical man? On questions of food and drink, would he want to get the better of a medical man or a medical action? … But the better of what is not medical? … Now, for every kind of knowledge and

¹⁹² So far, my articulation of the exchange between Socrates and Thrasymachus has depended heavily on Sean Kelsey—though I am not sure that he would agree with what follows. See Sean Kelsey, “Socrates on Thrasymachus on Justice,” unpublished.

¹⁹³ Plato, Republic, 343b–343c.
lack of knowledge, see if in your opinion any man who knows chooses voluntarily to say or do more than another man who knows.\textsuperscript{194}

The point is not entirely clear, but it seems to be this: if everything that everyone does is for his or her own benefit, then everything that everyone believes—since believing is just one kind of doing—he or she believes not because it is true but rather because it benefits him or her to believe it. A musician, therefore, has no reason to defer to the judgment of another musician who knows more of the science of composition—indeed, there is no science of composition to know. Just so, a doctor has no reason to defer to the judgment of another doctor who knows more of the science of physiology—indeed, there is no science of physiology to know. Just so—and this is the punchline—a politician has no reason to defer to the judgment of another politician—say, Thrasymachus—who knows more of the science of politics. Indeed, there is no science of politics to know: there is no fact of the matter, if Thrasymachus is right, about whether Thrasymachus is right about his definition of justice.

4.2.2. Frustration

Socrates can, in argument, \textit{embarrass} Thrasymachus—can reveal to Thrasymachus that, in carrying his inheritance to its inevitable conclusion, he has carried it far indeed:

Thrasymachus did not agree to all of this so easily as I tell it now, but he dragged his feet and resisted, and he produced a wonderful quantity of

\textsuperscript{194} Plato, \textit{Republic}, 350a.
sweat, for it was summer. And then I saw what I had not yet seen before—Thrasymachus blushing.\textsuperscript{195}

But Socrates cannot, in argument, \textit{convict} Thrasymachus—cannot, that is, convince Thrasymachus that he has spoken without justification. Thrasymachus says as much:

Feast yourself boldly on the argument… for I won’t oppose you, so as not to irritate these men here.\textsuperscript{196}

Thrasymachus no longer shares with the others—those he fears to irritate—all of what they have inherited from Homer and Hesiod: in carrying their inheritance to its logical conclusion, Thrasymachus has shorn it of those aspects that did not fit. This has made their inheritance into a thing far harder than it was—but this is not in \textit{itself} contradictory.

And so the first book of the \textit{Republic} ends in frustration:

So long as I do not know what the just is, I shall hardly know whether it is a virtue or not and whether the one who has it is unhappy or happy.\textsuperscript{197}

Because they look at the world in entirely different ways, Socrates cannot convict Thrasymachus: Socrates cannot convince Thrasymachus that he has spoken without justification. For Socrates to convince Thrasymachus that his words are false—even if justified—\textit{he must articulate an entirely different way of looking at the world}. One that might move even the hardest of men.

And this is a second sailing. It takes not an hour but an entire night.

\textsuperscript{195} Plato, \textit{Republic}, 350c–d.
\textsuperscript{196} Plato, \textit{Republic}, 352b.
\textsuperscript{197} Plato, \textit{Republic}, 354c.
4.3. Some More Metaphor

The next nine books of the Republic are an articulation of this entirely different way of looking at the world. Throughout this articulation, Socrates admits that his words will seem madness to those—like Cephalus, Polemarchus, and Thrasymachus—who remain in their inheritance. His fullest admission of this is, of course, the Allegory of the Cave:

See human beings as though they were in an underground cave-like dwelling with its entrance, a long one, open to the light across the whole width of the cave. They are in it from childhood with their legs and necks in bonds so that they are fixed, seeing only in front of them, unable because of the bond to turn their heads all the way around. Their light is from a fire burning far above and behind them. Between the fire and prisoners there is a road above, along which see a wall, built like the partitions puppet-handlers set in front of the human beings and over which they show the puppets. Then also see along this wall human beings carrying all sorts of artifacts, which project above the wall, and statues of men and other animals wrought from stone, wood, and every kind of material; as is to be expected, some of the carriers utter sounds while others are silent.\footnote{Plato, Republic, 514a–515a.}

Those within the cave speak with justification: their words are consistent among themselves—and reflect, \textit{in a way}, what they experience. What they say, therefore, is not false \textit{in its details}: when they say “here are some men,” for example, their “men” refers to what we would call “shadows of statues of men.”\footnote{Hilary Putnam makes more or less this point. Because he is a pragmatist, however, he misses the subtler anxiety \textit{behind} such skepticism—an anxiety that Plato does \textit{not} miss. See Hilary Putnam, “Brains in a Vat,” in \textit{Reason, Truth, and History} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1–21.} Nonetheless, what they say is false in \textit{another way}—one subtler by far:

Do you suppose such men would have seen anything of themselves and one another other than the shadows cast by the fire on the side of the cave facing them? And what about the things that are carried by? Isn’t it the same with them? If they were able to discuss things with one another,
don’t you believe they would hold that they are naming these things going by before them that they see? … Then most certainly such men would hold that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of artificial things.200

Those in the cave have thoroughly misunderstood their world: they are wrong not about this or that detail of their situation but rather about all of it. Chained within their practices of justification, they have missed entirely the crucial insight about their world: it is an illusion—one carefully maintained by those not themselves chained.

It is crucial that those in the cave cannot see that they are prisoners: their chains prevent them from turning their heads—and thus from seeing their chains. But their imprisonment is all the more thorough for that: those who suppose themselves already free cannot cast off their chains. To free themselves, those in the cave must learn to see the world from an entirely different perspective. To do this, however, those in the cave must turn themselves entirely—must, that is, undergo conversion:

Take a man who is released and suddenly compelled to stand up, to turn his neck around, to walk and look up toward the light… When he recalled his first home and the wisdom there, and his fellow prisoners in that time, don’t you suppose he would consider himself happy for the change and pity the others?201

“Conversion” is, of course, another spatial metaphor. But it is one that has served us rather well over the millennia.

200 Plato, Republic, 515a–c.

201 Plato, Republic, 515c, 516c. Italics mine.
4.4. Conclusion

Both Protagoras and Parmenides are idealists: each holds that it is not a coincidence that the world is intelligible—for each takes intelligibility to be constitutive of the world. This is so even though they understand that constitutive relationship in opposite ways: while Protagoras sees the world as a construction of our intelligence, Parmenides apparently sees our intelligence as an echo of that of the world.

Plato is also an idealist—albeit an idealist of a subtly different kind. For while Protagoras and Parmenides see intelligibility as a constitutive ideal, Plato sees it as a regulative ideal—a guide not to how the world is but rather to how we should see the world: we should strive for intelligible theories not because the world is intelligible but rather because we, with our limitations, cannot hold theories that are unintelligible.\textsuperscript{202} We therefore have to assume that the world is intelligible—whether or not it is.\textsuperscript{203}

\textsuperscript{202} The relationship between Parmenides and Plato is rather like the relationship between Spinoza and Kant. For this suggestion, I owe Vittorio Hösle, my teacher and my friend.

\textsuperscript{203} Sider, by the way, cites simplicity as a constitutive ideal: his atomism is likely to be true, he argues, because it is simple—and because simplicity is a “guide to truth.” But simplicity is, even more obviously than intelligibility, a regulative ideal—a guide not to how the world is but rather to how we should see the world: we should strive for simpler theories not because the world is simple but rather because we, with our limitations, cannot hold theories that are too complicated. We therefore have to assume that the world is simple—whether or not it is. See Sider, “Against Parthood,” 3. For pointing me toward both Schafer and Sider, by the way, I owe Peter Finocchiaro, my colleague and my friend.
4.4.1. God

In a way, of course, Protagoras is right: subjectivity is the measure of all things—for one cannot see the world except from some perspective or other. But the relevant subjectivity is that of God, not that of men and women:

In our view it is God who is preeminently the “measure of all things,” much more so than any “man,” as they say.204

In a way, Parmenides is also right: the most legitimate perspective upon the world—even if not the only legitimate perspective—is that from eternity. Though we can never reach this perspective, we should nonetheless strive toward it—as one prominent Platonist notes:

A life of this sort would exceed what is human. For it is not insofar as he is a human being that a person will live in this way, but insofar as there is something divine present in him... But one ought not—as some recommend—to think only about human things because one is a human being, nor only about mortal things because one is mortal, but rather to make oneself immortal, insofar as that is possible, and to do all that bears on living in accord with what is the most excellent of the things in oneself.205

The way in which God looks at things is regulative for us because the way in which God looks at things is constitutive of them. Indeed, for the world to be intelligible is for God to exist—for there to be, in other words, a perspective from eternity:

To God all things are beautiful and good and just, but humans have supposed some unjust and others just.206


From this perspective, it is only the superficial that is endlessly changing. For changes are determined to be as they are by something deeper, something unchanging:

[Mortals] do not understand how, by being at variance with itself, it agrees with itself. It is a backwards-turning attunement like that of the bow and lyre.\(^{207}\)

In destroying one another, plants and animals are really preserving something else—an order that explains their destructive behavior. Just so, what is salient about the stars is not the desperation in their motion but rather the fact that it is, year after year, the same. Human “justice” might well be injustice, as Glaucon and Thrasymachus fear. But there is a divine justice, an iron law that somehow rules all things—even men and women, though they do not know it.

It is not a coincidence that, while Parmenides takes himself to be divinely inspired, Protagoras is an agnostic:

Concerning the gods, I cannot ascertain whether they exist or whether they do not, or what form they have; for there are many obstacles to knowing, including the obscurity of the question and the brevity of human life.\(^{208}\)

But the relationship of Plato to the divine seems to be one of faith. Indeed, whenever he confronts the limits of experience, Plato has his Socrates exchange argument for myth. The *Phaedo* is only one example of this:

Just describing [my convictions] doesn’t need the skill of a Glaucus; however, to show that they’re true appears to me even beyond Glaucus’ expertise—and not only that, I’d probably be incapable of it. Anyway

\(^{207}\) Heraclitus, *On Nature*, § 51. For clarity, I adopt one among several translations suggested by McKirahan.

even if I did know how to do it, the life I still have left to me, Simmias, doesn’t seem to me equal to the length of the argument required.\textsuperscript{209}

To see the world as a totality—to see it from eternity, as would God—is beyond us. The excuse of Socrates—that he will not live long enough to prove that the world \textit{is} a totality—is obviously ironic: \textit{no one} will live long enough to prove this—for it cannot be proven at all.

Nevertheless, Socrates \textit{believes} that the world is a totality: he holds that the world is ruled by divine justice—most of all, by the Law of Noncontradiction. Socrates believes, despite everything, that the world \textit{is} intelligible—and that his second sailing has therefore not been in vain.

Again and again, philosophers strive to reach bedrock. But there is no bedrock. Rather, philosophy begins in \textit{faith}: to see the world as intelligible—as \textit{home} to us, no less than Athens in the fourth and third centuries—is a decision. It might be a decision made for transcendental reasons, but it is a decision nonetheless.

4.4.2. Humanity

To see the world as it \textit{is} would be to experience it in an unconditioned way—but, as Plato has his Theaetetus admit to Socrates, this seems beyond us:

\begin{quote}
[Regarding] being… you want to know through what bodily [instrument] we perceive [it] … But \textit{I} couldn’t possibly say. All I can tell you is that it
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{209} Plato, \textit{Phaedo}, 108d.
doesn’t seem to me that for [this] there is any special instrument at all, as there is for the others.\textsuperscript{210}

We are mortals—are, that is, flesh and blood and bone. \textit{Without} flesh and blood and bone—which is, our perspectives—we could not experience \textit{at all}: we could no more hear, smell, taste, or touch without our ears, noses, tongues, or hands, respectively, than we could see without our eyes. To experience the world in an unconditioned way, we would have to be akin to gods—which would have to be, specifically, the God of Xenophanes:

\begin{quote}
God is one, greatest among gods and men, 
not at all like mortals in bodily form or thought…
[For] \textit{all} of him sees, \textit{all} of him thinks, \textit{all} of him hears… 
[And] without effort he shakes all things by the thought of his mind.\textsuperscript{211}
\end{quote}

To experience the world in an unconditioned way, we would have to inhabit a perspective that was somehow \textit{not} flesh and blood and bone—which would somehow have to see without eyes and hear without ears no less than write without hands. But this seems far beyond us—seems, indeed, to contradict itself: to experience in a way \textit{utterly} unconditioned—to discern a \textit{reality} that our experience does not exhaust—would be to achieve a perspective that was somehow \textit{not} a perspective. No wonder, then, that Xenophanes is skeptical—both of his God and of everything else:

\begin{quote}
No man has seen nor will there be anyone 
who knows the clear truth about the gods and about all the things I speak of.
For even if a person should in fact say what has come to pass, 
Nevertheless he himself does not know, but in all cases it is opinion that has been wrought.\textsuperscript{212}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{210} Plato, \textit{Theaetetus}, 185c–185e. Besides being, Socrates and Theaetetus mention beauty, goodness, unity, identity, distinctness, and so on; however, it seems no coincidence that all of these are \textit{transcendental}—are, that is, aspects of being.

\textsuperscript{211} Xenophanes, \textit{Satires}, §§ 23–25. Italics mine.
\end{flushright}
To move beyond this would require a power more than mortal: it would require of us the ability to experience without eyes, ears, noses, tongues, or hands—indeed, without any instruments at all.

Of course, Plato presupposes that we are more than mortal—that, somehow, we can experience without any instruments at all:

I… put [being] among the things [that] the soul itself reaches out after by itself.²¹³

We are more than merely material: the wisdom of Socrates is something somehow other than his bones and sinews.

Insofar as we look at Socrates as material—as, specifically, a rational animal—we ask for the causes of his behavior. But insofar as we look at him as more than material—as, specifically, a rational animal—we ask for the reasons for his behavior. Thus should we see ourselves: each of us is both body and soul. We inhabit particular perspectives that condition our experience—and yet we can move beyond these perspectives: we can move toward the unconditioned—even if it remains at an infinite remove from us.

Or so we must presuppose.²¹⁴

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²¹² Xenophanes, Satires, § 34.1–4.

²¹³ Plato, Theaetetus, 186a.

²¹⁴ These chapters are deeply indebted to Sean Kelsey, David O’Connor, and Vittorio Hösle—those who taught me the most about Plato. Of course, my interpretation—or misinterpretation—of Plato is my own.
CHAPTEIR 5

EXCURSUS ON INTERPRETATION

Don’t make a quarrel between Thrasymachus and me when we’ve just become friends.

—Plato, Republic

What is the difference between philosophy and sophistry?

5.1. Introduction

Superficially, the two are pretty similar. This superficial similarity is, perhaps, what misleads so many contemporary philosophers into practicing the latter instead of the former:

The power of the contradicting art is grand… Many fall into it even unwillingly and suppose they are not quarreling but discussing, because they are unable to consider what’s said by separating it out into its forms. They pursue contradiction in the mere name of what’s spoken about, using eristic, not dialectic, with one another.215

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215 Plato, Republic, 454a.
Contemporary philosophers are no less guilty of this than were their forebears in Athens: entire careers are spent marshaling arguments for rival positions—arguments that are, inevitably, only convincing to those who already hold the relevant positions. But contemporary philosophers spend scarcely any time investigating the roots of their rivalries: rarely do they ask whether two rival positions might both be legitimate—whether they might be two perspectives, however partial, on one reality. And so their contention continues without end.

5.2. Charity

To confuse sophistry with philosophy in this way is understandable: both are, after all, war made with words. Both the sophist and the philosopher strive for victory. Nonetheless, Alasdair MacIntyre implies, philosophy transcends sophistry in a crucial way:

[A sophist can] fail [only] by advancing a thesis that [succumbs] to refutation, [whereas a philosopher can] fail [also] by defending [his or her] thesis in such a way so that it [becomes] able to escape refutation only by being self-enclosed, bound into some narrow circle of consistency from which all possible counterexamples and objections had been excluded by some initial definition. To avoid this latter risk of failure [the philosopher must] frame [his or her] theses so that they are as open to refutation as adequacy of formulation will allow: that is to say, so that we may have as much opportunity as possible to discover whether or not they are false.\(^{216}\)

Both sophistry and philosophy are war made with words. Both the sophist and the philosopher strive for victory. But the sophist strives for victory over his or her

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*interlocutor*; the sophist should therefore interpret the arguments of said interlocutor so that they seem maximally *implausible*. The philosopher, on the other hand, strives for victory over *himself* or *herself*—over, that is, those of his or her beliefs that admit of objection; the philosopher should therefore interpret the arguments of his or her interlocutor so that they seem maximally *plausible*.

In both cases, the only limit upon interpretation is what the relevant audience will allow. But the audience of the philosopher is, in the end, himself or herself: the philosopher has made of himself or herself a multitude—and has found therein the only worthy opponent, the only competent judge. The philosopher has brought the justice of the assembly within his or her own heart.

5.3. Courage

The will to truth, Nietzsche suggests, is just the will to power turned against itself. And so philosophy is, in a way, an exercise in cruelty toward oneself. But this cruelty is not *pointless*—for only through cruelty toward oneself can one harden oneself:

> Only the dialectical way of inquiry proceeds [by] destroying the hypotheses, to the beginning itself in order to make it secure… Unless a man is able to separate out the *idea* [of a thing] from all other things and distinguish it in the argument, and, going through every test, as it were in battle—eager to meet the test of being rather than that of opinion—he

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comes through all this with the argument still on its feet... you will deny that such a man knows the [thing] itself, or any [manifestation of it].

Like an army, knowledge is secure not when it stands on unshakable ground but rather when it can stand unshakable on every ground. Security comes, in other words, not through certainty but through courage: in philosophy, security comes not through building upon premises that are beyond question—for there are none—but rather through the courage to ask oneself even those questions that no one else has yet thought to ask.

Among contemporary philosophers, such courage is rare indeed. Not coincidentally, contemporary philosophers seem to strive above all to render the words of their interlocutors implausible. The question of truth—of the deeper reality that might have birthed the contending perspectives—is all but forgotten:

Nor... have they given an adequate hearing to fair and free speeches of the sort that strain with every nerve in quest of the truth for the sake of knowing and that “nod a distant greeting” to the subtleties and contentious quibbles that strain toward nothing but opinion and contention in trials as well as in private groups.

Again, contemporary philosophers are no less guilty of this than were their forebears in Athens: like those in any arms race, contemporary philosophers deploy an increasingly sophisticated arsenal—in this case, an increasingly technical jargon and an increasingly formal regimentation—in service of an increasingly improbable total victory. And, like those in any arms race, it never occurs to contemporary philosophers to transcend the conflict: that their contention might derive from a confusion—specifically, from a failure to recognize their rival positions as subjective perspectives on an objective reality—never occurs to them.

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218 Plato, Republic, 533b–534c.

219 Plato, Republic, 499a.
This metaphor of an arms race implies, of course, an etiology of the ongoing confusion of philosophy with sophistry—specifically, the analogue of a military-industrial complex: mere refutation, precisely because of its shallowness, is especially apt for publication in books and articles—thereby becoming the research that contemporary universities use to impress applicants and donors. And for which, not coincidentally, those universities reward contemporary philosophers. That those rewarded with positions and tenure are those responsible for teaching the next generation of philosophers only compounds the problem.

5.4. Conclusion

Perhaps this is too cynical—is, indeed, uncharitable: perhaps so many contemporary philosophers practice sophistry not because they have been corrupted by the promise of positions and tenure but rather because they have lost faith in philosophy—because millennia of searching for what is true without qualification have yielded only the suspicion that nothing is true without qualification.

Nonetheless, if contemporary philosophers are to be more than mere sophists, refutation must become a far less prominent philosophical move than it now is. For competition among competing positions is philosophical only insofar as that competition has its place within a larger context of cooperation—within, specifically, a collaborative search for what survives all such competition.
The difference between philosophy and sophistry, then, is charity in interpretation. And this, like every exercise of charity, demands courage. And this, though hard, is worth doing.
CHAPTER 6

WITTGENSTEIN ON LANGUAGE-GAMES,
RULE-FOLLOWING, AND FORMS OF LIFE

Words are also deeds.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

What is the thesis of the *Philosophical Investigations*?

6.1. Introduction

This is a surprisingly difficult question to answer: the *Investigations* makes countless assertions, but the relationship among these assertions is far from clear. If the thesis of a text is the proposition for which that text is an argument, then one might conclude that the *Investigations* does not *have* a thesis—that it is, in other words, just a series of arbitrary assertions.
6.1.1. Philosophy as Therapy

Lest this seem uncharitable, one should note that the *Investigations* all but demands this interpretation of itself:

> Philosophy just puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything.—Since everything lies open to view, there is nothing to explain… If someone were to advance theses in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them.\(^{220}\)

The potential for paradox here is obvious: that no philosophical proposition could be controversial seems itself a philosophical proposition that is profoundly controversial. For this proposition not to contradict itself, one must interpret “philosophy” to mean something quite different from what it is usually taken to mean.

But what is “philosophy” usually taken to mean? Well, contemporary philosophers seek to answer certain questions—specifically, those questions that seem to them too profound to be answered by natural science. For these questions seem… well, *metaphysical*: they concern not how reality happens to be but rather how any reality *must* be. As such, they can only be answered by pure thought—unfettered by particle accelerators and the like:

> Logical investigation explores the essence of all things. It seeks to see to the foundation of things, and shouldn’t concern itself whether things actually happen in this or that way.—It arises neither from an interest in the facts of nature, nor from a need to grasp causal connections, but from

an urge to understand the foundations, or essence, of everything empirical.\textsuperscript{221} Wittgenstein contrasts such philosophy—call it “dogmatic”—with what he calls “therapeutic” philosophy: while the dogmatic philosopher strives to answer certain questions, the therapeutic philosopher strives to dismiss those questions. And it is only therapeutic philosophy, Wittgenstein insists, that is legitimate:

The philosopher treats a question; like an illness.\textsuperscript{222} While dogmatic philosophy seeks to change one’s mind, therapeutic philosophy seeks to change one’s life: dogmatic philosophy seeks primarily to instruct one, while therapeutic philosophy seeks primarily to liberate one. More specifically, therapeutic philosophy seeks—like psychoanalysis, its rough contemporary—to liberate one from oneself. For it is our own thoughts, Wittgenstein insists, that torment us:

Philosophy is a struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language... The results of philosophy are the discovery of some piece of plain nonsense and the bumps that the understanding has got by running up against the limits of language.\textsuperscript{223}

To do philosophy legitimately, then, is not to answer questions that seem to one profound: it is to reveal that profundity as an illusion, those questions as confusions. Legitimate philosophy is therefore like psychoanalysis in another way: each therapy leads one to a new awareness of oneself—specifically, of the ways in which one’s thoughts are pathological. While it would be an exaggeration to suggest that either therapy is valuable

\textsuperscript{221} Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, § 89. Of course, Wittgenstein’s words are ambiguous: in hindsight, one can locate the “foundation of things” in language-games and forms of life rather than in anything metaphysical—just as one can identify “logical investigation” with reflective sociology rather than with conceptual analysis. This ambiguity is, of course, precisely Wittgenstein’s point—as the sections that immediately follow this one make clear. But more on this in a moment.

\textsuperscript{222} Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, § 255.

\textsuperscript{223} Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §§ 109, 119.
only instrumentally, it is true that each therapy is valuable only insofar as there is something wrong with one. Just so, the primary point of each therapy is to transform oneself to the point that one no longer needs that therapy.

6.1.2. The Paradox of Quietism

Of course, therapeutic philosophy merely trades one paradox for another: to call one kind of philosophy “legitimate” and another “illegitimate” is to do more than merely describe how men and women use language—since, in fact, most of those who today call themselves “philosophers” see their task as dogmatic rather than therapeutic. Nonetheless, Wittgenstein insists, this brand of philosophy is illegitimate:

Philosophy must not interfere in any way with the actual use of language, so it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot justify it either. It leaves everything as it is.224

Unfortunately, to leave everything as it is would be to acknowledge that philosophy constantly interferes with the actual use of language. If philosophy may not justify the way language is used, it may not justify not justifying the way language is used—since this would itself be an exercise of language.

Call this the “Paradox of Quietism.” It recurs whenever one insists that everything is fine as it is—whenever one criticizes all criticism. Stoicism, for example, seems to face this paradox: if one should accept all things as fated, should one accept also any resistance to such acceptance that one discovers within oneself—resistance that would be,

of course, no less fated? But if one accepts whatever resistance to acceptance that one discovers within oneself, would one still have a reason to accept it?

The Paradox of Quietism derives from a tension within a fairly fundamental aspect of the human condition: even if what we say is purely theoretical, nonetheless our saying it is inevitably practical. For we speak for reasons—usually, because we hope to change, in one way or another, what those who hear us think and do. No doubt we speak too often—even, that is, when our reasons are not particularly good. But the Paradox threatens whenever one concludes from this that we should never hope to change what those who hear us think and do—and says so.

Can the Paradox of Quietism be resolved—in this case, at least? Is there, in other words, a way for the Investigations to be consistent with itself? To insist, as a piece of philosophy, that philosophy should change—specifically, such that it no longer insists that things should change?

Well, the Investigations takes as its object the use of language. And this at three levels: ordinary language, the dogmatic philosophical analysis of ordinary language, and itself—its own therapeutic philosophical investigation, that is, of the dogmatic philosophical analysis of ordinary language. One might see these three levels as three moments within a dialectic: ordinary individuals speak, dogmatic philosophers speak against ordinary language, and therapeutic philosophers speak against dogmatic philosophy. There is a sense in which dogmatic philosophy is therefore an extension of ordinary language—the same sense in which therapeutic philosophy is an extension of dogmatic philosophy, and thus ultimately of ordinary language.
The dissolution of the paradox would then look something like this: *insofar as it is considered as an end in itself*, dogmatic philosophy is illegitimate and should be reformed so that it no longer seeks to reform ordinary language. Indeed, *insofar as it is considered as an end in itself*, even therapeutic philosophy is illegitimate and should be reformed so that it no longer seeks to reform dogmatic philosophy. *However, insofar as either is considered as an extension of ordinary language—a moment within a larger dialectic—each should be left exactly as it is.*

All language is ordinary language. Quietism is the right response to ordinary language because ordinary language reforms *itself*—for dogmatic philosophy and therapeutic philosophy are just aspects of ordinary language. But this is so only if neither becomes an end in itself: just as dogmatic philosophy has its place—to express the confusions latent in ordinary language *but only insofar as those confusions are dissolved by therapeutic philosophy*—so therapeutic philosophy has its place—to dissolve dogmatic philosophy *so that one can get back to the business of speaking ordinary language*. A therapeutic philosophy that fed on itself would become just another dogmatic philosophy—just as a psychoanalysis that fed on itself would become just another compulsion.

To put the point in another way, the Paradox of Quietism emerges *insofar as quietism is taken to be a theory* rather than a *practice*: it would indeed be paradoxical if the point of philosophy was to *say* that philosophy should stop saying things. But the point of philosophy is not to *say* that one should stop saying things but rather to *stop saying things*; if among those things that one stops saying is that one should stop saying things, so much the better. Indeed, philosophy as therapy seems paradoxical only if one
remains in one’s heart a dogmatic philosopher—only, that is, if one continues to see philosophy primarily as a means of answering questions rather than as a means of liberation from them.  

The Paradox of Quietism will dissolve, then, when one stops thinking about it and starts living. Call this the “Practical Turn.” It is not, of course, an entirely new idea:

Education is not what the professions of certain men assert it to be. They presumably assert that they put into the soul knowledge that isn’t in it… But the present argument, on the other hand… indicates that… the [soul]… must be turned around from that which is coming into being… until it is able to endure looking at that which is and the brightest part of that which is. And we affirm that this is the good.

What is crucial in this, the Socratic redefinition of education, is the idea of conversion: to learn is less to transform one’s opinions than to transform oneself—to reorient oneself toward the good, toward living rightly. All the true opinions in the world are worth holding only in relation to this—to becoming master over rather than slave to oneself. And mastery is, of course, a practical matter.

6.1.3. Therapy as Reinterpretation

If the Investigations seeks to be therapeutic rather than dogmatic, then its primary point cannot be the advancement of a thesis—as it itself acknowledges. But therapy often

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225 I owe this spirit of interpreting the Investigations—this kind of relentless thoroughness—to Curtis Franks, my teacher and my friend. Whether my words are merely a dialectical moment that his would reform, I do not know.


227 Plato, Republic, 518b–518d.
advances theses *incidentally*: to relieve one of some compulsion, psychoanalysis might well teach one a new way of looking at one’s actions—for example, as motivated by the subconscious desire to kill one’s father and marry one’s mother. However implausible this interpretation, the parallel is obvious: to liberate one from confusion, therapeutic philosophy might well teach one a new way of looking at language—one that does not imprison one within confusion.

In neither case would such instruction take the form of propositions bound together into syllogisms—into, that is, an argument for some thesis. Rather, such instruction would take the form mostly of observations—observations not themselves controversial. However, these observations would be set in a new context: implied in their presentation would be a new way of *looking* at them—a new way of *interpreting* oneself.

Therapeutic philosophy cannot *prove* to one that one is in the grip of linguistic confusion any more than psychoanalysis can *prove* to one that one subconsciously desires to kill one’s father and marry one’s mother. The search for alternative interpretations—that is, denial—is always possible. But each therapy can show that its new interpretation explains much that previously seemed utterly mysterious. The only *argument* that one is in the grip of the Oedipus Complex would be that interpreting oneself in this way renders one’s actions less mysterious—and so gives one the power to stop doing them; just so, the only *argument* that one is in the grip of linguistic confusion would be that interpreting oneself in this way renders one’s questions less mysterious—and so gives one the power to stop asking them.
6.1.4. The Thesis

What, then, is this new way of interpreting oneself—of interpreting, specifically, the language that one speaks? Though it is not entirely clear that the *Investigations* ever states its thesis explicitly, the best candidate is this:

For a *large* class of cases of the employment of the word “meaning”—though not for *all*—this word can be explained this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.\(^{228}\)

This thesis, if it is that, is often interpreted as a *theory* of meaning. But such an interpretation runs the risk of missing the point entirely. For the thesis that meaning is use should not be *controversial*: it is not the discovery that, despite our expectations, the meaning of each word is identical to its *use* rather than to something else. The thesis is, rather, a *reminder* of something that is, in hindsight, obvious: language is used in many ways—too many, it seems, for any one theory of meaning to find much purchase.

Consider a parallel thesis: to assert that some proposition is true is to assert nothing more than that proposition. This thesis is often interpreted as a *theory* of truth—indeed, is usually *called* the “Deflationary Theory of Truth.” But such an interpretation runs the risk of missing the point entirely. For the thesis should not be *controversial*: it is not the discovery that, despite our expectations, asserting that some proposition is true is identical to asserting that proposition—rather than to, say, denying that proposition. The thesis is, rather, a *reminder* of something that is in hindsight obvious: propositions are

evaluated in many ways—too many, it seems, for any one theory of truth to find much purchase.

A better interpretation of the above thesis about truth would be, therefore, the authentically deflationary one that there is nothing more to knowing what it would mean for a given proposition to be true than knowing how to evaluate its truth. Just so, a better interpretation of the thesis about meaning would be the deflationary one that there is nothing more to knowing the meaning of a given word than knowing how to use it. This is, of course, less a theory of meaning than it is a rejection of every theory of meaning—or at least of every theory of meaning that would apply itself to all of language: overall, all that one can say is that words mean whatever they do—whatever they happen to be used to mean—and it is confusion to seek something somehow deeper than this. 229

6.2. The Augustinian Picture

The thesis that meaning is use should be interpreted, then, in a deflationary way—as a rejection of every theory of meaning. That this is the right interpretation becomes clearer when one contrasts that thesis with its chief competitor—a highly inflationary theory of meaning. Indeed, each thesis can be interpreted rightly only in contrast with its competitor—as Wittgenstein himself suggests:

Four years ago... I had occasion to reread my first book (the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus) and to explain its ideas. Then it suddenly seemed to me that I should publish those old ideas and the new ones [of the Philosophical Investigations] together: that the latter could be seen in the

229 For this interpretation of the thesis that meaning is use, I am indebted again to Curtis Franks.
right light only by contrast with and against the background of my older way of thinking.\textsuperscript{230}

What, then, was this older way of thinking? In order to exhibit it, Wittgenstein quotes a text that implies it. Surprisingly, however, this text is not his own \textit{Tractatus} but rather the \textit{Confessions} of Saint Augustine:

> When grown-ups named some object and at the same time turned towards it, I perceived this, and I grasped that the thing was signified by the sound they uttered, since they meant to point \textit{it} out. This, however, I gathered from their gestures, the natural language of all peoples, the language that by means of facial expression and the play of eyes, of the movements of the limbs and the tone of voice, indicates the affections of the soul when it desires, or clings to, or rejects, or recoils from, something. In this way, little by little, I learnt to understand what things the words, which I heard uttered in their respective places in various sentences, signified.\textsuperscript{231}

Perhaps Wittgenstein quotes the \textit{Confessions} rather than his own \textit{Tractatus} in order to show that he is not the only philosopher to have fallen into this picture of language—that, indeed, even the best philosophers have fallen into it. In any case, Wittgenstein summarizes Augustine thus:

> The words in language name objects—sentences are combinations of such names.—In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.\textsuperscript{232}

Call this the “Augustinian Picture of Language.”\textsuperscript{233} At first, it seems almost tautological: what else \textit{could} the meaning of a word be except the object for which it stands? But the


\textsuperscript{233} MacIntyre argues that Wittgenstein in fact misunderstood Augustine—specifically, that Wittgenstein was wrong to interpret this passage as an articulation of Augustine’s full picture of language: “Wittgenstein, mistakenly thinking himself to be repudiating Augustine’s view of ostensive learning, in fact
feeling that it is tautologous derives, Wittgenstein suggests, from the particular way that
the Augustinian Picture prompts one to evaluate it:

Someone who describes… language in this way is, I believe, thinking
primarily of nouns like “table,” “chair,” “bread,” and of people’s names,
only secondarily of the names of certain actions and properties; and of the
remaining kinds of words as something that will take care of itself.\(^2^{34}\)

The Augustinian Picture seems almost tautological only because one first reads it and
second looks to language to confirm or disconfirm it: after reading the Augustinian
Picture, one inevitably looks to those aspects of language that most resemble it—nouns.
Even the question above—superficially rhetorical—carries this implicit bias: to ask
“What else could be the meaning of a word except the object for which it stands?” is
already to imply that there is an object—a meaning—correlated to each word.

The feeling that it is tautologous makes it difficult to see the point of the
Augustinian Picture. Perhaps that point can be captured in language that is practical
rather than theoretical: language, the Augustinian Picture assumes, is a tool—one meant
to represent the world. And so words are meaningful insofar as they refer, or at least try
and fail to refer, to objects in the world. Words that do not even try to represent are like
broken tools: they are meaningless—are, that is, without practical application.

Despite the name it is typically given, the Augustinian Picture of Language had
been a cornerstone of philosophy long before his time. Plato sometimes seems to adopt
it—indeed, in a fairly radical version:

We are... accustomed to set down some one particular form for each of the particular “manys” to which we apply the same name... For example... there are surely many couches and tables... But as for ideas for these furnishings, there are presumably two, one of couch, one of table.235

According to Plato—or, at any rate, to the Socrates of Plato—words are indeed correlated with objects. Some are correlated with one and only one object: “Socrates,” for example, is correlated with Socrates—and he is certainly one of a kind. However, many words seem to be correlated with more than one object: we apply “couch” and “table,” for example, to indefinitely many couches and tables. Yet Socrates suggests that this is misleading: in fact, there must exist singular objects—the Couch and the Table, respectively—with which “couch” and “table” are correlated.236

The enthymeme in this argument is obvious: however things seem, no word can be correlated with a plurality of objects—similar in indefinitely many ways but also dissimilar in indefinitely many ways. For then the meaning of the word—its referent—would contradict itself; reference would be impossible. Rather, every word must be correlated with one and only one object; only thus can meanings attain the identity to themselves, the “crystalline purity,”237 that they must have.

235 Plato, Republic 596a–596b.

236 One might see his Parmenides as an admission by Plato that it is a confusion to see the Forms as particular objects: the Forms are supposed to explain particular objects—and so, were they are themselves particular objects, they too would stand in need of explanation. One should therefore see the Forms not as paradigms of particular objects but rather as aspects of particular objects. This is, of course, precisely the point that Plato has his Eleatic Visitor make in the Sophist; Aristotle later echoes it. See Plato, Parmenides and Sophist, and Aristotle, Sophistical Refutations, trans. W. A. Pickard-Cambridge, in The Complete Works of Aristotle, vol. 1, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 178b37–179a10.

6.2.1. The *Tractatus*

Though the Theory of the Forms has gone in and out of fashion—depending largely, it seems, on how charitable its interpreters were willing to be at any given time—the Augustinian Picture underlying it has endured for millennia. A more recent radicalization of that Picture is the Principle of Verification—the endorsement of which was the criterion for membership, more or less, in the Vienna Circle:

A sentence [has] literal meaning if and only if it [is] either analytic or empirically verifiable.\(^{238}\)

As is clear from the Theory of Forms, the Principle of Verification is not the only possible radicalization of the Augustinian Picture: one might hold that words are meaningful only insofar as they refer *without* holding that words are meaningful only insofar as they refer to the objects of physics, chemistry, and biology. Nonetheless, the *Tractatus* makes it clear that this is exactly what Wittgenstein holds:

The right method of philosophy would be this. To say nothing except what can be said, *i.e.* the propositions of natural science, *i.e.* something that has nothing to do with philosophy: and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions. This method would be unsatisfying to the other—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—but it would be the only strictly correct method.\(^{239}\)

The point of language is, then, to represent the world—specifically, in one of the few ways canonized by natural science.


\(^{239}\) Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, § 6.5.3.
But another way to put this—albeit one that would have made many in the Vienna Circle uncomfortable—is that *our* point is to represent the world: to be rational animals is primarily to be animals who construct representations—who go around, in other words, telling one another how things are. Our ethical paradigm is, or should be, the scientist—the one who works full-time, who gets paid, to tell his or her fellows how things are. Other ways of talking—other language-games—are somehow *wrong*: they do not express who we really are—or, if they do, they do so in a way so confused as to be counterproductive.

Put like this, the Augustinian Picture sounds a bit silly—not least because it forbids its own expression: if we should not do anything with our words but describe the world, then we certainly should not use our words to say so. Indeed, all talk of the normative—of how things should be, rather than of how they happen to be—is apparently illegitimate:

All propositions are of equal value.
The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. *In* it there is no value—and if there were, it would be of no value.
If there is a value which is of value, it must lie outside all happening and being-so. For all happening and being-so is accidental. What makes it non-accidental cannot lie *in* the world, for otherwise this would again be accidental.
It must lie outside the world.
Hence also there can be no ethical propositions.
Propositions cannot express anything higher.  

Of course, the Vienna Circle would hardly have been comfortable with the suggestion that what *really* matters is something utterly beyond the grasp of natural science. In hindsight, one might note that it is somewhat surprising that the Vienna Circle took

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Wittgenstein to be one of their own: one raised in the shadow of Johannes Brahms and Gustav Klimt might develop a passion for science, but he could hardly be expected to count it the only thing worth doing.\textsuperscript{241}

But there is a deeper problem here—one as subtle as it is profound: if words are meaningful only when they attempt to represent the world, then they are not meaningful when they implore us to use them only to represent the world. The \textit{Tractatus} is therefore nonsensical on its own account. To his credit, Wittgenstein is aware of this problem:

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)

He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.\textsuperscript{242}

One can see in this the precursor to the \textit{Investigations’} insistence that philosophy be therapeutic: the \textit{Tractatus} seeks, on its own admission, to achieve something more—or, better, something else—than the acceptance of its assertions. The \textit{Tractatus} seeks to transform those who read it—to the point that they are no longer compelled to ask themselves questions that are meaningless. The \textit{Tractatus} seeks, then, the very thing that the \textit{Investigations} would seek decades later.

The difference between the two texts is that the \textit{Tractatus} cannot succeed: if the \textit{Tractatus} is nonsensical on its own account—really and truly nonsensical—then so is its demand that one accept its peculiar distinction between sense and nonsense. To abandon all talk of the normative would be to come to think that one did not have, and could not have had, a reason to do so—and thus to render one incomprehensible to oneself. To


\textsuperscript{242} Wittgenstein, \textit{Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus}, § 6.5.4.
climb the ladder would be to arrive at a height that would reveal the ladder, and even the climb, as illusory: one would find oneself suddenly walking on a plain, vast and barren and cold.

Both the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* face the Paradox of Quietism: each text insists that its readers reject a certain way of talking—a way of talking the rejection of which removes the grounds for its rejection. The *Investigations* can dissolve the Paradox: a reader of the *Investigations* might come to see that dogmatic philosophy, though nonsensical in itself, has its place within a larger dialectic. However, the *Tractatus* cannot dissolve the Paradox in the same way: a reader of the *Tractatus* cannot come to see talk of the normative, though nonsensical in itself, as having a place within a larger dialectic—for talk of any dialectic is talk of the normative.

To put the point in another way: while the quietism of the *Investigations* is a *practical* quietism, the quietism of the *Tractatus* is a *theoretical* quietism. The quietism of the *Tractatus* is therefore paradoxical in a way that the quietism of the *Investigations* is not: two contradictory *propositions* cannot both be part of the same theory, but two contradictory *actions* can be part of the same *practice*—insofar as practice, unlike theory, is extended over time.

6.2.2. Objections

In any case, there are deeper objections to the Augustinian Picture.
On the one hand, the *Tractatus* posits many facts and at least as many propositions as there are facts: after all, each proposition is such insofar as it succeeds or fails to represent some fact. On the other hand, the *Tractatus* also insists that all propositions and all facts have a foundation in common—a foundation that allows propositions to represent, or at least fail to represent, facts.

A map, for all of its symbolism, must extend in two spatial dimensions—not symbolically, but actually—in order to represent the surface of the earth; just so, every proposition must be structured according to the grammar of functions and their objects in order to represent a world of things and their properties. Wittgenstein calls this grammar “logical form”:

Propositions can represent the whole of reality, but they cannot represent what they must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it—the logical form.
To be able to represent the logical form, we should have to be able to put ourselves with the propositions outside logic, that is outside the world.
Propositions cannot represent the logical form: this mirrors itself in the propositions.
That which mirrors itself in language, language cannot represent.
That which expresses *itself* in language, we cannot express by language.
The propositions *show* the logical form of reality.
They exhibit it.\(^{243}\)

There is indeed an insight here: if one’s student had no understanding whatsoever of grammar, one could not *tell* one’s student how to understand it—for understanding that very explanation would require understanding its grammar. Just so, one can define conjunction in terms of negation and disjunction, but one cannot define the very idea of

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logical operators: one can only show them—give examples of their use in propositions—
until one’s student grasps their use, until he or she says “‘Now I can go on.’”244

But Wittgenstein does not stop at this point. He suggests that logical form—the
ability of propositions to represent, and the ability of facts to be represented—is mystical,
is indeed divine:

How the world is, is completely indifferent for what is higher. God does
not reveal himself in the world…
Not how the world is, is the mystical, but that it is…
There is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself; it is mystical.245

Though no particular proposition asserts logical form, every proposition expresses
logical form: logical form is the grammar that each proposition must assume in order to
represent the world—to be a proposition at all. Just so, though no particular fact is
mystical, every fact expresses the mystical: that there are any facts rather than none is
something beyond the explanation of facts. One might conclude that Wittgenstein
identifies logical form with the mystical.

Though it is somewhat speculative, one might also conclude that Wittgenstein
identifies logical form with value—since, after all, we can represent neither in our words.
Though he writes that logical form “shows itself” in the world while value “lies outside
the world,” these seem not two different claims but rather two different expressions for
the same insight: the divine is utterly immanent yet also utterly transcendent. And indeed,
Wittgenstein seems to identify value with the divine:

What is good is also divine. Queer as it sounds, that sums up my ethics.246

244 Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, § 151.

245 Wittgenstein, Tractatus, §§ 6.4.3.2–6.4.3.2.1, 6.5.2.2.
It does sound queer. But what, after all, is the thesis of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*? In this text, at least, Wittgenstein is explicit:

> What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent.  

For all of its poetry, this thesis might seem somewhat disappointing—might seem, indeed, downright tautological. For the interesting question is, presumably, that of *whereof* one cannot speak: what *is* it, exactly, that our words inevitably fail to capture?

In hindsight, though, the answer is obvious: one cannot speak of God. Indeed, for all of its talk of propositions, the *Tractatus* is a book about God. It speaks of propositions only so that its readers might resist the inevitable temptation to make idols of them.

6.2.2.1. An *A Posteriori* Objection

However plausible this theological interpretation of logical form is, the doctrine itself misses the mark. Though every map of the surface of the earth must share the “grammar” of extension in two spatial dimensions, this does not mean that everything worth writing down is a map; just so, there is no *one* grammar that all meaningful expressions share—nor is there, if facts are what we express in our meaningful expressions, any one “grammar” that all facts share. To deny this is to deny that most of the expressions that we take to be meaningful are in fact meaningful:

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Consider the variety of language-games in the following examples, and in others:

- Giving orders, and acting on them—
- Describing an object by its appearance, or by its measurements—
- Constructing an object from a description (a drawing)—
- Reporting an event—
- Speculating about the event—
- Forming and testing a hypothesis—
- Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams—
- Making up a story; and reading one—
- Acting in a play—
- Singing rounds—
- Guessing riddles—
- Cracking a joke; telling one—
- Solving a problem in applied arithmetic—
- Translating from one language into another—
- Requesting, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.

—It is interesting to compare the diversity of the tools of language and of the ways they are used, the diversity of kinds of word and sentence, with what logicians have said about the structure of language. (This includes the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.)

Between finishing the *Tractatus* and beginning the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein seems to have adopted a certain empiricism—one more or less the opposite of the “empiricism” of the Vienna Circle: his was an empiricism demanding that we take seriously life as we live it, not just life as scientists live it during their working hours. For to be rational animals is to have found countless things to do with our words—not just science but poetry, prayer, and even philosophy.

Such empiricism is demanded by the practical quietism of the *Investigations*. Whatever its other implications, said quietism certainly demands that we accept ordinary language as it is rather than reforming it to meet some standard that we bring to it. But why did Wittgenstein transition from the theoretical quietism of the *Tractatus* to the

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practical quietism of the *Investigations*? The most obvious suggestion is that he carried the quietism of the *Tractatus* to its logical conclusion: if one should not speak of the normative, then one should not insist that one should not speak in certain ways. One should instead take ordinary language as it is—which is exactly what the *Investigations* strives to do.

### 6.2.2.2. An *A Priori* Objection

We are not all scientists. But this is not just an arbitrary fact—not just, in other words, something that happens to be the case: it is difficult to see how we *could* all be scientists. For to be even remotely like what we are—to be, that is, rational animals—seems to require that those of us who are scientists live and work within a context much broader than themselves. Most obviously, scientists need an economy to sustain them, families and schools to raise them, a military to protect them—in short, a whole institutional context that allows them to exist at all. More significantly, perhaps, they need a *culture*—a way of understanding the world, and themselves, that provides them with the intellectual context to do what they do: the construction and evaluation of scientific theories inevitably draws upon a way of understanding the world before all scientific reflection—and, for that matter, a way of understanding oneself such that one is motivated to do science in the first place.

Just so, there is a deeper objection to the Augustinian Picture than its mere failure to fit the facts:
Let us imagine a language for which the description given by Augustine is right: the language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass him the stones and to do so in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they make use of a language consisting of the words “block,” “pillar,” “slab,” “beam.” A calls them out; B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call.—Conceive of this as a complete primitive language. 

Call this the “Builder’s Language.” Ignore for a moment that it is too simple to exist on its own—as Wittgenstein notes, it would need to be supplemented by at least some practice of instruction—and focus instead on its deeper problem: though the Builder’s Language is born of the attempt to construct a language for which the Augustinian Picture is the right one, this attempt inevitably fails. Sure, there is a sense in which the Builder’s Language is exactly described by the Augustinian Picture: there are, in this language, only four words—and each of them represents an object, or at any rate a kind of object. But it is exactly for this reason that there is a sense in which the Builder’s Language is exactly misdescribed by the Augustinian Picture: in this language with only four words, there is no difference between a word that represents an object and one that commands some action toward that object.

Not only is the Augustinian Picture false of our language, then, it is false of every language—even one designed specifically to accommodate it. For the force of the Augustinian Picture relies upon its contrast with a wider context: the claim that some words represent objects is substantive only insofar as other words do other things, such as command.

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251 For this understanding of Wittgenstein’s point, I am indebted yet again to Curtis Franks.
6.2.2.3. A Motivation Objection

Again, there is a sense in which the Augustinian Picture is correct of the Builder’s Language: one may look at the four words of the language as representing objects—just as one may look at the same four words as commands to bring those objects. But this is presumably not the point of the Augustinian Picture: if it is to be substantive, its point must be that one should look at those four words as representing objects. Presumably, Saint Augustine advances his Picture because he takes it as the best way—even if it turns out not to be the only way—to look at language.

Again, many words resist interpretation as names: for example, whatever their relation to objects, commands seem not to represent those objects. Of course, one could just stipulate that all words represent objects—that commands “represent,” for example, desires for objects. But Wittgenstein anticipates this suggestion:

Think of the tools in a toolbox: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screwdriver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws.—The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects… Suppose someone said, “All tools serve to modify something. So, a hammer modifies the position of a nail, a saw the shape of a board, and so on.”—And what is modified by a rule, a glue-pot and nails?—“Our knowledge of a thing’s length, the temperature of the glue, and the solidity of a box.”—Would anything be gained by this assimilation of expressions?\

If one asserts of all tools that each modifies some object, one does so not because one seeks to redefine “modify some object” but rather because one seeks to assert something substantive about all tools—in effect, that there are many categories of tools but that all

but one of these categories, that of object-modifiers, is unoccupied. In defending one’s thesis against the charge of absurdity, however, one will find oneself more and more redefining “modify some object” in an utterly inconvenient way—and less and less advancing a substantial claim. Just so, philosophers are only motivated to assert the Augustinian Picture insofar as they take themselves to be making a substantive assertion—in effect, that there are many categories of words but that all but one of these categories, that of names, is unoccupied. In defending the Augustinian Picture against the charge of absurdity, however, one will find oneself more and more redefining “represent some object” in an utterly inconvenient way—and less and less advancing a substantive claim. Stephen Mulhall makes just this point:

The problem with Augustine’s picture is therefore not that it makes a substantial claim about language as a whole that turns out to be true only of some subset of language (applying happily to nouns and proper names, less happily to verbs and adjectives, and flatly inapplicable elsewhere). It is instead that it makes what appears to be a substantial claim about language as a whole that turns out to lack any substance whatever. If the Augustinian’s claim that all words are names employs the word “name” in its ordinary sense, then it has a plain content, but it is also so self-evidently false that it makes little sense to imagine it being advanced by mistake… whereas if his words are read as advocating the introduction of a regimented form of description of word-meaning, then it fails to advance a substantive claim at all.253

For the Augustinian Picture to be true, it would have to be empty; for the Augustinian Picture to be substantive, it would have to be false. Saint Augustine is motivated to advance his Picture only because he is confused: he interprets it simultaneously as a thesis about language and as a suggestion about how we might talk about language. It is only because he derives the content of his Picture from its first interpretation and the

*plausibility* of his Picture from its second interpretation that he is motivated to advance it at all:

He has suffered a hallucination of sense; he has maintained his conviction of saying something self-evidently true only because his utterance hovers between two very different possibilities of sense or meaning without ever actualizing either. Once the necessity of separating out those two possibilities is made clear to him, he will see that there is nothing here to be said—no claim of the kind he took himself to be making; and then his attraction to this form of words will wither away, his interests will undergo a reorientation. He will, in other words, have begun to turn away from the picture that fascinated him.²⁵⁴

Mulhall makes reference here to what might as well be Wittgenstein’s final statement on the Augustinian Picture:

One thinks that one is tracing nature over and over again, [but] one is merely tracing round the frame though which we look at it. [For] a *picture* held us captive. And we couldn’t get outside it, for it lay in our language, and language seemed only to repeat it to us inexorably.²⁵⁵

Within this metaphor is an etiology of our confusion. Ordinary language, Wittgenstein suggests, implies a picture of itself: to ask a question of language is already to deploy language. And this implicit picture is misleading: to ask “What is the meaning of this word?” is, again, to imply that there is some *object*, its meaning, to which the word corresponds. Yet this seems the inevitable way to ask the question:

The decisive movement in the conjuring trick has been made, and it was the very one that seemed to us quite innocent.²⁵⁶

It is as though each of us was born with a frame of rose-colored glass before our eyes: not only would everything look rosy, the frames of glass before the eyes of our fellows would be, in effect, invisible to us. It might never occur to us that what seemed the objective

²⁵⁴ Mulhall, 92–93.


color of the world would be, in fact, an artifact of our perspective on the world—or that we might decide to inhabit other perspectives altogether.

And yet there is a point at which this metaphor breaks down: while one can look upon nature without any frame at all—if “frame” is interpreted literally—one cannot understand language except through language. Indeed, some picture or other of language is inevitable: since language is defined by recursion,\textsuperscript{257} language would not be language if it could not articulate some picture of itself. To forsake every explicit picture of language is, therefore, just to accept whatever picture of itself ordinary language implies—and this implicit picture is, again, deeply misleading. We should therefore articulate some picture—call it the “Wittgensteinian Picture”—of language, even if we should not attempt to refine that picture into a theory of meaning.

6.3. The Wittgensteinian Picture

What, then, is the Wittgensteinian Picture of Language? If the thesis that meaning is use is to be interpreted not as a theory of meaning but rather as a rejection of every theory of meaning—as a reminder that language is used in too many ways for theories of meaning to find much purchase—then philosophical analysis of the thesis will not answer the question. Rather, only philosophical investigation—in other words, reflective sociology—will answer it.

Reflective sociology is at its heart empirical: it will be reflective only to the extent that reflection strengthens its understanding of the facts about language in use. Indeed, reflective sociology will reject reflection to the extent that reflection leads it to prejudge and thus misunderstand the facts about language use:

Consider, for example, the activities that we call “games.” I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, athletic games, and so on. What is common to them all? —Don’t say: “They must have something in common, or they would not be called ‘games’”—but look and see whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them, you won’t see something that is common to all, but similarities, affinities, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don’t think, but look!258

This is reflective sociology in action: it is just obvious, upon investigation of the games that people in fact play, that there is no one property that all and only games share. This does not mean, of course, that “game” cannot be defined:

Playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.259

Assume that this definition—constructed by Bernard Suits, who takes it to refute Wittgenstein—is correct: assume that it applies to all and only games. Nonetheless, it does not refute Wittgenstein: the question is not whether “game” can be defined but rather whether its definition is substantive—whether, that is, it should be taken as a theory of games.

Recall that the thesis that meaning is use should not be taken as a theory of meaning: the thesis is not the discovery that, contrary to our expectations, the meaning of a word is identical to its use rather than to something else. In the same way, the definition


of “game” should not be taken as a *theory* of games: the thesis is not the *discovery* that, contrary to our expectations, to play a game is to attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles—rather than, say, necessary ones. The definition is, rather, a *reminder* of something that is, in hindsight, obvious: games are played in many ways—too many, it seems, for any one theory of their rules to find much purchase.

The *substantive* question would be this one: in what way are the obstacles unnecessary? But to *this* question, there is no one answer: the way in which it is unnecessary to move golf balls exclusively with clubs is quite different from the way in which it is unnecessary to move bishops exclusively along diagonals. In both cases, granted, one would not be *playing* the relevant game if one did not embrace the unnecessary obstacle: to move golf balls by hand, or to move bishops horizontally and vertically, is to fail to play the relevant game. But to note this is to note only that games are defined by rules that, broadly, could have been otherwise; *how the rules in fact are* defies summary.

The way in which a player of croquet must seek to block his or her opponent is entirely different from the way in which that player of croquet must move balls with a club: in the first way, croquet resembles chess more than golf, but in the second way, croquet resembles golf more than chess. Thus it is, Wittgenstein suggests, with games generally—for they are linked to one another by the similarities among the unnecessary obstacles that define them:

I can think of no better expression to characterize these than “family resemblances”; for the various resemblances between members of a family—build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, and so on and
so forth—overlap and criss-cross in the same way.—And I shall say: “games” form a family.\textsuperscript{260}

Wittgenstein offers games as his paradigm of a family-resemblance concept—a concept defined not by any set of necessary and sufficient conditions but rather by the various similarities among its objects. That Wittgenstein would offer a paradigm of family-resemblance concepts suggests that family-resemblance concept is \textit{itself} a family-resemblance concept—and, indeed, the definition of “family-resemblance concept” as “a concept defined by the various similarities among its objects” is not particularly substantive: presumably, the many kinds of similarity that might constitute family-resemblance concepts are too various for any definition of them—any \textit{theory} of family-resemblance concepts—to find much purchase. But Wittgenstein does not himself draw this conclusion.

In a way, of course, the term “family-resemblance concept” is inapt: while the members of a biological family might well resemble one another in various ways—my sister and I might share our mother’s eyes, for example, even as my brother and I share our father’s nose—such overlapping resemblances are, in fact, determined by what is \textit{actually} definitive of a family—identical ancestry, resulting in \textit{roughly} identical genetic inheritance. This might lead one to suspect that a given family-resemblance concept is also defined, ultimately, not by overlapping resemblances among its objects but rather by the set of necessary and sufficient conditions that determine those resemblances to overlap as they do. But Wittgenstein insists that this is not so:

\begin{quote}
We extend our concept… as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread resides not in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres. But if
\end{quote}

someone wanted to say, “So there is something common to all these constructions—namely, the disjunction of all their common properties”—I’d reply: Now you are only playing with a word. One might as well say, “There is a Something that runs through the whole thread—namely, the continuous overlapping of these fibres.”

Some might protest that the boundaries of family-resemblance concepts are inevitably “fuzzy”—just as the ends of a thread are often fuzzy: whatever the overlapping similarities that define a family-resemblance concept, there will be some objects that slightly resemble the paradigmatic objects of the concept. Wittgenstein admits this objection only to challenge its premise—that a concept with “fuzzy” boundaries is any less legitimate than a thread with fuzzy ends:

Isn’t [a concept] that isn’t sharp often just what we need? Frege compares a concept to a region, and says that a region without clear boundaries can’t be called a region at all. This presumably means that we can’t do anything with it.—But is it senseless to say “Stay roughly here”? Imagine that I were standing with someone in a city square and said that. As I say it, I do not bother drawing any boundary, but just make a pointing gesture—as if I were indicating a particular spot. And this is just how one might explain what a game is.

If we are serious about doing philosophical investigation rather than philosophical analysis, then we should take seriously the human condition as it is lived. And that condition is… well, “fuzzy”: many are the situations in which absolute precision would be counterproductive, even absurd—and, since our words are inevitably practical, they cannot but avoid such precision. Insofar as dogmatic philosophy misunderstands this—insofar as, like the Tractatus, it seeks to limit our words to what can be said clearly—it misses the point:


We don’t want to refine or complete the system of rules for the use of our words in unheard-of ways. For the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed complete clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should completely disappear.\textsuperscript{263}

Many things can be said only with unclarity—if “unclarity” means “lack of precision.” But such unclarity is necessary if our words are to be clear—if “clear” means “usable.” Insofar as philosophical analysis prompts us to forget this, it is the task of philosophical investigation to remind us of it.

6.3.1. Language-Games

What does philosophical investigation reveal, then, regarding language in use? Is reference, as the Augustinian Picture suggests, the only way—or even the paradigmatic way—in which we deploy our words? Does language only describes things—how they might be, how they are, and how they should be? Far from it, Wittgenstein insists:

How many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question and command?—There are countless kinds; countless different kinds of use of all the things we call “signs,” “words,” “sentences.”\textsuperscript{264}

It was not accidental that Wittgenstein chose games as his paradigm of a family-resemblance concept: philosophical investigation reveals that our language is used in too many ways for any one theory of meaning to find much purchase—just as it reveals that games are played in too many ways for any one theory of their rules to find much purchase. \textit{Language is therefore, in one respect, like games}: words are meaningful

\textsuperscript{263} Wittgenstein, \textit{Philosophical Investigations}, § 133.

insofar as they are used according to the rules definitive of particular linguistic situations, just as moves are legitimate insofar as they are made according to the rules definitive of particular games—but the linguistic situations, like the games, are too diverse for any one list of rules to capture them.

Since the boundaries of family-resemblance concepts are inevitably fuzzy, we might extend the boundaries of the family-resemblance concept of game so that linguistic situations count as games. Wittgenstein, of course, does precisely this: what I have called “linguistic situations” he calls “language-games.”

6.3.1.1. Historicism

Language-games differ not only from one another but also from themselves—that is, over time:

[The] diversity [of language-games] is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten.265

That language-games change is almost a matter of definition: the Wittgensteinian Picture reinterprets our experience such that scientific theories are no more paradigmatic of language than are jokes and songs—such that, at the limit, “language” denotes all those aspects of the human condition that are cultural. Insofar as human culture changes over time, therefore, so do language-games; trivially, human culture does change over time—especially, it seems, within those societies that have invented agriculture.

Though Wittgenstein does not articulate the ways in which particular language-games have changed over time, he offers mathematics as an example of a language-game that has thus changed:

We can get a rough picture… from the changes in mathematics.\textsuperscript{266}

Wittgenstein suggests mathematics as a picture, however rough, of linguistic change because the history of mathematics is so clear—indeed, is mirrored in the way in which we are taught mathematics. Calculus, for example, was an extension of analytic geometry, which was an extension of algebra, which was an extension of arithmetic; each, at its introduction, prompted the reinterpretation of existing mathematical practice. We experience these reinterpretations as we extend our understanding from arithmetic to algebra to analytic geometry to calculus; our final understanding of mathematics is as it is only because of the history—simultaneously ontogenetic and phylogenetic—that has wrought that understanding.

In one way, the history of mathematics is like the history of any other language-game: its course was neither inevitable nor arbitrary. Just as chess could have developed without bishops—without any alteration of its other rules—mathematics could have developed differently: mathematicians could have ignored the calculus of Newton and Leibniz without changing the rules of arithmetic, algebra, or analytic geometry. But just as there was a reason that chess developed with bishops—the game would have been less interesting without pieces that could move indefinitely far, but only diagonally—there were reasons that mathematics developed as it did: once one can represent geometrical

\textsuperscript{266} Wittgenstein, \textit{Philosophical Investigations}, § 23.
constructions algebraically—in, that is, maximal abstraction—an equally abstract way to compute their areas becomes profoundly useful.

Without bishops, chess would have been less useful for entertainment—would have been, that is, less interesting. But things are not interesting or uninteresting in themselves: they are only interesting or uninteresting to us. Had we achieved only the intelligence of young children, chess would have developed to look rather more like checkers—without, that is, any differences among the pieces at all. Just so, were we pelagic like whales, any game played in merely two dimensions might seem hopelessly childish—rather as checkers does to us. It is the task of reflective sociology, Wittgenstein suggests, to offer this kind of explanation—to explain how our language-games are by reference to how we are:

What we are supplying are really remarks on the natural history of human beings; not curiosities, however, but facts that no one has doubted, which have escaped notice only because they are always before our eyes.267

That almost all of us have ten fingers is such a remark on our natural history: that most of us count in decimal rather than binary is clearly not arbitrary, but it is also could have been different—had we been different. For all of its obviousness, however, the link between having ten fingers and counting in decimal has often been overlooked—as the millennia of numerological significance attributed to the number ten attests.

Counting in binary would not, of course, have been dramatically different from counting in decimal: the decision of arithmetical base is mathematically arbitrary. Nonetheless, it might be that mathematics has the least arbitrary history of any of our language-games: for mathematics to be radically different—for addition not to be

intuitively associative, for example—we would likely have to be so different that we would have trouble recognizing ourselves at all.

6.3.1.2. Antifoundationalism

In one way, the Wittgensteinian Picture blurs the distinctions among language-games: natural science, joking, and singing are not different in kind, insofar as they are all equally legitimate—equally paradigmatic examples of language in use. In another way, however, the Wittgensteinian Picture sharpens the distinctions among language-games: natural science, joking, and singing are different in kind, insofar as each is, well, a different language-game—one defined by rules peculiar to it alone. There is in this no contradiction: since our language-games are all equally legitimate—as philosophy must admit if it is not to reform our language—no language-game depends for its justification on others.

Mathematics offers only a rough picture of linguistic change because certain extensions of mathematics—especially those initiated by Frege and Russell, the teachers of Wittgenstein—are often taken to be justifications of previous mathematics: it is as though we were not really sure that two and two make four until Peano offered us his axioms. Put like this, a justificatory interpretation of the foundations of mathematics sounds slightly silly—and, indeed, Wittgenstein makes clear that he considers it a mistake:

What does mathematics need a foundation for? It no more needs one, I believe, than [do other] propositions... What mathematical propositions

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do stand in need of is a clarification of their grammar, just as do... other propositions.\textsuperscript{268}

To articulate the grammar of any language is to offer a \textit{clarification}, not a \textit{justification}, of that language. Thus the “foundations” of mathematics are a \textit{clarification}, not a \textit{justification}, of mathematics:

The mathematical problems of what is called foundations are no more the foundation of mathematics for us than the painted rock is the support of a painted tower.\textsuperscript{269}

Mathematics is—like all of language—our construction: it has the rules that it does because we decided, consciously or not, that it would. Though our decisions were not arbitrary, they are only \textit{justified} insofar as their product meets our needs: since mathematics was \textit{our} construction, there is no other authority to whom to appeal. And whether or not arithmetic can be derived from some set of axioms is not relevant to whether arithmetic meets our needs.\textsuperscript{270}


\begin{flushleft}\textsuperscript{269} Wittgenstein, \textit{Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics}, § 7.16.\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}\textsuperscript{270} Mark Steiner points out that Wittgenstein—in his \textit{Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics}, a work philosophically continuous with his \textit{Investigations}—is wrong to attack Gödel’s Theorem. For Gödel proved only that, within mathematics, a certain proposition is such that neither it nor its denial can be proven, but Wittgenstein apparently misinterpreted Gödel’s proof as somehow depending upon Gödel’s controversial interpretation of it—that, within mathematics, a certain proposition is \textit{true} and nonetheless not provable; Wittgenstein insisted only that “truth” had no meaning in such a context—because it had no use. Ironically, Steiner notes, Gödel’s Theorem—stripped of Gödel’s own interpretation of it—is profoundly \textit{congenial} to the Wittgensteinian Picture of Language: Wittgenstein insists that mathematics \textit{need} not be derived from any foundation, while Gödel proved that mathematics \textit{cannot} be derived from any foundation. See Mark Steiner, “Wittgenstein as His Own Worst Enemy: The Case of Gödel’s Theorem,” \textit{Philosophia Mathematica} 9, no. 3 (2001): 257–279.\end{flushleft}
6.3.1.3. A Case Study

Just so, whether the existence of God can be proved philosophically is not relevant to whether prayer meets our needs. Questioning the existence of God is no more a “move” within prayer than is demonstrating the associativity of addition a “move” within arithmetic. Or, rather, insofar as questioning the existence of God is a move in prayer—since one might ask, in the depths of despair, whether anyone is listening—the relevant countermove is not the Ontological Argument but rather the insight that silence too can bear grace. Perhaps it is this insight that Wittgenstein means to capture near the conclusion of his *Tractatus*:

> The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of this problem. (Is not this the reason why men to whom after long doubting the sense of life became clear, could not then say wherein this sense consisted?)

Perhaps the dark night of the soul does not so much transition gradually into day as dissolve in sudden blinding light: perhaps one overcomes spiritual dryness when one realizes that it is an illusion. When one realizes, in other words, that God has been present to one all along—not in the seeking of him but rather in the living of everyday life. Not in the theoretical, that is, but in the practical.

Perhaps one might salvage a similar insight from the otherwise paradoxical penultimate section of the *Tractatus*: though Wittgenstein would not come to interpret his own words in this way until he wrote the *Investigations*, to climb the ladder is to reveal the ladder and even the climb as illusory—to realize, in other words, that one has been

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speaking ordinary language all along, even if one had been preoccupied by the time that one spent theorizing. Spiritual dryness and dogmatic philosophy are alike, in other words, insofar as they are but dialectical moments—albeit moments existentially difficult to overcome.

6.3.1.3.1. Wittgensteinian Fideism

Though one cannot define “language-game”—not, anyway, substantively—one can offer paradigmatic examples of language-games; it is telling that not only natural science but also prayer are among the suggestions that Wittgenstein offers. While the Tractatus cautioned us not to make an idol of the world described by natural science, it took natural science as the only legitimate language-game and so forbade us from anything but negative theology—from anything, that is, but smashing idols. The Investigations, on the other hand, implies that natural science and prayer are no more in competition with one another than are natural science and poetry. Indeed, only an idolater would mistake prayer for a representation of the world:

No opinion serves as the foundation for a religious symbol. And only an opinion can involve an error… One could begin a book on anthropology by saying: When one examines the life and behavior of mankind throughout the world, one sees that, except for what might be called animal activities, such as ingestion… men also perform actions that bear a characteristic peculiar to themselves, and these could be called ritualistic actions. But then it is nonsense for one to go on and say that the
characteristic of these actions is that they arise from faulty views about the physics of things.\textsuperscript{272}

Prayer is, in this respect, rather more like poetry than like natural science: while each of these is a language-game defined by rules peculiar to it—rules constructed such that following them satisfies some human need—\textit{only natural science} satisfies the need of representing the world in the vocabulary of physical, chemical, and biological forces. Indeed, natural science and poetry are, in another respect, rather more like each other than either is like prayer: though it rarely employs the vocabulary of physical, chemical, and biological forces, poetry nonetheless does often represent the world around us—especially insofar as that world inspires sentiment within us.

This way of looking at the relationship between prayer and other language-games is often called “Wittgensteinian Fideism.”\textsuperscript{273} The name is apt insofar as Wittgensteinian Fideism denies, like other kinds of fideism, that prayer depends for its justification upon, for example, natural science. But the name is inapt insofar as Wittgensteinian Fideism denies, unlike other kinds of fideism, that prayer somehow presents an alternative to, for example, natural science—that it offers a theory, a representation born of argumentation. On the contrary: Wittgensteinian Fideism reminds us that prayer is just a different way of using words—in order to satisfy a different need. However, this should not be taken to imply that representation is utterly irrelevant to prayer:

\begin{flushright}

\end{flushright}
The characteristic feature of ritualistic action is not at all a view, an opinion, whether true or false, although an opinion—a belief—can itself be ritualistic or part of a rite.\textsuperscript{274}

Though prayer does not have as its primary purpose representation, prayer nonetheless implies certain propositions—that, most obviously, God exists. Fundamental as this proposition is, though, it is not exactly a representation of the world: it certainly does not employ the vocabulary of physical, chemical, and biological forces. Wittgenstein seems skeptical of the degree to which it is even substantive:

Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar.)\textsuperscript{275}

To assert that God exists, Wittgenstein might suggest, is less to describe how things are than it is to describe how we use words. To offer the Ontological Argument, for example, is just to offer a clarification of prayer—of, specifically, the grammar that defines it:

A whole cloud of philosophy condenses into a drop of grammar.\textsuperscript{276}

To offer the Ontological Argument, Wittgenstein might suggest, is just to remind ourselves that we tend to see everyday life as radically contingent—that is, as standing in an intimate relationship to something unfathomably more significant than it.

\textsuperscript{274} Wittgenstein, “Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough,” 129.

\textsuperscript{275} Wittgenstein, \textit{Philosophical Investigations}, § 373.

6.3.1.3.2. An Objection

Of course, one who actually *prays* might be uncomfortable with Wittgensteinian Fideism: if to assert that God exists is merely to clarify the grammar of prayer, then *whether* God exists seems to be up to us—for we can always change our grammar. One who actually prays might worry, in other words, that Wittgensteinian Fideism makes God nothing more than a linguistic construct—and that no god of that kind will hold our attention for long.

One might worry, in other words, that Wittgensteinian Fideism is a kind of *antirealism*—specifically, antirealism about God. If this is the correct interpretation of Wittgensteinian Fideism, then it is like another kind of antirealism—specifically, antirealism about moral values: according to the position often called “non-cognitivism,” to state that some action is right or wrong, some object good or bad, is only to express one’s approval or disapproval, respectively, of that action or object—and so one can change a right action into a wrong one, a good object into a bad object, merely by deciding to disapprove of it. Right and wrong, good and bad, are merely our *projections* onto a world without value: nothing is right or wrong, good or bad, independently of our deciding that it is such—just as, according to the worrisome interpretation of Wittgensteinian Fideism, God does not exist or fail to exist independently of our deciding that he exists or fails to exist.

There is much indeed to be said of non-cognitivism—though most of it must wait until a later chapter. In the meantime, consider what David Wiggins takes to be a devastating objection to non-cognitivism:
Objectively speaking... any reason is as good or as bad as any other reason, it seems to say. For on the non-cognitive account, life is \textit{objectively} meaningless. So, by the non-cognitivist’s lights, it must appear that whatever the will chooses to treat as a good reason to engage itself is, for the will, a good reason. But the will itself, taking the inner view, picks and chooses, deliberates, weighs, and tests its own concerns. It craves objective reasons; and often it could not go forward unless it thought it had them.\footnote{277}

A non-cognitivist might \textit{theorize} that moral evaluation is nothing more than the projection of our approval and disapproval onto a world without value—but when that non-cognitivist \textit{acts}, he or she will inevitably think quite differently: he or she \textit{cannot} pursue some object with all of his or her heart in the knowledge that it is only good because of his or her arbitrary decision. This would be, it seems, a psychological impossibility: no object the value of which depends on our decision will hold our attention for long—just as no god whose existence depends on our decision will hold our attention for long. Sabina Lovibond summarizes the point thus:

If value is constituted by our desires, simply as such, there can be no \textit{objectively valid reason} why we should want one thing rather than another; what difference does it make, then, what we choose? And what is to prevent us from lapsing into an inert condition in which no choice seems worth making?\footnote{278}

To avoid this inert condition, Wiggins concludes, a non-cognitivist must deliberately delude himself or herself—even if only from time to time:

[The outer view] cannot adopt the inner [view] because, according to the picture that the non-cognitivist paints of these things, the inner view has to be unaware of the outer one, and has to enjoy essentially illusory notions of objectivity, importance, and significance: whereas the outer view has to hold that life is \textit{objectively meaningless}. The non-cognitivist mitigates the outrageousness of so categorical a denial of meaning as the outer view


\footnote{278} Sabina Lovibond, \textit{Realism and Imagination in Ethics} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 9.
issues by pointing to the availability of the participant perspective. But the most that he can do is to point to it. Otherwise the theorist is himself engulfed by a view that he must maintain to be false.279

This is a powerful criticism. Unfortunately, it seems to hit Wittgenstein: moral evaluation is, according to the Wittgensteinian Picture of Language, just another language-game—and, though our language-games are not arbitrary, we are nonetheless free to change them. The meaning of “right,” “wrong,” “good,” and “bad” seem to rest, in other words, entirely upon our decisions.

Wittgenstein seems, then, an antirealist about values. But the same objection could be made regarding every language-game—not only evaluation but also prayer and even natural science: just as no action is right or wrong, no object good or bad independently of our decision, so no physical, chemical, or biological proposition is true or false independently of our decision. Wittgenstein seems, in other words, to be a global antirealist:

Doesn’t the Wittgensteinian denial of a transcendent standard of rationality with regard to moral and intellectual norms amount to much the same thing as the non-cognitivists’ denial of “objective” or “real” variations, in point of intrinsic value, between different sorts of human activity? … Wittgenstein’s views imply… that if we wish to engage in any kind of rational thought or action we must immerse ourselves in a habit of mind which—in our philosophical capacity—we can recognize as historically conditioned. But now someone may protest that this is nothing but a global version of the non-cognitivist view that, in order to discover a meaning life, we must immerse ourselves in the scheme of concerns supplied by our own (positive or negative) feelings about the world.280

That life is worth living, or that God exists, or that neutrinos have mass would be, according to the Wittgensteinian Picture, nothing more than an expression of the

279 Wiggins, 549.

280 Lovibond, Realism and Imagination in Ethics, 145.
corresponding language-game—and every language-game is at it is because of our decisions. But just as an object the value of which depends on our decision cannot hold our attention for long—and just as a god whose existence depends on our decision cannot hold our attention for long—so a physical, chemical, or biological theory the truth of which depends on our decision cannot hold our attention for long.

6.3.1.3.3. A Response

Or so the objection goes. But Lovibond sees a way to answer it—paradoxically, by taking it to its furthest extreme:

[The position of Wittgenstein] bears more than a superficial resemblance to the non-cognitivist [position]… [But] an expressivism which extends to the whole of our discourse can clear itself, merely in virtue of its global character, of the irrationalist taint which it carried when it was asserted only in respect of a limited subject-matter.²⁸¹

Lovibond notes that, according to non-cognitivism, it is only our moral evaluations that are merely expressive. Indeed, the very name “non-cognitivism” implies that moral evaluation is to be contrasted with another kind of talk—specifically, natural science: the non-cognitivist assumes that the propositions of physics, chemistry, and biology are more than merely expressive—specifically, that they refer to a reality utterly independent of our decisions about how to talk. According to the Wittgensteinian Picture of Language, however, this is a deep confusion: nothing is right or wrong, good or bad, real or unreal,

²⁸¹ Lovibond, Realism and Imagination in Ethics, 147.
true or false independently of our decisions. But this just means that there is no higher standard that any given language-game could possibly fail to meet: God is as real as the mass of neutrinos—or, for that matter, anything else. For each of these things is as real as anything could possibly be.

But one might ask whether this is realism at all: does the insistence that nothing is real really mean, somehow, that everything is real? It seems little comfort to declare that every given thing is as real as anything possibly could be if “as real as anything possibly could be” means “not real at all.” The objection to Wittgensteinian Fideism, in other words, seems applicable to the Wittgensteinian Picture as a whole: how could anything hold our attention for long if everything about it—including its very existence—depends on our decision?

It is at this point that Barry Stroud would remind us that what we have been calling our “decisions” are not precisely decisions—for our range of options is always somewhat restricted, and often quite tightly restricted, by a reality beyond our control:

We do not decide to accept or reject [most of our language-games] at all, any more than we decide to be human beings as opposed to trees. Consider again the example of the associativity of addition: it depends on our decision insofar as we can imagine, however vaguely, deciding to construct a mathematics in which addition was not associative. But it would not have been our mathematics. For we—the species that we are, living in the world that we do—could not have made that decision: we cannot really imagine ourselves constructing a mathematics in which

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282 Trivially, there is a circularity here: our decisions are real insofar as we have decided that they are—insofar, that is, as we have decided to look at our language from the perspective of therapeutic philosophy. Equally trivially, however, this circularity is virtuous.

addition was not associative. We would have to become unrecognizable to ourselves.\textsuperscript{284}

And so it is, Stroud reminds us, in general:

We think we can understand and accept [alternatives to our language-games] as representing genuine alternatives only because the wide-reaching consequences of counting, calculating, and so forth, in these deviant ways are not brought out explicitly. [But] when we try to trace out the implications of behaving like that consistently and quite generally, our understanding of the alleged possibilities diminishes... The attempt to get a clearer understanding of what it would be like to be one of these people and to live in their world inevitably leads us to abandon more and more of our own familiar world and the ways of thinking about it upon which our understanding rests. The more successful we are in projecting ourselves into such a world, the less we will have left in terms of which we can find it intelligible.\textsuperscript{285}

How comforting this will be will depend, of course, on the language-game in question: it might well be comforting to learn that the associativity of addition is as real as our inability to add otherwise—for we cannot imagine, it is true, adding otherwise. But one who is troubled by Wittgensteinian Fideism will hardly be comforted to learn that it leaves God as real as our inability to cease believing in him. For it seems that we can, in fact, stop believing in him—can, that is, abandon the language-game of prayer.

6.3.1.3.4. Iconoclasm

Though neither is deliberately atheistic, both the Tractatus and the Investigations are profoundly iconoclastic—albeit in different ways: while both see theology as an idol, the

\textsuperscript{284} Again, there is a circularity in this: we are the species that we are, and live in the world that we do, because of our decisions—specifically, our decisions to do physics, chemistry, and biology as we do. Again, however, this circularity is virtuous: our decisions to do physics, chemistry, and biology as we do were not remotely arbitrary.

Tractatus would have us refrain from theology altogether, while the Investigations would have us reinterpret theology as a clarification of the grammar of a certain way of life. Nonetheless, this difference might not be as significant as it first appears. For it seems that the Investigations would endorse the theological conclusion of the Tractatus: men and women of faith are not those who have somehow confirmed the existence of God but rather those for whom that question has ceased to make sense. They are those who have come to reinterpret the world, who have learned to live in it in a new way:

If good or bad willing changes the world, it can only change the limits of the world, not the facts… In brief, the world must thereby become quite another. It must so to speak wax or wane as a whole.
The world of the happy is quite another than that of the unhappy.\textsuperscript{286}

In any case, to maintain that language-games do not depend on one another for their justification is not to maintain that they do not depend on one another in other ways: though natural science and prayer do not depend for their justifications upon one another, for example, it might nonetheless be that—as Nietzsche suggests—natural science is ultimately an extension of prayer and would not have come to exist without prayer.\textsuperscript{287} Nor is it to maintain that language-games cannot ever conflict: two language-games might conflict not in their theoretical implications but rather in their practical effects. For, in the end, all of our language-games are linked insofar as they are all ours—insofar, in other words, as they are all aspects of the same way of life:

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{286}] Wittgenstein, \textit{Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus}, § 6.4.3.
\end{itemize}
The word “language-game” is used… to emphasize the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.\footnote{\textit{Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations}, § 23.}

Every language-game, no matter how theoretical, is practical. For we \textit{practice} it—and only then insofar as it meets one of our needs.

\subsection*{6.3.2. Rule-Following}

Philosophy is one among our language-games: it meets our need for liberation from confusion. It is \textit{because} it is a language-game that legitimate philosophy is, for Wittgenstein, therapeutic rather than dogmatic:

\begin{quote}
The real discovery is the one that enables me to break off philosophizing when I want to.—The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring \textit{itself} in question.\footnote{\textit{Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations}, § 133.}
\end{quote}

An authentic philosopher is one not forever driven to seek the foundations of his or her thoughts—no longer haunted by the worry that all of them, even this one, are somehow illegitimate. An authentic philosopher sees the Hermetic compulsion to delve forever into the depths for what it is—a compulsion, birthed in confusion and destined only for tragedy:

\begin{quote}
[For the Hermetic,] interpretation is indefinite. The attempt to look for a final, unattainable meaning leads to the acceptance of a never-ending drift or sliding of meaning… [For] every object, be it earthly or heavenly, hides a secret. Every time a secret has been discovered, it will refer to another secret in a progressive movement toward a final secret. Nevertheless, there can be no final secret. The ultimate secret of Hermetic initiation is that everything is secret. Hence the Hermetic secret must be an empty one,
\end{quote}
because anyone who pretends to reveal any sort of secret is not himself initiated and has stopped at a superficial level of the knowledge of cosmic mystery. 290

Though one sometimes gets this feeling from the Investigations itself—or at least from the secondary literature on the Investigations—Umberto Eco is in fact describing the contradiction at the heart of postmodern literary criticism: if no text is meaningful in itself, then—because every interpretation of a text is itself a text—no text is meaningful at all. What began as delving into the depths reveals in the end that there are no depths: the only “meaning” in texts is their utter lack of meaning.

6.3.2.1. Normativity

Eco could just as easily have been describing the quest for foundations within dogmatic philosophy. Consider the example of rule-following: when playing a language-game, a dogmatic philosopher might ask, what makes certain moves right and others wrong? Why is it, for example, that the answer to “1 + 1” is “2” and not “3”? Well, one might respond, that is just what the rule of addition demands! Indeed—but who is to say that what we have been calling “addition,” the way we have been interpreting “+”, is not in fact schmaddition—a language-game quite like addition, except that the answer to “1 + 1” is, at least on this occasion, “3”? More generally, who is to say that any of our “mistakes” are not just the results of correctly following different rules—or that our “successes” are

290 Umberto Eco, Interpretation and Overinterpretation, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 32.
not just the results of *incorrectly* following different rules? Normativity seems to evaporate before our very eyes:

This [is] our paradox: no course of action [can] be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be brought into accord with the rule. [And] if every course of action can be brought into accord with the rule, then it can also be brought into conflict with it. And so there [seems to] be neither accord nor conflict here.\footnote{Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 201.}

Perhaps what we need, a dogmatic philosopher might suggest, is a meta-rule that tells us how to play the relevant language-game: when you see “+,” the rule might go, interpret it as *addition* rather than *schmaddition*. Yet could one not interpret this new rule in more than one way? In response, the dogmatic philosopher seems obliged to offer a meta-meta-rule. Yet could not one interpret *this* new rule in more than one way? A vicious regress— one of our own creation—suddenly threatens us:

In this chain of reasoning we place one interpretation behind another, as if each one contented us at least for a moment, until we thought of yet another lying behind it.\footnote{Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 201.}

If to follow a rule is to follow the meta-rule of how to follow that rule, then to follow the meta-rule would be to follow the meta-meta-rule of how to follow that meta-rule… and so on. Stepping back, it seems that there would be *nothing* that it is to follow a rule—nothing, in other words, that it would be to be right rather than wrong.\footnote{Obviously, my presentation of this paradox owes much to that of Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). It is less obvious to what extent my solution to the paradox is similar to his: Kripke is often taken to offer a solution to the paradox—what is often called the “skeptical solution”—that is fairly unsubtle, but it seems to me that he might be interpreted more charitably than this.}
6.3.2.2. The Private-Language Argument

This skeptical conclusion shows only, Wittgenstein suggests, that something has gone wrong:

What we thereby show is that there [must be] a way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation, but which, from case to case of application, is exhibited in what we call “following the rule” and “going against it.”

Dogmatic philosophy, in seeking to avoid skepticism about normativity, perennially offers a way of grasping rules that it takes to be more than merely interpretive—a way that manifests, quite elegantly, the Augustinian Picture of Language: every word, it is suggested, refers—either directly or indirectly—to some idea or sensation. These ideas and sensations are the meanings of the words that refer to them. One does not need a rule to interpret the meanings of one’s words—to discern, in other words, to which ideas and sensations one’s words refer—for one has direct access to one’s ideas and sensations. After all, one can mentally “point” at them:

[Suppose I] keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation. To this end I associate it with the sign “S” and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation… I speak, or write the sign down, and at the same time I concentrate my attention on the sensation—and so, as it were, point to it inwardly.

This suggestion—call it a “private language”—is supposed to stop the regress insofar as one cannot be wrong about to which of one’s ideas and sensations one’s words refer: to attempt to mentally “point” at a particular idea or sensation just is to mentally “point” at it. But this, Wittgenstein suggests, only exacerbates the problem it was meant to solve:


What is this ceremony for? For that is all it seems to be! [After all,] a
definition [must serve] to lay down the meaning of a sign, [mustn’t] it?—
Well, that is done precisely by concentrating my attention; for in this way
I commit to memory the connection between the sign and the sensation.—
But “I commit it to memory” can only mean: this process brings it about
that I remember the connection correctly in the future. But in the present
case, I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is
going to seem correct to me is correct. And that only means that here we
can’t talk about “correct.”

Normativity dissolved under the vicious regress of interpretations because the limitless
interpretability of every rule showed that the difference between right and wrong was an
illusion. But a private language does not solve this problem: if one cannot be wrong about
to which of one’s ideas and sensations one’s words refer, then the very distinction
between right and wrong once again collapses.

6.3.2.3. Communal Agreement

This hints at another solution to the vicious regress—one rather more in the spirit of the
Wittgensteinian Picture:

“Following a rule” is a practice.

Our words, including our mathematical words, operate according to rules—but these
rules are not such that we can succeed or fail in discovering them. Rather, they are
created by communal agreement: everyone insisting that the answer to “1 + 1” is “2” just

296 Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, § 258.

is what makes it true that the answer to “1 + 1” is “2.” A word, remember, gets its meaning through its use—that is, through the way that we use it:

To think one is following a rule is not to follow a rule. And that’s why it’s not possible to follow a rule “privately”; otherwise, thinking one was following a rule would be the same thing as following it.298

Publicity, Wittgenstein insists, is essential to normativity: normativity demands fallibility, while fallibility demands publicity.299 Far from making possible the following of rules, therefore, utterly private ideas and sensations are irrelevant to the following of rules. Since to discern the meaning of a word is to follow the rule of how to use that word, words cannot refer to utterly private ideas and sensations:

Suppose that everyone had a box with something in it which we call a “beetle.” No one can ever look into anyone else’s box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at his beetle.—Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing.—But what if these people’s word “beetle” had a use nonetheless?—If so, it would not be as the name of a thing. The thing in the box doesn’t belong to the language-game at all; not even as a Something: for the box might even be empty.—No, one can “divide through” by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is.300


299 For another interpretation of the Private-Language Argument, see Barry Stroud, “Wittgenstein’s ‘Treatment’ of the Quest for ‘A Language which Describes My Inner Experiences and which Only I Myself Can Understand,’” in *Meaning, Understanding, and Practice: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): constructing a purely private language is impossible, Stroud argues, not because it would refer to purely private sensations but rather because its construction would draw upon a background of established linguistic practices—most obviously, the established linguistic practice of ostensive definition. This is quite true, of course—but I take it to be just a version of the interpretation that Stroud rejects: Stroud apparently forgets that our background of linguistic practices is communally—and thus publicly—established. Moreover, Wittgenstein is abundantly clear throughout the *Investigations* that publicity is somehow essential to normativity. In any case, Stroud’s fundamental concern seems to be to avoid the conclusion that nothing more than spontaneous communal agreement determines what is right or wrong; I too am concerned to avoid this conclusion, but I argue below that the link between normativity and communal agreement need not be nearly so tight—as, again, Wittgenstein makes abundantly clear.

Consider, for example, what dogmatic philosophers call their “qualia”—their sensations, in other words, insofar as those sensations are purely private. If one can “divide through” a purely private beetle, then one can also “divide through” a purely private sensation—that is, through a quale. Insofar as dogmatic philosophers discuss with one another their quale of some object, Wittgenstein suggests, they are really discussing that object:

Look at the blue of the sky and say to yourself, “How blue the sky is!”—When you do it spontaneously—without philosophical purposes—the idea never crosses your mind that this impression of colour belongs only to you. And you have no qualms about exclaiming thus to another. And if you point at anything as you say the words, it is at the sky.\(^{301}\)

Insofar as dogmatic philosophers discuss with one another their quale of the color of the sky, they are really discussing the color of the sky—something utterly public. The most obvious evidence of this is that they cannot indicate which quale is under discussion except by reference to the public object of which it is a quale: if one dogmatic philosopher asks another to specify just which quale he or she means, the latter can only—for all of the supposed privacy of the quale—point helplessly toward the sky. To note this is not to reform the grammar of dogmatic philosophy but rather to clarify it. If dogmatic philosophers, understanding their own words for the first time, renounce their dogma—if, in other words, they cease to use the word “qualia”—that is their business.

Like every language-game, dogmatic philosophy exists only because it meets a human need—in this case, security: qualia—and, for that matter, private language—are attempts to be certain of our own righteousness, to reach some bedrock from which we might speak and act without fear. Unlike most language-games, however, dogmatic philosophy serves the relevant need only badly—only, that is, insofar as it deludes itself:

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what it takes for bedrock is never bedrock. For we cannot demonstrate—not theoretically, anyway—our own righteousness.

The only answer to fear is courage: we can demonstrate our righteousness to ourselves only practically. We can follow a rule, for example, only when we halt the chain of interpretations and act—only when, that is, we trade the theoretical for the practical:

“How am I able to follow a rule?”—If this is not a question about causes, then it is about the justification for my acting in this way in complying with the rule. Once I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: “This is simply what I do.”

Call this the “primacy of the practical.” The *Investigations* manifests it not only on the object level but also on the meta level: the answer to “2 + 2” becomes clear only when we stop staring at the marks “2 + 2” and start adding—just as philosophy ceases to torment us only when we use it to change our lives rather than our opinions.

Mathematics hits bedrock only when it trades interpretation of “+” for execution of “+.” Just so, philosophy hits bedrock only when it trades dogma for therapy. To make either of these trades is to seek security no longer in certainty but in courage. They are not, of course, tempting trades to make: certainty is easy, courage hard. But since certainty is always a delusion, courage is the best we can do.

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6.3.3. Forms of Life

“Private language” is incoherent because, in speaking, we speak to each other. Language is inevitably public: in language, as it morality, the only reason that distinguishing right from wrong matters is so that we might do justice, broadly speaking, to one another.

Of course, this insight runs the risk of profound misinterpretation—regarding both language and morality. True, we would have neither language nor morality were we not intrinsically social: alone, one cannot learn to speak—or, for that matter, to act—rightly. But this does not mean that, having learned to speak and to act rightly, one cannot talk to oneself—or, for that matter, do right by oneself. For to learn to speak and to act rightly is to rebuild within oneself the community that teaches one to speak and to act rightly. It is to make of oneself a multitude—to divide oneself into legislator and subject.304

Recall that, for Wittgenstein, everyone insisting that the answer to “1 + 1” is “2” just is what makes it true that the answer to “1 + 1” is “2.” One might conclude from this that nothing more than communal agreement distinguishes right from wrong—such that, alone, one can neither talk nor act rightly. This is not, of course, an especially robust sort of normativity. Indeed, it reduces the normative to the descriptive—to certain facts about how people in fact respond: “1 + 1 = 2” just means, if the reductionist is right, that “most agree, most of the time, that ‘1 + 1 = 2.’” But Wittgenstein is clear that this is not his position:

“So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?”—What is true or false is what human beings say; and it is in their
language that human beings agree. This is agreement not in opinions, but rather in form of life.\textsuperscript{305}

It is possible—albeit not particularly likely—that everyone could one day make the same mistake, could decide for example that the answer to “1 + 1” is “3.” But this would still be a mistake: the answer to “1 + 1” would still be “2.”

Why is this? Well, our rules for arithmetic are deeply embedded in the language that we have created over our history. We could have created a very different language—one in which, somehow, the answer to “1 + 1” was “3”—but we have created this language, this form of life. And this form of life determines that the answer to “1 + 1” is not “3” but “2.”

Language takes on a life of its own: we construct it, but then it constructs us. Of course, we can alter our language—including the mathematical aspects of our language. This is exactly what would happen if everyone began answering “3” to “1 + 1”—and continued to do so indefinitely. The paradox in this is merely apparent:

It is not only agreement in definitions, but also (odd as it may sound) agreement in judgments that is required for communication by means of language. This seems to abolish logic, but does not do so.—It is one thing to describe methods of measurement, and another to obtain and state results of measurement. But what we call “measuring” is in part determined by a certain constancy in results of measurement.\textsuperscript{306}

Words mean what they do because of how we use them: “meter” has the meaning that it does because most of us agree, for most things, how many meters long those things are. I cannot change, by myself, on a whim, what “meter” means—but we can change, together, over time, what “meter” means: we need only start measuring in a different way. Just so,


I cannot change, by myself, on a whim, what “+” means—but we can change, together, over time, what “+” means: we need only start adding in a different way.

Again, it is doubtful that we—the species that we are, living in the world that we do—could start adding in a way as different as this. But the point is a general one: certainly many of our language-games that are at least somewhat open to revision—the best evidence of which is that we have in fact spent our history revising them.

6.4. Conclusion

Another way to state all of this—and the thesis of the Philosophical Investigations—is that use is meaningful: the practical is intrinsically normative. One of the perennial misinterpretations of the Investigations is that, because Wittgenstein redefines rule-following in terms of language-games and forms of life, he thereby reduces the normative to the descriptive—specifically, to descriptions of how people happen to use words. But this is to misunderstand what language-games and forms of life are: they are not mere behavior—not, anyway, if “mere behavior” means “movement represented in the vocabulary of biology.” Wittgenstein is explicit that such reductionism is not his point:

“Aren’t you nevertheless a behaviourist in disguise? Aren’t you nevertheless basically saying that everything except human behaviour is a fiction?”—If I speak of a fiction, then it is of a grammatical fiction.307

The grammatical fiction is, of course, that of a normativity somehow isolated from human behavior: while we can turn our attention to the normative aspect of our

behavior—just as we can turn our attention to the physical aspect of our behavior—these are aspects of the same thing. Our grammar misleads us insofar as our ability to consider our behavior in abstraction from its physical aspect leads us to wonder whether our behavior might exist, somehow, in abstraction from its physical aspect. But consider again Wittgenstein’s example of the blue of the sky:

[Intuitively, you do not] think that really you ought to point at the colour not with your hand, but with your attention. (Consider what “to point at something with one’s attention” means.)

Wittgenstein is not denying, of course, that one can point to something with one’s attention—only that this is not a different thing than pointing to something with one’s hand, at least in this case. For, in general, intentionality is behavior: to mean “1 + 1 = 2” is to say “1 + 1 = 2.”

6.4.1. The Point

The thesis of the Philosophical Investigations is that rule-following is irreducibly normative—and that language-games and forms of life are therefore also irreducibly normative. One cannot understand normativity without reference to human behavior only because one cannot understand human behavior without reference to normativity. This means that the social sciences—sociology, economics, political science, and so on—are also irreducibly normative, at least insofar as they use intentional categories like thought and action. To describe a religion or a market or a nation—to explain the rules that

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govern them—is to state what men and women *should do* insofar as they are players in the relevant language-games:

The Wittgensteinian view that linguistic rules are institutions reiterates, although with a changed emphasis, an idea inherited from the Romantic movement by Hegel and his successors: it is the other side of the thought that institutions display objective mind, and as such have a semantic value.309

To understand ourselves as rational animals—as more than merely physical, chemical, and biological—is to understand ourselves as thoroughly and irreducibly normative. And this is so even if we are thoroughly and irreducibly normative only because of the *ways* in which we are physical, chemical, and biological: the physical, chemical, and biological determine our behavior to be as it is—determine, in other words, our *form of life* to be as it is—but that form of life is nonetheless thoroughly and irreducibly normative. It is because dogmatic philosophy misses *this* that it can be nothing more than a moment in a larger dialectic.

6.4.2. The Path

The *Investigations* manifests a searing brilliance—a brilliance as much spiritual as intellectual: it is born of a courage, a relentless honesty, seldom found in the history of philosophy—a courage that would had made Plato proud. For Wittgenstein liberates us from the dilemma that has threatened us since the dawn of philosophy—that between an endless search for foundations, on the one hand, and sceptical paralysis, on the other.

309 Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics*, 90.
In reminding us of the primacy of the practical, Wittgenstein gives us the courage to live without theoretical foundations. This seems to be a message that every generation needs to hear anew. Indeed, the generation of Wittgenstein apparently needed to hear it three times:

The three most important philosophers [of the twentieth] century [were] Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey. Each tried, in his early years, to find a new way of making philosophy “foundational”—a new way of formulating an ultimate context for thought… [But] each of the three came to see his earlier effort as self-deceptive, as an attempt to retain a certain conception of philosophy after the notions needed to flesh out that conception (the seventeenth-century [representational] notions of knowledge and mind) had been discarded. Each of the three, in his later work, broke free of the… conception of philosophy as foundational, and spent his time warning us against those very temptations to which he himself had once succumbed. Thus their later work is therapeutic rather than constructive, edifying rather than systematic, designed to make the reader question his own motives for philosophizing rather than to supply him with a new philosophical program.310

A corollary of the primacy of the practical is that philosophy should be therapeutic rather than dogmatic—an insight already implied, albeit in a contradictory way, in the Tractatus. Whether or not this insight is identical to the insights of Heidegger and Dewey, the Investigations seems to be uniquely therapeutic in the presentation of its insight:

The very nature of the investigation… compels us to travel criss-cross in every direction over a wide field of thought.—The philosophical remarks in this book are, as it were, a number of sketches of landscapes which were made in the course of these long and meandering journeys. The same or almost the same points were always being approached afresh from different directions, and new sketches made.311

310 Richard Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, 30th anniversary edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 5–6. This quotation should not be taken as an endorsement of the ironism of Rorty: as I mentioned, I disagree radically with Rorty—though, as I also mentioned, my disagreement is as much spiritual as intellectual.


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In the end, feeling that the *Investigations* has no thesis derives from “the very nature of the investigation.” For if Wittgenstein is to actually *practice* therapy upon his readers, he cannot merely *assert* his thesis:

> To convince someone of the truth, it is not enough to state it, but rather one must find the *path* from error to truth.\(^{312}\)

The thesis of the *Investigations* is fairly straightforward: use is meaningful. This thesis is not a *discovery* but rather something that is obvious—so long as we do not stop to think about it: it is when we *forget* use—when we give up practice to *theorize* about practice—that meaning becomes so mysterious. This air of mystery is the reason that Wittgenstein cannot just state his thesis but rather must approach it again and again: he must *retrain* us, slowly but surely, to see normativity as we once did—that is, implicitly.

In dogmatic philosophy, we look at the landscape of life from on high—and so cannot find ourselves in it; Wittgenstein retrains us to see the landscape of life from the perspective of those who walk upon it—that is, *our* perspective. Wittgenstein retrains us, in other words, to be ourselves.

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\(^{312}\) Wittgenstein, “Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*,” 119.
CHAPTER 7

MACINTYRE ON INSTITUTIONS, THE EMOTIVIST SOCIETY, AND PRACTICES

If there are good reasons to reject the central theses of After Virtue, by now I should certainly have learned what they are.

—Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue

Might the Philosophical Investigations miss something fundamental?

7.1. Introduction

The searing brilliance of the Investigations derives from its insistence upon the primacy of the practical—an insistence it manifests both in its thesis and in the way it argues for that thesis. But interpreting the Investigations as a work of searing brilliance does not prevent one from wondering whether the Investigations misses something, even something fundamental.

Wittgenstein’s reinterpretation of meaning as use—that is, his redefinition of rule-following in terms of language-games and forms of life—has been profoundly influential; this is so even if many contemporary philosophers have misinterpreted that redefinition.
as a *reduction* of rule-following to language-games and forms of life. Somewhat less influential has been Wittgenstein’s methodology—that is, the reflective sociology that led Wittgenstein to his redefinition: contemporary philosophers do a great deal more thinking, unfortunately, than looking.

Alasdair MacIntyre is a welcome exception to this trend. Though his *After Virtue*, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* mention Wittgenstein only six times altogether—and only then in passing—these texts are the application of the reflective sociology of Wittgenstein to metaethics: MacIntyre’s practices and traditions, for example, are clear echoes of Wittgenstein’s language-games and forms of life, respectively. But MacIntyre does more than merely echo Wittgenstein: in applying reflective sociology to metaethics, MacIntyre arrives at a crucial insight that Wittgenstein does not. This insight allows MacIntyre to be critical in a way that Wittgenstein is not: Wittgenstein criticizes dogmatic philosophy insofar as it misunderstands ordinary language, but he takes ordinary language to be itself beyond criticism—whereas MacIntyre, through a philosophical investigation more intensely sociological, realizes that our ordinary language contains a deep tension within itself. Or, better, that our language—even when untroubled by philosophy—is far from ordinary.

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7.2. Institutions

To see this, consider what might initially seem a confused question: why shouldn’t one cheat at a language-game?

7.2.1. Cheating at a Game

Well, why shouldn’t one cheat at a game? Consider, for example, the game of chess: why, Black asks us, shouldn’t he hide the white queen, bishops, knights, and rooks under the table while White is distracted? The answer, it might seem, is obvious: Black will get caught! Black shouldn’t hide White’s chessmen for the same reason that Black shouldn’t steal White’s refrigerator: Black will likely fail to achieve that which motivates him to consider the transgression in the first place.

Suppose, however, that White is easily distracted. Suppose, furthermore, that Black is especially clever—that he has long practiced hiding chessmen while maintaining a façade of innocence. Suppose, in other words, that Black is fairly confident that he will not get caught:

A sensible knave, in particular incidents, may think that an act of iniquity or infidelity will make a considerable addition to his fortune… That honesty is the best policy, may be a good general rule, but is liable to many exceptions; and he, it may perhaps be thought, conducts himself with most wisdom, who observes the general rule, and takes advantage of all the exceptions.\(^{314}\)

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Why shouldn’t Black cheat, then, if he is fairly confident that he will not get caught?

Well, Hume suggests, such confidence is sometimes misleading—and the punishment for getting caught even once far outweighs the rewards of a lifetime of cheating:

Knaves, with all their pretended cunning and abilities, [are often] betrayed by their own maxims; and while they propose to cheat with moderation and secrecy, a tempting incident occurs, nature is frail, and they give into the snare; whence they can never extricate themselves, without a total loss of reputation, and the forfeiture of all future trust and confidence with mankind.315

Suppose, however, that Black is not just confident that he will avoid getting caught: suppose that he is certain of what is, in fact, the case—that, if he cheats, he will not get caught. Perhaps White is but a child—one too young to fully understand the rules of chess. Still, who would want to cheat a child—or, for that matter, anyone else? The thrill of victory, Hume suggests, would pale beside the punishment that one would inflict upon oneself—that is, guilt:

Have we any difficulty to comprehend the force of humanity and benevolence? Or to conceive, that the very aspect of happiness, joy, prosperity, gives pleasure; that of pain, suffering, sorrow, communicates uneasiness? The human countenance, says Horace, borrows smiles or tears from the human countenance.316

Suppose, however, that Black is unusual: suppose that, unlike most of us, he has no sympathy whatsoever for White—or, for that matter, for anyone else. Suppose whatever must be supposed so that, in this case, Black will gain by cheating more than he loses.

David Hume admits that he has nothing to say to someone like this:

I must confess that, if a man think that this reasoning much requires an answer, it would be a little difficult to find any which will to him appear satisfactory and convincing. If his heart rebel not against such pernicious


316 Hume, An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, § 5.2.
maxims, if he feel no reluctance to the thoughts of villainy or baseness, he has indeed lost a considerable motive to virtue; and we may expect that this practice will be answerable to his speculation.\footnote{Hume, An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, § 9.2.}

These words bear a certain tension: Hume laments that the thoughts of Black are villainous and base—but “villainous and base” can mean here only “not as we would prefer.” For Black apparently thinks as he should: since Black seeks above all else to checkmate the white king—and since hiding the white queen, bishops, knights, and rooks is, we have supposed, the most efficient means to his deepest desire, the checkmate of the white king—Black apparently should cheat. It is confirmation of our conclusion that, upon reasoning as we do, Black apparently will cheat.

One cannot but feel that something has gone badly wrong here. Since our argument is valid, one of its two premises must be false; since we have just invented the case of Black and White—a case in which cheating is the most efficient means to the end of checkmate—the falsity must lie in the other premise. Perhaps, then, Black does not seek to checkmate the white king—not above all else, anyway: perhaps Black seeks less to win the game than to play it. Perhaps, in other words, we misinterpreted his question:

The first thought in setting up an ethical law of the form “thou shalt…” is: And what if I do not do it? But it is clear that ethics has nothing to do with punishment and reward in the ordinary sense. This question as to the consequences of an action must therefore be irrelevant. At least these consequences will not be events. For there must be something right in that formulation of the question. There must be some sort of ethical reward and ethical punishment, but this must lie in the action itself.\footnote{Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, § 6.4.2.2.}

When he wrote the Tractatus, Wittgenstein would have interpreted these words—his own—mystically: though one has some reason not to cheat at a game, one cannot
describe this reason—and so anyone who asks, like Black, why he should not cheat at a game can receive no answer “that will appear to him satisfactory and convincing.” When he wrote the *Investigations*, however, Wittgenstein would have interpreted his words rather differently: one cannot describe the reason one has not to cheat at a game only if one limits oneself to the vocabulary of natural science—the only language-game recognized as legitimate within the *Tractatus*.

The propositions of natural science are *purely* descriptive in a way that those of few—if any—other language-games are. Of course, *every* proposition is normative insofar as it is *true or false*: one should affirm both that “the atomic number of carbon is six” and that “a chess player should seek to checkmate the king of his or her opponent”—for the former is no less true than the latter. But one *evaluates* the truth of “the atomic number of carbon is six” in an entirely different way than the truth of “a chess player should seek to checkmate the king of his or her opponent”: the latter proposition refers, after all, to a world that we can access only through immersion in chess. And, though one might respond that the former proposition refers to a world that we can access only through immersion in natural science, the world of chess depends on us in a way that the world of natural science does not: the world of chess is accessible only through immersion in chess because that world is *entirely constituted* by our immersion in it—by, that is, our playing chess.³¹⁹ And chess is—like every other language-game in our form of life—*intrinsically* normative.

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³¹⁹ Even this clarification is not really sufficient. For the world of natural science is, a transcendentalist idealist might protest, *also* entirely constituted by our immersion in it: there would be no world of natural science were there no natural scientists. Our transcendentalist idealist is quite right, of course, but the distinction could be restated in this way: we are free to significantly change our language-game of chess in a way that we are not free to significantly change our language-game of natural science. One who resists even *this* distinction is either a pragmatist or an absolute idealist: a pragmatist insists that
Wittgenstein’s words will seem mystical, then, only to those who are mystified by whatever cannot be reduced to the descriptive. Yet dogmatic philosophers—of whom Hume is, in his skeptical way, the paradigmatic example—are often mystified in precisely this way:

[They hold that] reason is calculative; it can assess truths of fact and mathematical relations but nothing more. In the realm of practice therefore it can speak only of means. About ends it must be silent.\(^{320}\)

These dogmatic philosophers would be unable to explain to Black why he should not cheat at chess. For one cannot explain why one should never cheat at chess without drawing upon the intrinsically normative vocabulary of chess:

[We could not explain to Black what he would lose by cheating] for two reasons: first… because we can only specify [what he would lose] in terms of chess… and by means of examples from [chess]… and secondly because [what he would lose] can only be identified and recognized by the experience of participating in [chess]. [For] those who lack the relevant experience are incompetent thereby as judges of [what one would lose by cheating].\(^{321}\)

Not only would one not be able to explain to Black why he should not cheat without drawing upon the vocabulary of chess: if Black did not permit himself to draw upon the vocabulary of chess, he would not be able to understand the explanation that one gave him.

But if one did permit oneself to draw upon the vocabulary of chess—to go beyond, that is, the vocabulary of natural science—it would be fairly easy to explain to

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\(^{320}\) MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 54.

\(^{321}\) MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 188–189.
Black why he should not cheat at chess. For it is not, as Hume would worry, that cheating might make winning impossible. Rather, cheating would make chess impossible:

It is impossible for me to win the game and at the same time to break one of its rules. I do not have open to me the alternatives of winning the game honestly and winning the game by cheating, since in the latter case I would not be playing the game at all.\(^{322}\)

Black could checkmate White by cheating insofar as Black could rearrange the pieces on the chessboard such that White could not legally save his king from capture. But Black could not checkmate White by cheating insofar as this would not really be checkmating at all—even if Black managed to convince White that he had lost fair and square.

To put the point in a different way: why does Black seek to checkmate White? Not, presumably, because he fetishizes particular arrangements of objects—those arrangements of objects that count, according to the rules of chess, as the checkmate of the white king. Rather, Black seeks to checkmate White because he seeks to play chess with White—and to play chess just is to seek to checkmate one’s opponent. It is because he seeks primarily to play chess that Black, if he cheats White, really only cheats himself.

Seeking to checkmate is not precisely instrumental to playing chess—not, anyway, in the way that cheating at chess is precisely instrumental to achieving one of those arrangements of objects that counts, according to the rules of chess, as the checkmate of the opposing king. Of course, cheating at chess is only badly instrumental to achieving such an arrangement: most of the time, as Hume would remind Black, cheating at chess results only in getting caught. If Black happens to fetishize those arrangements of objects that count, according to the rules of chess, as the checkmate of

\(^{322}\) Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 25. Though Suits is wrong to think that he has refuted Wittgenstein, his investigation of games is nonetheless excellent—and is, not coincidentally, very much the precursor to MacIntyre’s investigation of practices.
the white king, then—most of the time—following the rules of chess is actually the best way for Black to get what he wants. Most of the time.

To put the point in a different way: there are two ways to interpret the rules of chess. If one interprets the rules instrumentally—specifically, as instruments to convince one’s opponent that he or she has been fairly checkmated—then those rules admit of exceptions: one should break them whenever one is especially sneaky, whenever one’s opponent is especially naïve, and so on. But if one interprets the rules of chess constitutively—specifically, as constitutive of what it is to checkmate one’s opponent—then those rules do not admit of exceptions: one should never break them. Indeed, there is a paradoxical sense in which one cannot break them: to the degree that one breaks them, one to that degree removes oneself from the situation in which they apply—chess.

7.2.2. Cheating at a Language-Game

Of course, it is salient that people do not often cheat at chess—even when, with respect to Hume, they could easily do so without remorse. And yet people cheat frequently at certain other language-games—college, for example. Why is this? MacIntyre offers an example that suggests the answer:

Consider the example of a highly intelligent seven-year-old child whom I wish to teach to play chess, although the child has no particular desire to

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323 Note that one can remove oneself from the situation in which the rules of chess apply: one need only cheat or—even easier—walk away from the chessboard. Of course, Hume and Wittgenstein were defending, albeit in different ways, the rules not of chess but of morality; whether one can remove oneself from the situation in which those rules apply—by breaking them, or by somehow “walking away”—is another question.
learn the game. The child does however have a very strong desire for candy and little chance of obtaining it. I therefore tell the child that if the child will play chess with me once a week I will give the child 50 cents worth of candy; moreover I tell the child that I will always play in such a way that it will be difficult, but not impossible, for the child to win and that, if the child wins, the child will receive an extra 50 cents worth of candy. Thus motivated the child plays and plays to win. Notice however that, so long as it is the candy alone which provides the child with a good reason for playing chess, the child has no reason not to cheat and every reason to cheat, provided he or she can do so successfully. But, so we may hope, there will come a time when the child will find in those goods specific to chess, in the achievement of a certain highly particular kind of analytical skill, strategic imagination and competitive intensity, a new set of reasons, reasons now not just for winning on a particular occasion, but for trying to excel in whatever way the game of chess demands. Now if the child cheats, he or she will be defeating not me, but himself or herself.  

I quote the entire paragraph because it is, in MacIntyre’s own opinion, the most important that he has ever written. Moreover, it suggests the answer to our question: people do not often cheat at chess because there is usually no reason to cheat at chess—nothing, that is, to be gained by cheating. Students often cheat in college, on the other hand, because there is something to be gained by cheating—higher grades, which are a means to a degree, which is a means to a job, which is a means to money, which is a means to... well, anything, really. Even sending one’s kids to college.

If chess were modified so that there were a reason to cheat—candy, for example, upon victory—then people would presumably cheat no less at chess than in college. Of course, not everyone cheats in college—not yet, anyway: though some interpret college primarily as an institution—as, specifically, a social structure that distributes credentials to those who spend four years more or less following its rules—others interpret it...
primarily as a *practice*—as, specifically, a social reality that makes of those who follow its rules a community working together to weave information into knowledge and knowledge into wisdom. Nor is college unique in having these two aspects:

Practices must not be confused with institutions. Chess, physics, and medicine are practices; chess clubs, laboratories, universities and hospitals are institutions. Institutions are characteristically and necessarily concerned with… external goods. They are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structured in terms of power and status, and they distribute money, power and status as rewards. Nor could they do otherwise if they are to sustain not only themselves, but also the practices of which they are the bearers.  

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In using the word “institution,” MacIntyre emphasizes *formal* institutions: he mentions a chess club, for example, rather than Black and his seven-year-old son, White. But formality is surely a matter of degree: even Black and White around their chessboard constitute an institution to *some* degree, however slight. For lack of a better word, I will refer to *all* physical manifestations of language-games, however informal, as “institutions.”

Even the institution that Black and White briefly constitute is concerned, however remotely, with money, power, and status. For one thing, Black needed money to purchase the chessboard—and, for that matter, to pay the mortgage and the electric bill, without which there would be no venue to play chess. For another thing, the institution formed by Black and White cannot help but bestow the status of victor—with whatever bragging rights, however meager, victory implies.

But the physical is only one aspect of the game that Black and White play: one might consider their moves not only insofar as they are the sliding of pieces across a board—made possible by money, and in the service of victory—but also insofar as they

326 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 194.
are... well, moves in a game of chess—made possible by, and in service to, the rules of chess. Insofar as Black and White interpret their moves in the first way, they have every reason to cheat one another; insofar as Black and White interpret their moves in the second way, they have every reason not to cheat one another.

Every language-game has these two aspects, these two ways in which one might interpret its rules. For every language-game is simultaneously physical and normative—just as every human is simultaneously body and soul: none of our language-games can be *purely* physical any more than it can be *purely* normative. There therefore cannot *be* a practice that is not manifested somehow in the world—any more than there can be an institution devoid of constituents:

No practices can survive for any length of time unsustained by institutions. Indeed so intimate is the relationship of practices to institutions—and consequently of the goods external to the goods internal to the practices in question—that institutions and practices characteristically form a single causal order in which the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution.327

But how can this be? How can practices be vulnerable to institutions if practices and institutions are just two aspects of the same thing? Well, remember that how one interprets a language-game affects the degree to which one follows its rules. Consider again the example of chess: if one interprets chess primarily as an institution—if one sees it *primarily* as a way of assigning victory and whatever awards come with victory—then one will interpret its rules as admitting of exceptions. One will interpret the *written* rules of chess as holding only *ceteris paribus*—only, that is, so long as one cannot get away with breaking them. If this example seems absurd, it is only because it is *exceptionally* rare that one will be able to break the rules of chess without getting caught *and* be

327 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 194.
playing for a prize worth mentioning: few checkmates indeed result in fame and fortune—and, while there are a few that do, grandmasters tend to notice when their pieces are hidden under the table. So long as this remains true—so long as rampant cheating at chess remains absurd—the institution of chess will not undermine the practice of chess.

But contrast chess with college: it is not absurd to fear that men and women might come to interpret college primarily as an institution—and sooner rather than later. More specifically, it is not absurd to fear that our students might come to see college primarily as a way of achieving credentials—as, that is, a way of showing potential employers that they are willing to spend arbitrarily long periods of time performing arbitrary tasks in exchange for economic security. If this ever happens—if our students ever lose faith, rightly or wrongly, that the inquiry that we witness to them is worthwhile for its own sake—then cheating in college will become rampant. Especially since there seems no reliable way to catch cheaters.

But if this ever happens—if cheating ever becomes the rule, so to speak, rather than the exception—then college is not long for our form of life: neither the practice nor the institution will endure beyond the time when our students find another, less expensive way to demonstrate their desperation to potential employers. Firewalking, maybe.

7.2.3. A Culture of Instrumentality

And so it is, Stephen Mulhall suggests, in general:

Philosophical [interpretations] of language and its users can find practical, concrete realization… [Specifically,] they [can] shape our actions and the
thoughts and actions of those to whom our own actions are directed, and thereby come to reshape the reality they concern.\textsuperscript{328}

Practices are vulnerable to institutions insofar as interpreting language-games primarily as institutions—interpreting their rules instrumentally, that is, and so admitting of exceptions—will lead to the replacement of the relevant language-games, of the relevant practices and institutions, as soon as other, more efficient instruments are found.

Why does this matter? Well, consider this time not any one language-game but rather an entire form of life: men and women might, in time, come to reinterpret all of their language-games primarily as institutions—primarily, that is, as mechanisms for the redistribution of money and power. Indeed, something like this radical reinterpretation is undertaken by Karl Marx:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.\textsuperscript{329}

Marx undertook this radical reinterpretation so that his readers might see how their form of life turned around their exploitation by a handful of elites. His hope was, of course, that his readers would overthrow those elites. But it seems that he put too much faith in the solidarity of the proletariat—or, perhaps, too little faith in the allure of money and power: most now strive not to overthrow their exploiters but instead to exploit others in turn.

Or so one might conclude from the decades since the publication of the Communist Manifesto—decades that saw the prominent absence of any world revolution

\textsuperscript{328} Mulhall, Philosophical Interpretations of the Fall, 106.

and the spectacular failure of every remotely serious attempt to put Marxist theory into practice. Instead, we have seen our world become more and more… well, bourgeois:

Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.\textsuperscript{330}

To whatever degree this was true in 1848, it is far truer now. For our form of life—call it “democratic capitalism,” though the term obscures the extent to which our mechanisms of representation and free exchange have gradually undermined themselves—is radically instrumental: our democracy and our market—language-games always justified, at least in part, by their instrumentality—have eclipsed all of our other language-games.\textsuperscript{331}

Correlatively, we now tend to see our society with our sober senses—if “with our sober senses” means “purely institutionally”: we value our democracy and our market not because to participate in them is to exercise our freedom but rather because—or, better, insofar as—they get us whatever it is that we happen to want.

\textsuperscript{330} Marx and Engels, \textit{The Communist Manifesto}, § 1.

\textsuperscript{331} Democracy undermines itself insofar as it allows citizens to gradually disenfranchise themselves: in order to attain security, they surrender more and more of their rights to those who govern them. See Plato, \textit{Republic} 555b–576b. The free market undermines itself insofar as it allows tremendous disparities in wealth—disparities that the tremendously wealthy then exploit: they use their tremendous wealth to manipulate the market so that it works less and less freely, more and more to their advantage. See Christopher Hayes, \textit{Twilight of the Elites: America after Meritocracy} (New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2012). Whether or not these two trends are inevitable, they certainly seem to afflict our society. One solution to them—though perhaps not the \textit{only} solution—would be checks on the relevant institutions: democracy might be checked by certain fundamental rights that cannot be surrendered, while the free market might be checked by a certain level of prosperity that cannot be lost. And indeed, our society employs these two checks—in theory, at least, if not in practice.
7.2.3.1. The Augustinian Picture Reconsidered

Remember the Augustinian and Wittgensteinian Pictures? The previous chapter presented these as two different interpretations of language: they apparently disagree not on which words men and women say but rather on what they mean when they say those words. The Augustinian Picture insists that every word refers—and that, as such, the paradigmatic use of language is description, especially description in the vocabulary of natural science; the Wittgensteinian Picture suggests that this interpretation of language is highly misleading—that, indeed, it is born out of confusion. The last chapter argued, of course, that the Wittgensteinian Picture is right and the Augustinian Picture is wrong. But this is compatible with a certain perverse defense of the Augustinian Picture:

[The Augustinian Picture of Language can be interpreted as] not an empty or incoherent fantasy of our solid, self-sustaining ordinary life with words, but rather a depiction of the way we presently, ordinarily inhabit our language as tending toward, if not already reduced to, the primitive.\(^{332}\)

If it is so obviously wrong, one might ask, why is anyone ever even tempted by the Augustinian Picture? We have already seen one suggestion—that ordinary language implies a false picture of itself. This seems to be Wittgenstein’s explanation:

A picture held us captive. And we couldn’t get outside it, for it lay in our language, and language seemed only to repeat it to us inexorably.\(^{333}\)

But there is another potential explanation: perhaps there are certain languages of which the Augustinian Picture is almost true. In the last chapter, we objected that language is used in many ways—and that, even in theory, description cannot be the only language-

\(^{332}\) Mulhall, *Philosophical Interpretations of the Fall*, 111.

game within a form of life. But perhaps there are forms of life within which description has become the *dominant*—even if not the only—language-game; perhaps there are forms of life within which *many* people—even if not all people—spend their time interacting in a purely instrumental mode.

Remember the Builder’s Language—that primitive language designed by Wittgenstein in order to accommodate the Augustinian Picture? Our most devastating objection to the Augustinian Picture was that, within the Builder’s Language—a language designed precisely to *accommodate* the Augustinian Picture—the difference between description and command evaporates. But perhaps this was a feature rather than a bug. Perhaps, in other words, the Builder’s Language is the language of a society in which *instrumentality* has become the dominant mode of interaction:

B is always the slave of A’s desires; and the language with which their practice equips them both appears as A’s way of mastering the world, of remaking it in the image of his own will through B’s efforts, and hence of reducing B to a means to that end. Since this language game is Wittgenstein’s best attempt to provide a context for which Augustine’s description of language is actually right, it seems that we are invited here to acknowledge that an inflection of the master-slave model of human social relations... is implicit in the conception of human society that Augustine’s picture of words at once engenders and presupposes.334

In the society of the Builders—or, for that matter, any society of which the Augustinian Picture of Language is something like true—men and women treat one another instrumentally: for example, B treats A as a mere means toward B’s ends—specifically, toward a certain arrangement of blocks, pillars, slabs, and beams. But to treat others instrumentally is to treat *language-games* instrumentally—for our language-games are just our ways of interacting with others. Those who treat one another instrumentally,

334 Mulhall, *Philosophical Interpretations of the Fall*, 109–110.
therefore, interpret their ways of interacting with one another as institutions, as means toward ends beyond themselves—and thus as disposable if more efficient means are found. The attitude of such men and women is that of cheaters.

7.2.3.2. Original Sin

Something about all of this sounds familiar.

The Augustinian Picture of Language is a theory of language: it is, if true, the discovery that, though words might be meaningful in a diversity of ways, they are in fact meaningful in only one way. What Wittgenstein seems to have missed—because of what might be called charitably his “purity of heart” and uncharitably his “insulation from economic reality by his father’s tremendous wealth”—was that, of our form of life, the Augustinian Picture is more and more true:

The primitiveness of the builders is an allegory of the way people in modern culture in fact speak… We can imagine that their unvarnished, almost psychotically functional deployments of their words constitute a microcosm of their ways with words off the building site. The idea is not that their vocabulary might be restricted to these four words; it is that their orientation to their words for building exemplifies that of their culture as a whole to its words… We might, in other words, take them as non-primitive human beings in the surroundings of a developed culture who nonetheless find themselves speaking primitively—in more or less simplified expressions of more or less uncultivated, fixated desires. Here, the culture as a whole must be thought of… as a collectivity… [marked] by the poverty of its practices. 335

If Mulhall sounds a bit harsh, one may take comfort in his suggestion that our society is not alone in this—that, indeed, every society is tempted to regard itself more and more

335 Mulhall, *Philosophical Interpretations of the Fall*, 110.
instrumentally. This is the reason, Mulhall suggests, that Wittgenstein chose the *Confessions* of Augustine as the paradigmatic expression of a certain way of looking at language:

[Wittgenstein’s] choice of Augustine as the starting-point of his own investigation further suggests that he takes this primitive depiction and realization of human culture to be exemplary—not just accidentally true of us then (when Augustine wrote) and now (when Wittgenstein cites that writing), but a persisting tendency in human imagination and life, both within and without philosophy, and hence presumably the result of forces that are fundamental to our nature and self-understanding, however hard they may be to identify and anatomicize.336

One might worry that Mulhall overinterprets Wittgenstein: there seems little indication that Wittgenstein meant the Builder’s Language—or anything else in the *Investigations*—as an implicit criticism of the instrumentality of our form of life. Indeed, the only such indication is that Wittgenstein quotes, albeit without comment, what Augustine probably does mean as an implicit criticism of the instrumentality of his form of life:

And once I got my tongue around these signs, I used them to express my wishes.337

The boy Augustine did not learn words for their own sake: he learned words so that he could use them as means to his ends—their referents.338 And this was not an accident. For everyone, Augustine insists, does whatever he or she does because he or she is consumed

336 Mulhall, *Philosophical Interpretations of the Fall*, 112.

337 Augustine, *Confessions*, § 1.8.

338 Mulhall notes that Augustine could not have remembered learning to speak and was merely projecting his own instrumental attitude—that which characterizes the adult world—onto his younger self. While this is true—while, indeed, one cannot desire certain things, or at least desire them in the same way, if one does not have language—it does not lessen the force of Augustine’s point: whether we learn words in order to express the desires that we have—less likely—or, learning words, come to desire the objects to which they refer—more likely—the fact remains that our interactions with our world and with one another are inevitably instrumental. See Mulhall, *Philosophical Interpretations of the Fall*, 105–106.
by desire—and, since this desire is without qualification, it finds its fulfillment only in what is desirable without qualification:

You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you. \(^{339}\)

In this, Augustine echoes Plato:

For this is what it is to proceed correctly, or to be led by another, to erotics—beginning from these beautiful things here, always to proceed on up for the sake of beauty, using these beautiful things here as steps: from one to two, and from two to all beautiful bodies; and from beautiful bodies to beautiful pursuits; and from pursuits to beautiful lessons; and from lessons to end at that lesson, which is the lesson of nothing else than the beautiful itself; and at last to know what is beauty itself. \(^{340}\)

But even though each of us does whatever he or she does because he or she is consumed by a desire without qualification, Augustine insists that each of us is fundamentally broken: each of us inevitably looks for what is desirable without qualification—at least at first—in the qualified things around us. We cannot but frustrate ourselves:

Human beings are not only naturally capable of acting—even perhaps disposed to act—sinfully, but are always already turned against themselves, against the true and against the good, by virtue of their very condition as human. \(^{341}\)

Augustine calls our orientation toward what cannot fully and finally satisfy us “original sin.” It is like other sins insofar as it is a violation of the law written on our hearts—of those rules that direct us toward what would fully and finally satisfy us. But it is unlike other sins insofar as we are guilty of it before any particular transgression:

Original sin… is not about being born either saintly or wicked. It is about the fact of being born in the first place. Birth is the moment when, without anyone having had the decency to consult us on the matter, we enter into a

\(^{339}\) Augustine, *Confessions*, § 1.1. Translation mine.


\(^{341}\) Mulhall, *Philosophical Interpretations of the Fall*, 6–7.
preexistent web of needs, interests, and desires—an inextricable tangle to which the mere brute fact of our existence will contribute, and which will shape our identity to the core… The past is what we are made of. Throngs of ghostly ancestors lurk within our most casual gestures, preprogramming our desires and flicking our actions mysteriously awry.\(^{342}\)

We are guilty of original sin before any particular transgression because it is the precondition of any of our deeds whatsoever—transgressive or otherwise: we are rational animals, and so cannot act at all without first inhabiting the form of life into which we are born—without coming to speak the language that we hear. And, because we are rational animals, the language that we hear is inevitably institutional—is inevitably concerned, that is, with what money, power, and status can buy: we are alive at all only because we are born into societies that make endless war upon the earth and upon one another for the resources that they need to sustain themselves.\(^{343}\) By the time it occurs to us that these resources can never fully and finally satisfy us, it is already too late.

Sin is the machinery within which we are the ghosts. To take on flesh at all is to damn ourselves—and yet we do not know this, indeed do not exist at all, until we have taken on that flesh. Original sin is therefore what we might call a “moral paradox”:

Such a doctrine patently violates a variety of interrelated and central Enlightenment precepts… [Most obviously,] it posits [our] moral responsibility for the deed that contributes [our] acquisition of the central precondition for moral responsibility… [We are thus] enslaved, but enslaved by ourselves (not only not autonomous, but autonomously nonautonomous); [we have] freely relinquished our freedom and so [have] ourselves placed its recovery beyond our own reach.\(^{344}\)


\(^{343}\) Though MacIntyre lists money, power, and status as the ends that institutions usually chase, I prefer the somewhat technical “what money, power, and status can buy”: money and status are—like all ends that are not their own means—merely forms of power—as Hobbes notes. See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

\(^{344}\) Mulhall, *Philosophical Interpretations of the Fall*, 7, 9.
To call original sin a “moral paradox” is to acknowledge that we cannot make moral sense of it—that it is the point at which, even if our practice of reflective sociology can handle it, our practice of moral evaluation breaks down: we are guilty, indeed inevitably guilty, insofar as to enter into our form of life is to wrong ourselves and one another, to fight and die for what can never fully and finally satisfy us—and yet we are innocent insofar as we did not know this, indeed could not have known this, before entering into our form of life. But to acknowledge that original sin is a moral paradox is, Charles Taylor notes, hardly to refute Augustine:

Augustine’s explanation [is] one attempt to give language to a mystery we can never sound… [Nonetheless, he wins] his debate with Pelagius. [For] the latter denies the enigma of [our brokenness] altogether [as though] there is no mystery here to find language for. Augustine [is] right at least in identifying the question, whatever one thinks of his answer.\(^{345}\)

Augustine did not just invent a paradoxical interpretation of the human condition: he saw that—insofar as we are both rational and animal—the human condition is itself paradoxical.

7.2.3.3. Conversion

If our desire is for that which is desirable without qualification—and if we are rational animals, are imprisoned in a world of inevitable qualification—then we cannot redeem ourselves as we are: we stand in need of a redemption so radical that we cannot as we are even see it.

This is a bit elliptical, of course, but to say more is to delve further into metaphor—and no metaphor is perfect. Nonetheless, some have stood the test of time. One among them is the spatial metaphor of Plato—the Allegory of the Cave.\textsuperscript{346} Another is the metaphor of Augustine—also spatial: though we are tempted toward the objects that lie \textit{before} us, we can find what is desirable without qualification only if we look \textit{within} ourselves. Either way, we must turn ourselves altogether—must, that is, undergo \textit{conversion}.  

To undergo conversion is not to add some new object to our lives but rather to change our interpretation of the lives that we are already living: it is to find our interactions with one another—that is, our words—meaningful not because of what those interactions might gain us but rather in themselves. To quote Wittgenstein again:

\begin{quote}
If good or bad willing changes the world, it can only change the limits of the world, not the facts… In brief, the world must thereby become quite another. It must so to speak wax or wane as a whole.
The world of the happy is quite another than that of the unhappy.\textsuperscript{347}
\end{quote}

To undergo conversion is to see God reflected in every aspect of our lives—less in the objects that we pursue than in the pursuit of them. It is, in short, to interpret our language-games as \textit{practices} rather than as \textit{institutions}. If we change how we interpret our language-games, however, we will inevitably change \textit{which} language-games we play: we will modify those language-games that ask us to make war upon the earth and upon one another, to fight and die for what can never fully and finally satisfy us.

\textsuperscript{346} Bizarrely, MacIntyre suggests that Augustine, in his doctrine of original sin, contradicts Plato—as though our imprisonment in illusion, our need for a teacher miraculously free from illusion, and our liberation through conversion by this teacher were not already implied in the \textit{Republic}. See MacIntyre, \textit{Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry}, 82–104.

\textsuperscript{347} Wittgenstein, \textit{Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus}, § 6.4.3.
Redemption is, in this interpretation, the embrace of our physicality: it is the reinterpretation of what seemed our wickedness—of our inevitable concern with what money, power, and status can buy—as nothing more than who we are. There is therefore a sense in which redemption from original sin requires only the recognition that original sin is an illusion—and yet, paradoxically, nonetheless real for that: our only fundamental brokenness is, in this interpretation, our conviction of our fundamental brokenness. The moral paradox of original sin is not solved but evaporated: to be redeemed, to become more than we are, is to cease to strive to become somehow more than we are—a striving that is, admittedly, fundamental to who we are. Less paradoxically: to be redeemed is to no longer strive to make ourselves equal to God. To undergo conversion to find humility.\footnote{348}

Augustine hopes that his readers will, like him, find this humility—that they will realize, in turning toward what is above them, their own smallness. Wittgenstein, Mulhall suggests, hopes the same thing:

Wittgenstein’s representation of Augustine’s picture as primitive… suggests that things need not be this way. The wager upon which his therapeutic philosophical practice is… founded is that we can inhabit our life of and with language otherwise.\footnote{349}

Dogmatic philosophy, in this interpretation, is not just perversely theoretical—is not, in other words, just our misunderstanding of our language: it is also perversely practical—is also, in other words, our transformation of our language so that it more and more matches our misunderstanding. Just so, therapeutic philosophy, in this interpretation, is not just theoretical—is not, in other words, just our liberation from our misunderstanding

\footnote{348} There is, in all of this, more than a whiff of the Paradox of Quietism.

\footnote{349} Mulhall, \textit{Philosophical Interpretations of the Fall}, 112.
of our language: it is also practical—is also, in other words, our transformation of our language so that it is less and less the product of our misunderstanding.

Again, one might worry that Mulhall overinterprets Wittgenstein: though Wittgenstein was, no doubt, severely critical of the instrumentality of his culture, there seems little indication that Wittgenstein sees either dogmatic or therapeutic philosophy as practical in precisely this way—as capable of transforming not only our understanding of ordinary language but also what language counts for us as ordinary. Regardless, this is precisely what MacIntyre sees: dogmatic philosophy, with its interpretation of our language-games primarily as institutions, has led us to build a society wherein more and more of our rules are merely means to ends beyond themselves—and are, as such, to be broken whenever they do not meet those ends.

But why, one might ask, is this so bad? After all, aren’t our language-games justified only insofar as they meet our needs? And don’t we need what money, power, and status can buy—even if these needs can never be fully and finally satisfied? Wittgenstein does not ask this question; to answer it, we must—with MacIntyre—employ a sociology rather more reflective.

7.3. The Emotivist Society

Wittgenstein implies that, for one trained to play a given language-game, how one should play that game is fairly unambiguous. MacIntyre realizes, however, that one can interpret

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every language-game in two subtly but significantly different ways: though every language-game is defined by the rules particular to it, those rules can be interpreted either instrumentally or as ends in themselves. This is because, though the rules of every language-game are justified insofar as following them meets our needs, our needs are of two very different kinds—external to the playing of the relevant language-game, and internal to the playing of that game. And this matters, MacIntyre argues, because one will often find oneself torn between those interpretations—between seeing the relevant language-game as a practice and seeing it as an institution: insofar as one interprets a given language-game as a practice, one will strive to follow its rules, while, insofar as one interprets a given language-game as an institution, one will be tempted to break its rules—and, in the long run, remake its rules—whenever those rules are not the most efficient means toward the relevant end.

But to use the word “temptation” is to imply that one should not break the rules of a given language-game whenever they are not the most efficient means toward the relevant end. Is efficiency so wicked, then? What would be so bad, after all, about a society wherein we interpreted all of our language-games as institutions directed primarily toward what money, power, and status can buy?

To answer this question, MacIntyre takes up the reflective sociology of such a society—ours. We live, MacIntyre quips, in an emotivist society—one marked, in other words, by rampant manipulation:

[An emotivist society is one without] any genuine distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations.351

351 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 23. Technically, MacIntyre does not use the term “emotivist society,” but it seems to be the term preferred by those who discuss his thought: see, for a representative example,
Initially, this claim might strike one as odd: how could our society be emotivist in a way that other societies are not? For emotivism is, one might protest, a metaethical theory—one that, if true, apparently explains the meaning of all moral language in all societies, not just ours:

Emotivism is the doctrine that all… moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral… in character.\textsuperscript{352}

There are, of course, many ways to express preference: “I prefer peace to war” is, for example, at least as much an expression of preference as is “peace is good, war evil.” If the latter means only what the former means, one might object, why would anyone ever bother to utter the latter? Indeed, one who utters “peace is good, war evil” seems to contradict one who utters “war is good, peace evil”; why would either speaker risk the illusion of contradiction when the first could utter “I prefer peace to war” and the second

\textsuperscript{352} MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 11–12. MacIntyre seems to steamroll two distinctions—that between subjectivism and expressivism and that between emotivism and prescriptivism, two kinds of expressivism. Subjectivism interprets moral judgments to be descriptions of their speakers’ attitudes—and thus cognitive—while expressivism interprets those judgments to be expressions of those attitudes—and thus noncognitive. Emotivism interprets moral judgments to be expressions of attitude akin to exclamations, while prescriptivism interprets those judgments to be expressions of attitude akin to imperatives. One source of confusion in all of this is that C. L. Stevenson, who seems to be a prescriptivist, is often cited as the paradigmatic emotivist—perhaps because he fails to emphasize, unlike the paradigmatic prescriptivist R. M. Hare, that moral judgments abstract from their contexts of utterance in a way that certain other imperatives do not. Another source of confusion is that, though expressivism was first interpreted as a noncognitivist alternative to subjectivism, expressivists like Simon Blackburn have recently come to reinterpret expressivism: if one accepts a deflationary theory of truth—if the truth and falsehood of a given statement are determined solely by the rules of the relevant language-game—then one might consider moral judgments, though mere expressions of preference, true or false in their own way. See Simon Blackburn, \textit{Ruling Passions} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Is MacIntyre justified in steamrolling all of this? Well, in his defense, what is uncharitably interpreted as subjectivism seems to have often been an attempt to articulate expressivism, while what is uncharitably interpreted as emotivism seems to have often been an attempt to articulate prescriptivism. And what is uncharitably interpreted as noncognitivist expressivism—in whatever variety—seems to have often been an attempt to articulate an expressivism that is at least somewhat cognitivist. Indeed, all of these positions seem to be attempts to articulate in the arid language of philosophical analysis an anxiety that is easier to articulate colloquially: in our moral judgments, we find ourselves seriously and suddenly adrift—making heartfelt but contradictory demands on one another that seem, in the end, surprisingly arbitrary. As we will see, MacIntyre agrees—even if his analysis of the situation is subtly but significantly different.
“I prefer war to peace”? Indeed, if emotivism is true, it might seem that only a preference for war could explain the decision to use moral language rather than some other way of expressing preference.

It is perhaps for this reason that mainstream emotivists extend their doctrine. Moral judgments, according to those emotivists who follow C. L. Stevenson, are those expressions of preference that are meant to alter the preferences of those who hear them:

Stevenson… asserted that the sentence “This is good” means roughly the same as “I approve of this; do so as well,” trying to capture by this equivalence both the function of the moral judgment as expressive of the speaker’s attitudes and the function of the moral judgment as designed to influence the hearer’s attitudes.

Like every emotivist, Stevenson strives to explain all moral language in all societies. When Horace writes that “it is sweet and right to die for the fatherland,” he means, according to Stevenson, “I approve of dying for the fatherland; do so as well”; Just so, when Wilfred Owen quotes Horace with bitter irony, he means, according to Stevenson, “I disapprove of dying for the fatherland; do so as well.” Horace and Owen might not contradict one another theoretically, then, but they do contradict one another practically—insofar as they issue contradictory commands. Indeed, it is presumably so that their expressions of preference might also be commands that they have decided to use moral language rather than some other way of expressing their preferences.

Oddly, MacIntyre does not make this connection: his mention of Stevenson is immediately followed by his objection that no emotivist has articulated what makes moral judgments different from other expressions of preference. Yet it seems clear that this is exactly what those emotivists who follow Stevenson seek to do.

MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 12.

Horace, *Odes*, § 3.2.13. Translation mine. (I would have liked to translate “decorum” as “polite”—in order to capture the radical difference between our categories of moral evaluation and those of Horace—but poetic rhythm seems to demand a single syllable.)
Yet this only trades one mystery for another: why would any expression of preference carry more weight than any other? Why, for example, would I ever utter “peace is good, war evil”—thus appending “do so as well” to “I prefer peace to war”? What reason could anyone have to listen to this command beyond what reason he or she already had to conform his or her preference to mine?

We will return to this objection—one that, in a certain perverse way, MacIntyre answers. In the meantime, consider the emotivist doctrine that all moral language in all societies merely expresses preferences. This doctrine might seem rather odd to one familiar with the Wittgensteinian insight that language-games change over time:

[The] diversity [of language-games] is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten.356

To one familiar with the Wittgensteinian Picture of Language, the emotivist insistence that all moral language in all societies is doing any one thing seems downright suspicious. MacIntyre suggests that the early emotivists did, in fact, reach certain insights about the way the language-game of moral evaluation was played in their time—but then assumed, wrongly, that the language-game had always been played like that:

It is… no accident that the acutest of the modern founders of emotivism… were pupils of Moore; it is not implausible to suppose that they did in fact confuse moral utterance at Cambridge… after 1903 with moral utterance as such, and that they therefore presented what was in essentials a correct account of the former as though it were an account of the latter.357

Interpreted through the lens of their own experience, the moral language of other times struck the early emotivists as just like their own:


357 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 17.
One thinks that one is tracing nature over and over again, [but] one is merely tracing round the frame though which we look at it.\footnote{Wittgenstein, \textit{Philosophical Investigations}, § 114.}

The solution to this error is, of course, the same as it always is:

Don’t think, but look!\footnote{Wittgenstein, \textit{Philosophical Investigations}, § 66.}

Thus does MacIntyre trade the \textit{philosophical analysis} of moral language for its \textit{philosophical investigation}—that is, for reflective sociology:

Let us… disregard emotivism’s claim to universality of scope; and let us instead consider emotivism as a theory which has been advanced in historically specific conditions.\footnote{MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 14.}

As a \textit{metaethical} theory—an explanation, that is, of the meaning of \textit{all} moral language in \textit{all} societies—MacIntyre considers emotivism almost trivially false. But one might see his criticism as a \textit{defense} of emotivism as a \textit{sociological} theory—as an account of how those in \textit{our} society use moral language. And this \textit{defense} of emotivism as a sociological \textit{theory} is compatible with—indeed, makes almost inevitable—an \textit{assault} upon emotivism as a sociological \textit{reality}: if emotivism is \textit{true} as an account of how \textit{we} use moral language—but \textit{false} as an account of how \textit{others} use moral language—then \textit{we can decide to speak differently}.

But should we? Though moral language seems pointless—since, again, “do so as well” seems, when appended to “I approve of this,” entirely superfluous—it also seems innocuous: men and women have preferences. Why should they not express those preferences? In order to answer this question, MacIntyre addresses a second problem with emotivism: not only wrong to interpret moral language in \textit{every} society as nothing
more than the expression of preferences, emotivism is—and this is, as it turns out, a closely related objection—also wrong to equate the meaning of moral language with the use of moral language.

To one familiar with the Wittgensteinian Picture of Language, of course, this second objection will likely sound insane: how could a word mean other than what it is used to mean?

7.3.1. Intuitionism

In order to answer this question, MacIntyre investigates the historical conditions that led to the rise of emotivism:

It is only in [the twentieth] century that emotivism has flourished as a theory on its own. And it did so as a response to [intuitionism,] which flourished, especially in England, between 1903 and 1939. We ought therefore to ask whether emotivism as a theory may not have been both a response to, and in the very first instance, an account of not, as its protagonists indeed supposed, moral language as such, but moral language in England in the years after 1903 as and when that language was interpreted in accordance with [intuitionism,] to the refutation of which emotivism was primarily dedicated.361

Intuitionism is like emotivism in that each is a metaethical theory: each strives to explain what all moral language in all societies means. Yet intuitionism interprets moral language as anything but the expression of preference:

“Good,” [according to intuitionism,] is the name of a simple indefinable property, a property different from that named by “pleasant” or… any other natural property… Propositions declaring this or that to be good are what Moore called “intuitions”; they are incapable of proof or disproof

361 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 14.
and indeed no evidence or reasoning whatever can be adduced in their favor or disfavor.\textsuperscript{362}

Intuitionism is also like emotivism in another way, then: each holds that moral judgments need not receive, and indeed cannot receive, any justification. One consequence of this is that, if either is true as a metaethical theory, then one has far less reason to read the ethical theories of… well, anyone. It seems that those around G. E. Moore—the Cambridge don whose 1901 \textit{Principia Ethica} is the founding document of intuitionism—were thrilled at this news:

Keynes [initially] treated [intuitionism] as “the beginning of a renaissance,” [while] Lytton Strachey declared [it] to have “shattered all writers on ethics from Aristotle and Christ to Herbert Spencer and Mr. Bradley” and… Leonard Woolf described [it] as “substituting for the religious and philosophical nightmares, delusions, hallucinations in which Jehovah, Christ and St. Paul, Plato, Kant and Hegel had entangled us, the fresh air and pure light of commonsense.”\textsuperscript{363}

One might expect such enthusiasm from, say, a graduate student crushed by his guilt over never having finished the \textit{Outlines of the Philosophy of Right}. Indeed, it seems difficult to explain such enthusiasm otherwise: Christ—who was not a writer at all, much less one on ethics—taught merely that one should love one’s neighbor as oneself. Is this really a nightmare? Or were they morons who followed Moore? Neither, MacIntyre insists:

[Intuitionism] is great silliness of course; but it is the great silliness of highly intelligent and perceptive people.\textsuperscript{364}

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\textsuperscript{362} MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 15.
\textsuperscript{364} MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 16.
\end{flushright}
MacIntyre suggests that the explanation for the silly enthusiasm of Keynes, Strachey, and Woolf lies in another doctrine of Moore’s *Principia Ethica*—one today often forgotten:

> It turns out to be the case... that... the achievement of friendship and the contemplation of what is beautiful in nature or in art [are]... the sole justifiable ends of human action.\(^{365}\)

This *ethical* theory is, as MacIntyre notes, logically independent of the *metaethical* theory of intuitionism:

> [Moore’s] positions are logically independent of each other. There would be no breach of consistency if one were to affirm [one] and deny the other.\(^{366}\)

Of course, Moore’s ethical theory—whatever it was—would *have* to be independent of his metaethical theory: again, if intuitionism is true, then *no* ethical theory can receive *any* justification. Nonetheless, it is no coincidence that this particular ethical theory and this particular metaethical theory find their way into the same text. For the former seems... well, *reprehensible*—that is, *unjustifiable*. Only one who held the latter—only one who held that *every* ethical theory was just as unjustifiable—could stomach the former.

Why, then, did the Bloomsbury Group—Keynes, Strachey, Woolf, and all of the others who followed Moore—adopt intuitionism? Because, MacIntyre implies, they were deeply narcissistic: they were hipsters who had come to care only about parties, music, and hooking up. Yet they could not admit this to themselves without coming to hate themselves:

\(^{365}\) MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 15.

\(^{366}\) MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 15. MacIntyre also notes that consequentialism—a third doctrine that Moore endorses—is logically independent of either of these theories.
The group who were to become Bloomsbury had already accepted [certain] values… but could not accept these as merely their own personal preferences. They felt the need to find objective and impersonal justification for rejecting all claims except those of personal intercourse and of the beautiful… The whole of the past is [therefore] envisaged as a burden that Moore has helped them cast off.  

The Bloomsbury Group adopted intuitionism, MacIntyre argues, as a defense mechanism: far from narcissistic, their rejection of “all claims on behalf of social action conceived as a worthwhile end”—of, that, anything beyond their own amusement—was deeply moral. Was, indeed, obviously moral—so obviously that anyone who doubted it was morally blind.  

Lest we be too harsh, note that this silliness is that of the hipsters of every generation. And it is not as though those who remained devoted to sacrifice—as it turned out, on behalf of the British Empire—came to a different conclusion in the end:  

The aesthetic can be chosen seriously… I think especially of those young men of my father’s generation who watched their own earlier ethical principles die along with the deaths of their friends in the trenches in the mass murder of Ypres and the Somme; and who returned determined that nothing was ever going to matter to them again and invented the aesthetic triviality of the nineteen-twenties.  

Though the Bloomsbury Group is apt for teasing—and MacIntyre teases them—their refusal to conform to the stern moralism of their Edwardian brethren seems less shameful when one sees that moralism as the fuel of a vast imperialist machine that would, within two decades, tear the world apart.

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367 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 16.  
368 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 16.  
369 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 41. Surprisingly, MacIntyre does not make this connection explicit.
7.3.2. Emotivism

In the meantime, our Bloomsbury friends got down to business—that is, romancing one another. This brought with it certain profound philosophical questions:

“If A was in love with B and believed that B reciprocated his feelings, whereas in fact B did not, but was in love with C, the state of affairs was certainly not as good as it would have been if A had been right, but was it worse or better than it would become if A discovered his mistake?” Or again: “If A was in love with B under a misapprehension as to B’s qualities, was this better or worse than A’s not being in love at all?”

There is in these questions a decline from the question of whether it is better to flee to Megara or Boeotia and live or to stay in Athens and die. Nonetheless, Moore insists, that question too can only be answered in one way:

How were such questions to be answered? By following Moore’s prescriptions in precise fashion. Do you or do you not discern the presence or absence of the non-natural property of good in greater or lesser degree? And what if two observers disagree? Then, so the answer went… either the two were focusing on different subject matters, without recognizing this, or one had perceptions superior to the other. But, of course, as Keynes tells us, what was really happening was something quite other: “In practice, victory was with those who could speak with the greatest appearance of clear, undoubting conviction and could best use the accents of infallibility.”

In arguing moral questions, the men and women of Bloomsbury took themselves to be arguing matters of fact. But matters of fact are those that are argued from evidence that is shared among subjects—and intuitions about morality were, in Edwardian Britain, somewhat less likely to be shared among subjects than were intuitions about, say, color. In arguing moral questions, then, the men and women of Bloomsbury were merely

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arguing—were, that is, merely shouting at one another, however quietly. What seemed a struggle for truth was, in fact, merely a struggle for victory:

An acute observer at the time and Keynes himself retrospectively might well have put matters thus: these people take themselves to be identifying the presence of a non-natural property, which they call “good”; but there is in fact no such property and they are doing no more and no other than expressing their feelings and attitudes, disguising the expression of preference and whim by an interpretation of their own utterance and behavior which confers upon it an objectivity that it does not in fact possess.\footnote{MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 17.}

This is emotivism—albeit emotivism with a twist: the men and women of Bloomsbury insisted that they were doing more than merely commanding others to share their preferences. This was false, of course, but said insistence was nonetheless their most powerful weapon in the struggle for victory: one is far more likely to obey an arbitrary command if one is told that said command is more than arbitrary. Indeed, one is likely to obey \textit{any} command \textit{only} if one sees it as rooted in something beyond itself—whether the threat of punishment, the promise of reward, or some moral foundation that one already presupposes:

Consider two different ways in which I may provide backing for an injunction to someone else to preform some specific action. In the first type of case I say, “Do so-and-so.” The person addressed replies, “Why should I do so-and-so?” I reply, “Because I wish it.” Here I have given the person addressed no reason to do what I command or request unless he or she independently possesses some particular reason for paying regard to my wishes… Contrast with this the type of case in which the answer to the question “Why should I do so-and-so?” … is not “Because I wish it,” but some such utterance as… “Because it is your duty.” In this type of case the reason given for action either is or is not a good reason for performing the action in question independently of who utters it or even of whether it is uttered at all. Moreover the appeal is to a type of consideration which is independent of the relationship between speaker and hearer. Its use presupposes the existence of impersonal criteria—the existence,
independently of the preferences or attitudes of speaker and hearer, of [a standard] of... duty.\textsuperscript{373}

This is the reason that emotivism is, at best, a sociological theory—\textit{is}, in other words, true only of some societies and not of others. For men and women \textit{can} use moral language to express their preferences only when moral language is \textit{not} rooted in some foundation deeper than that of mere preferences. But men and women \textit{will bother} to use moral language to express their preferences only when those who hear them still think that moral language \textit{is} rooted in some foundation deeper than that of mere preferences. Emotivism will only be true, in other words, of societies in transition between a moral foundation that most presuppose and the lack of such a moral foundation—a society like that of Edwardian Britain.

As soon as everyone in a given society realizes that moral language is no longer rooted in some moral foundation that most presuppose, emotivism will no longer be true—\textit{because} men and women will no longer bother to listen to, and thus no longer bother to use, moral language. To some degree, of course, precisely this happened—not only in Britain but also in America: since the coronation of Edward VII—and especially since the coronation of Elizabeth II—men and women have largely ceased to use what Bernard Williams calls “thick moral concepts”—words like “chaste” and “blasphemous.” Of course, the transition is not yet total: what Bernard Williams calls “thin moral concepts”—words like “good,” “evil,” “right,” and “wrong”—remain very much within our vocabulary. But no doubt this is only because thin moral concepts are far less

\textsuperscript{373} MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 9.

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determinate in the rules of their application than thick moral concepts—and so can be conscripted into the service of our preferences, whatever they are.\footnote{374}{See Bernard Williams, \textit{Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 151–152.}

7.3.2.1. Meaning and Use

Consider once again the way Wittgenstein states the thesis of his \textit{Investigations}:

The meaning of a word is its use in the language.\footnote{375}{Wittgenstein, \textit{Philosophical Investigations}, § 43.}

But MacIntyre sees that a word might mean something other than what it is used to mean—for the meaning of a word and the use of that word to come apart. Or, better, it is possible for the hearers of certain words to systematically take them to mean something other than what the speakers of those words use them to mean. And this is possible not only in cases of deceit—indeed, sometimes the hearers who take the words to mean one thing are identical to the speakers who use them to mean something else:

The agent himself might well be among those for whom use was concealed by meaning. He might well, precisely because he was self-conscious about the meaning of the words that he used, be assured that he was appealing to independent impersonal criteria, when all that he was in fact doing was expressing his feelings to others in a manipulative way.\footnote{376}{MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 14.}

We find an example of this disconnect between meaning and use in moral language—at least as it was used by the generation of Bloomsbury:

When someone utters a moral judgment, such as “This is right” or “This is good,” it does not mean the same as “I approve of this; do so as well” or

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\footnotetext{374}{See Bernard Williams, \textit{Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 151–152.}
\footnotetext{375}{Wittgenstein, \textit{Philosophical Investigations}, § 43.}
\footnotetext{376}{MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 14.}
\end{footnotesize}
“Hurrah for this!” or any of the other attempts at equivalence suggested by emotive theorists; but… it might plausibly be claimed… that in using such sentences to say whatever they mean, the agent was in fact doing nothing other than expressing his feelings or attitudes and attempting to influence the feelings and attitudes of others. If the emotive theory thus interpreted were correct it would follow that the meaning and the use of moral expressions were, or at the very least had become, radically discrepant with each other. Meaning would be at odds in such a way that meaning would tend to conceal use. We could not safely infer what someone who uttered a moral judgment was doing merely by listening to what he said.\footnote{377}{MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 13–14.}

Implied in this is the answer to our question of why anyone would ever bother to use moral language rather than some other way of expressing preference—would ever bother, that is, to append “do so as well” to “I approve of this”: the speaker thereby implies to the hearer that he or she does have a reason to conform his or her preference to that of the speaker—even when he or she does not.

The speaker will only bother to imply this so long as the hearer is likely to hear it—and the hearer will hear it only so long as he or she assumes that moral language is rooted in some foundation that he or she already presupposes—loosely speaking, some set of rules, some language-game that the hearer is playing. Sometimes, of course, moral language \textit{is} rooted in a foundation that its hearers already presuppose: when Horace wrote that it is sweet and right to die for the fatherland, both he and his readers took for granted the righteousness of the Roman Empire—its role as the beacon of civilization in a world otherwise dark.\footnote{378}{This example assumes, of course, that Horace did not write cynically—that he was not, or at least not entirely, a tool of Augustus.} But sometimes moral language is \textit{not} rooted in a foundation that its hearers already presuppose: when Wilfrid Owen wrote, in effect, that it was sour and wrong to die for the fatherland, he implied to his readers that they had reason to agree—

\footnote{377}{MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 13–14.}

\footnote{378}{This example assumes, of course, that Horace did not write cynically—that he was not, or at least not entirely, a tool of Augustus.}
even though many of them, those who believed in the righteousness of the British Empire, did not. This is, of course, manipulation—even if manipulation in service of what today strikes most of us as the obvious truth. For better or worse, of course, such manipulation will reign only so long:

The questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn… [Doubting these hinges] would put me in a position in which I could not go on with the old language-game any further. In which I was torn away from the sureness of the game. Indeed, doesn’t it seem obvious that the possibility of a language-game is conditioned by certain facts? 

One such fact is, of course, commitment to playing the relevant language-game. Once those who hear moral language realize that it is spoken by those not committed to any morality that they themselves presuppose, they will cease to pay attention to it—and, because of this, such language will fade into irrelevance. Open conflict will take its place—no less violent, but at least more honest, than manipulation. To judge from our politics, our own generation seems to be partway through this transformation; if anything has changed since the publication of After Virtue, it is likely this.

7.3.2.2. Management

Insofar as our society is still a society—insofar as our politics are still a deliberation, however heated, and not merely a war, however cool—our society is still emotivist: insofar as we appeal in our moral arguments to a moral foundation that we no longer

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presuppose, we manipulate one another. Manipulation is, of course, a form of instrumentalization—and a particularly sinister one at that: its efficacy depends its victim failing to realize that he or she has become an instrument.\footnote{I do not claim that it is the \textit{most} sinister form of instrumentalization: one can also instrumentalize another by taking his or her wallet. Which seems pretty bad too.}

Why, then is it so bad to interpret our language-games instrumentally—as institutions, as mere means to ends beyond themselves? MacIntyre provides the answer: to instrumentalize our language-games is to instrumentalize one another—and to instrumentalize one another is, in any society losing its shared moral foundation, to manipulate one another. Because manipulation is, in such a society, inevitably one of the most efficient instruments—since it is a way to make others collaborate, even collaborate gladly, in their own defeat:

To [manipulate someone] is to seek to make him or her an instrument of my purposes by adducing whatever influences or considerations will in fact be effective on this or that occasion. The generalizations of the sociology and psychology of persuasion are what I shall need to guide me, not the standards of a normative rationality.\footnote{MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 24.}

Again, an emotivist society is one wherein men and women have forgotten how to play language-games for their own sake—wherein they can no longer see the point of following the rules when it would be more efficient to break them. And to lose sight of this just is, of course, to lose agreement on any shared moral foundation.

But is our society really emotivist? Have we really forgotten how to play language-games for their own sake, really lost our shared moral foundation? As usual, philosophical \textit{analysis} cannot answer this question. MacIntyre thus brings to bear philosophical \textit{investigation}—that is, reflective sociology:
A moral philosophy... characteristically presupposes a sociology. For every moral philosophy offers explicitly or implicitly at least a partial conceptual analysis of the relationship of an agent to his or her reasons, motives, intentions and actions, and in so doing generally presupposes some claim that these concepts are embodied or at least can be in the real social world... Thus it... follows that we have not yet fully understood the claims of any moral philosophy until we have spelled out what its social embodiment would be.\textsuperscript{382}

The social embodiment of any moral philosophy is—among other things—the lives of the men and women who presuppose that moral philosophy in their interactions with one another. But certain of these lives are paradigmatic insofar as they are particular to that moral philosophy—and especially insofar as they are the archetypes that the men and women who presuppose that moral philosophy use to understand themselves. MacIntyre calls such lives those of “characters”:

[Characters] are [not] marginal figures in the social drama of the present age. I intend this dramatic metaphor with some seriousness. There is a type of dramatic tradition—Japanese Noh plays and English medieval morality plays are examples—which possesses a set of stock characters immediately recognizable to the audience. Such characters partially define the possibilities of plot and action. To understand them is to be provided with a means of interpreting the behavior of the actors who play them, just because a similar understanding informs the intentions of the actors themselves.\textsuperscript{383}

Who, then, would be the characters of an emotivist society? And do we see such characters in our society? MacIntyre argues that we do; one of these characters—whom MacIntyre calls the “manager”—is especially unforgettable.

Consider once again the example of chess. To forget how to play chess for its own sake is to lose agreement on any shared ludic foundation: once everyone has forgotten how to play chess for its own sake—and everyone realizes this—no one will bother to

\textsuperscript{382} MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 23.

\textsuperscript{383} MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 27.
play chess anymore. For every game will have become nothing more than an opportunity for cheating. In the meantime, however, those players will rise to prominence who are especially efficient at the achievement of what seems to be checkmate—whether this achievement requires the clandestine breaking of rules or not.

Just so, to forget how to do anything for its own sake is to lose agreement on any shared moral foundation: once everyone has forgotten how do anything for its own sake—and everyone realizes this—no one will bother to play any language-game anymore. For every language-game will have become nothing more than an opportunity for warfare of one kind or another. And for this to happen is for society to revert to the state of nature—whether to the hot war of all against all or merely to the cold war of the social contract:

In any society [that interpreted its language-games primarily as means to ends beyond themselves] competitiveness would be the dominant and even exclusive feature. We have a brilliant portrait of such a society in Hobbes’s account of the state of nature.384

Until this happens, however, those men and women will rise to prominence who are especially efficient at the achievement of what money, power, and status can buy—whether this achievement requires the clandestine breaking of rules or not.

384 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 196. Hobbes is right to call the war of all against all the “state of nature” insofar as it is the condition into which we would fall without culture—without, that is, language-games that we might play for their own sakes. He is wrong, of course, to suppose that any merely human sovereign could keep the social contract—a form of cooperation that is merely an elaboration of the war of all against all, and therefore merely an especially clever form of competition—from imploding under its own weight: men and women who cooperate merely for their own benefit will turn on one another as soon as it benefits them—and no merely human sovereign, however absolute, can prevent this absolutely. Locke saw this—which is the reason that Locke presupposes that God is the absolute sovereign who enforces our rights—natural rights from which our legal rights, established in the social contract, are merely derivative. To admire Locke for this insight is, of course, not to ignore his oversights. See Hobbes, Leviathan, and John Locke, Two Treatises of Government, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
MacIntyre argues that our society is indeed dominated, both in its understanding of itself and in reality, by those trained in the efficient achievement of what money, power, and status can buy—that is, by managers:

The [institution] is characteristically engaged in a competitive struggle for scarce resources to put to the service of its predetermined ends. It is therefore a central responsibility of managers to direct and redirect their [institutions’] available resources, both human and non-human, as effectively as possible toward those ends. Every [institution] embodies some explicit or implicit definition of costs and benefits from which the criteria of effectiveness are derived. Bureaucratic rationality is the rationality of matching means to ends economically and efficiently.  

Of course, the manager is not the only character particular to our emotivist society:

The figure cut by present-day conservative moralists, with their inflated and self-righteous ironic rhetoric, should be set alongside [the other] figures whom I [identify] as notable characters in the cultural dramas of modernity: that of the therapist, who has in the last twenty years become bemused by biochemical discoveries; that of the corporate manager, who is now mouthing formulas that she or he learned in a course in business ethics, while still trying to justify her or his pretensions to expertise; and that of the aesthete, who is presently emerging from a devotion to conceptual art. So the conservative moralist has become one more stock character in the scripted conversations of the ruling elites of advanced modernity.  

These four characters—or, rather, men and women insofar as they are these four characters—are defined by their instrumentality: though the manager chases money, the therapist adjustment, the aesthete beauty, and the conservative moralist the fruition of the

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385 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 25. Of course, I have changed “organization” to “institution” throughout this quotation: MacIntyre’s discussion of emotivism comes early in *After Virtue*, while his contrast of practices and institutions comes later. I assume, however, that the society of institutions that he discusses later is the same as the emotivist society that he discusses earlier—that is, ours.

386 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, xv. One might suggest that MacIntyre intends some homology between the manager, the therapist, and the aesthete—the three characters of his emotivist society—and practices, narratives, and traditions—the three aspects of his positive metaethics: just as the manager of an institution disregards the relevant practice, so the therapist of a life disregards the relevant narrative and the aesthete of a society disregards the relevant tradition. Yet this suggestion is thrown into doubt by this quotation, taken from the preface to the twenty-fifth-anniversary edition to *After Virtue*, wherein MacIntyre sketches a fourth character who is particular to our emotivist society.
vast right-wing conspiracy, each chases his or her end with whatever means are most efficient.\textsuperscript{387} As MacIntyre suggests, such means often include manipulation: the manager, he notes, cites—whenever it sounds convincing—a shared moral foundation that no longer exists. Indeed, a cynic might worry that we teach applied ethics—will all of its contradictory and incommensurable principles—only so that our students might learn the sophistry they will need in their careers to justify their actions, whatever those actions might be.

7.4. Practices

So… what would be the \textit{alternative} to our emotivist society? What would it be to interpret our language-games primarily as \textit{practices} rather than as \textit{institutions}? What would it be to play our language-games as though most of them had no ends beyond themselves—as though their rules were inviolable? What would it be to live in a society \textit{not} marked by rampant manipulation?

Well—first of all—such a society would be marked by rather different language-games. For, though every language-game has two aspects, not every language-game can be interpreted such that its institutional aspect is secondary: some language-games are such that they are \textit{obviously} and \textit{inevitably} directed primarily toward ends beyond themselves. Indeed, MacIntyre reserves the word “practice” for those language-games

\textsuperscript{387} It is not obvious that the therapist has the cultural cachet that he or she once did—though the conservative moralist is ascendant indeed.
that *can* be interpreted *primarily* as practices—denying it to those language-games more obviously instrumental:

Tic-tac-toe is not an example of a practice in this sense, nor is throwing a football with skill; but the game of football is, and so is chess. Bricklaying is not a practice; architecture is. Planting turnips is not a practice; farming is. So are the enquiries of physics, chemistry and biology, and so is the work of the historian, and so are painting and music.  

What would it be, after all, to play tic-tac-toe not for entertainment but because one was truly *dedicated* to tic-tac-toe *specifically*—even at the cost of boredom? What would it be, after all, to plant turnips not because one sought to eat or sell the turnips but because one was truly *dedicated* to the planting of turnips *specifically*—even at the cost of not planting crops tastier or more profitable? It is no coincidence, of course, that both playing tic-tac-toe and planting turnips can be and have been mechanized—that, indeed, the machines that we have built to play tic-tac-toe win more often than we can, the machines that we have built to plant turnips sow more seeds than we can.

Other language-games, however, *can* be interpreted primarily as practices: though every language-game is concerned to *some* degree with what money, power, and status can buy, *some* language-games can nonetheless be played primarily for their own sakes.

MacIntyre restricts the word “practice” to such language-games:

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389 For some reason, this is always a point of tremendous contention in teaching *After Virtue* to undergraduates: they always show enthusiasm for finding a way in which some activity—otherwise obviously instrumental—*can* be done as an end in itself. The most common way in which undergraduates do this is the articulation of a spiritual outlook within which some otherwise instrumental activity becomes a meditative practice; the repetitive character of many purely instrumental activities no doubt contributes to this. Such undergraduates are not wrong, of course—except insofar as, in articulating a spiritual outlook for the relevant activity, they have in effect articulated an entirely different form of life. And this is not to contradict MacIntyre. For there is no doubt that what seem purely instrumental activities *to us* might be done by others, in relevantly different societies, for their own sakes—just as many of the things that we do for our own sakes could not be done by those in relevantly different societies except purely instrumentally. One without faith, for example, would have no obvious reason to eat bread and drink wine unless hungry and thirsty.
By “practice” I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. 390

But what is it to adhere to the rules of a particular practice? What is it, in other words, to achieve the standards of excellence that define that practice?

7.4.1. Virtues

Well, to adhere to the rules of a particular practice is to exercise what MacIntyre calls a “virtue”:

A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods. 391

But this is hardly a definition: what is a virtue? Even if a substantive definition is not available, we should seek some definition of a virtue: how does its exercise tend to enable us to achieve those goods that are internal to the relevant practice?

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390 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 187.

391 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 191. Italicization omitted.
Traditionally, what is called a “virtue” is the disposition to see that a certain response to a particular aspect of the given situation is the right one—and, of course, to act accordingly. Courage, for example, is the disposition to see that a certain response to whatever is frightful in the given situation is the right one—and, of course, to act accordingly: to be courageous is—among other things—to overthrow a tyrant when one reasonably hopes that said tyrant can be overthrown.\footnote{This example assumes—fairly trivially—that it is right, all else equal, to overthrow a tyrant. Indeed, because the word “tyrant” seems a thick moral concept, this seems a matter of definition.}

Some such dispositions can be rendered as substantive rules: the disposition to respond rightly to those aspects of the given situation of the form “$x^y$” is just the disposition to multiply $x$ by itself $y$ times. One might call this disposition “the virtue of exponentiation.” Just so, the disposition to respond rightly to those aspects of the given situation that are one’s desire to kill an innocent is just the disposition never to indulge that desire. One might call this disposition “the virtue of not murdering anyone.” There is, of course, something faintly ridiculous about calling either of these dispositions a “virtue”: we are far more likely to say that one who possesses the former disposition “knows the rule of exponentiation,” that one who possesses the latter disposition “knows the rule against murder.” For we tend to restrict the term “virtues” to those dispositions to respond rightly to particular aspects of the given situation that cannot be rendered as substantive rules. And there are, John McDowell insists, such dispositions:

\begin{quote}
A conception of right conduct is grasped, as it were, from the inside out… If one attempted to reduce one’s conception of what [the virtues require] to a set of rules, then, however subtle and thoughtful one was in drawing
\end{quote}
up the code, cases would inevitably turn up in which a mechanical application of the rules would strike one as wrong. A virtue is, then, the disposition to apply rightly what Wittgenstein calls a “family-resemblance concept”—and to act accordingly: though one cannot state the necessary and sufficient conditions for an action to be courageous, one can nonetheless come to see—through training into a certain language-game, and by extension into a certain form of life—all and only courageous actions as relevantly similar to one another. And the same is true of the other virtues.

Lest this seem to rob the virtues of their dignity—to make them somehow less than fully rational—McDowell reminds us that every concept, family-resemblance or otherwise, depends for its application upon certain things happening to strike us as relevantly similar to one another. For example, to answer “6, 8, 10…” to “0, 2, 4” is to apply a concept that can be rendered in the form of necessary and sufficient conditions, of a substantive rule—specifically, and rather trivially, “take the last number in the series, add two, append that number to the series, and repeat.” But McDowell cites Wittgenstein’s argument—one that we saw in the last chapter—that every rule, mathematical or otherwise, can be interpreted in countless ways, and that it is lowly communal agreement that makes one interpretation correct and another incorrect:

Universal knowledge of how to extend the series interacts with particular knowledge of where one is in it, to produce a non-accidentally correct judgment as to what the next number is. In this case we can formulate [a substantive rule] so as to confer on the judgment the compellingness possessed by the conclusion of a proof. What is wrong is to take that fact to indicate that the [substantive rule] lays bare the inexorable workings of a machine: something whose operations, with our understanding of them,

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would not depend on the deliverances, in particular cases, of... [our] shared sense of what is similar to what else.\textsuperscript{394}

For example, it is only because “6, 8, 10...” happens to strike us as relevantly similar to “0, 2, 4” that the former is the correct extension of the latter—is the correct manifestation, that is, of the substantive rule “take the last number in the series, add two, append that number to the series, and repeat.” We can at least imagine a student who was struck otherwise—one who answered, say, “8, 16, 32...” rather than “6, 8, 10...”:

We say to him, “Look what you’re doing!”—He doesn’t understand. We say, “You should have added \textit{two:} look how [the series began]!”—He answers, “Yes, isn’t it right? I thought that was how I \textit{had} to do it.”—Or suppose he pointed to the series and said, “But I did go on in the same way.”—It would now be no use to say, “But can’t you see...?”—and go over the old explanations and examples for him again.\textsuperscript{395}

Since right and wrong are determined by communal agreement—or, better, by the form of life that a community agrees to inhabit—one among us who continued the series “0, 2, 4” with “8, 16, 32...” would be \textit{wrong}. But there is nothing in the \textit{series itself}—or, better, there is nothing in the marks “0, 2, 4”—that determines one answer to be right and another wrong. The student we have imagined is wrong \textit{only} because his or her \textit{instincts} differ from ours:

In such a case, we might perhaps say: this person finds it natural, once given our explanations, to understand our order \textit{[almost] as we would understand the order [“take the last number in the series, \textit{multiply by two, append that number to the series, and repeat.”]}} This case would have similarities to that in which it comes naturally to a person to react to the gesture of pointing with the hand by looking in the direction from fingertip to wrist, rather than from wrist to fingertip.\textsuperscript{396}

\textsuperscript{394} McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” 339.


\textsuperscript{396} Wittgenstein, \textit{Philosophical Investigations}, § 185.
Of course, if we can imagine one with these instincts, we can imagine many: we can imagine a community in which it would be right to continue the series “0, 2, 4” with “8, 16, 32…”—in which our instincts would steer us wrong. Lest this invite skepticism about normativity, McDowell reminds us that our sense of what is similar to what else is not our arbitrary decision. Rather, it is determined by the form of life that we inhabit:

It is… because of our own involvement in our “whirl of organism” that we can understand the [substantive rule] we produce as conferring that special compellingness on the judgment explained.  

Above, I suggested a continuation of the series that we would see as almost conforming to a substantive rule, albeit to a different substantive rule—“take the last number in the series, multiply by two, append that number to the series, and repeat”—in order to show just how plausible a different interpretation might be. But we can also imagine one who, instead of answering “6, 8, 10…” or even “8, 16, 32…” answered “rosebud”—or, for that matter, anything else whatsoever. Or, rather, we can imagine such things so long as we can imagine a sufficiently different form of life. Though there is a limit to our ability to do this.

7.4.1.2. Virtue in General

It is natural, McDowell implies, to see the distinctions among the virtues as artificial: one who lacks even one virtue cannot always see when his or her other virtues are irrelevant

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to the situation at hand. Courage, for example, might dispose one to overthrow, instead of submit to, a tyrant—but it might well be that what is relevant in the situation is not that the tyrant is frightful but rather that he or she yearns to abdicate.

Virtue, then, is—among other things—knowing when courage is less relevant than mercy. More generally, virtue is the disposition to see that a certain aspect of the given situation is the relevant one—and that a certain response to that aspect of the given situation is the right one. And, of course, to act accordingly.\(^{398}\)

7.4.1.3. Virtues and Practices

Certain particular virtues are, of course, more relevant to virtue in general than are others: the disposition to avoid early checkmates, like the disposition to overthrow tyrants, is relevant only to those playing particular language-games. But other virtues—especially some of those called “the cardinal virtues”\(^{399}\)—are relevant, MacIntyre argues, to those playing every language-game:

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\(^{398}\) Perhaps to see that a certain aspect of the given situation is the relevant one—and that a certain response to that aspect of the given situation is the right one—*just is* to act accordingly: if one does not act accordingly, in this interpretation, one has not in fact seen sufficiently clearly which aspect of the given situation is the relevant one—or, perhaps, which response to that aspect of the given situation is the right one. Indeed, McDowell suggests, Plato and Aristotle assimilate seeing what is virtuous and acting accordingly in just this way.

\(^{399}\) In the *Republic*, Plato has Socrates list—for principled, if not always entirely convincing, reasons—wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice as the cardinal virtues. To possess these four virtues, Socrates implies, is also to possess every other virtue: to be wise, for example, is to know—among other things—how to avoid early checkmate. Indeed, in the *Protagoras*, Plato has Socrates argue that one cannot possess any virtue without possessing wisdom—just as one cannot possess wisdom without possessing all of the other virtues: courage, moderation, and justice are, Socrates argues, merely the wisdom that immediate pain is sometimes the cost of later pleasure. However, because this argument depends on
The essential function of the virtues is clear. Without them, without justice, courage and truthfulness, practices could not resist the corrupting power of institutions... [For] without the virtues there could be a recognition only of what I have called external goods and not at all of internal goods in the context of practices.

What, then, is the role of the virtues in MacIntyre’s positive metaethics? How, specifically, do their exercise tend to enable us to achieve those standards of excellence that define particular practices? Well, to see that a certain aspect of the given situation is the relevant one is, of course, just to know which language-game one is playing—and to see that a certain response to that aspect of the given situation is the right one is to see which move the rules of that language-game demand. Virtue is, in short, the disposition to play language-games well—to follow their rules, even when one is tempted to violate those rules in order to secure what money, power, and status can buy:

Virtues then stand in a different relationship to external and internal goods. The possession of the virtues—and not only of their semblance and simulacra—is necessary to achieve the latter; yet the possession of the virtues may perfectly well hinder us in achieving external goods.

Lest anyone take MacIntyre’s positive metaethics—much less this chapter—as a screed against what money, power, and status can buy, it is crucial to remind ourselves that we need such goods—that, quite literally, we could not live without them:

External goods genuinely are goods. Not only are they characteristic objects of human desire, whose allocation is what gives point to the virtues of justice and of generosity, but no one can despise them altogether without a certain hypocrisy.

hedonism—a position that Plato has Socrates deny in the Republic, among other dialogues—it is not obvious what to make of this argument. See Plato, Republic and Protagoras.

400 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 194, 196.
401 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 196.
402 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 196.
MacIntyre’s claim—and my own—is not, then, that we should renounce such goods entirely. It is rather that it is not madness to follow the rules of this or that language-game even on those occasions when those rules are not the most efficient means toward what money, power, and status can buy:

Notoriously the cultivation of truthfulness, justice and courage will often, the world being what it contingently is, bar us from being rich or famous or powerful. Thus although we may hope that we can not only achieve the standards of excellence and the internal goods of certain practices by possessing the virtues and become rich, famous and powerful, the virtues are always a potential stumbling block to this comfortable ambition. 403

Of course, some societies are better than others at aligning the rules of their language-games with ends beyond those language-games—are better, that is, at making temptation infrequent. Indeed, ours—with its mechanisms of total surveillance—is better at this than most. 404 Nonetheless, our success has come at a cost:

We should... expect that, if in a particular society the pursuit of external goods were to become dominant, the concept of the virtues might suffer first attrition and then perhaps something near total effacement, although simulacra might abound. 405

We have made temptation—well, temptation toward certain sins, anyway—infrequent only by radically instrumentalizing our understanding of ourselves: while only virtue kept a medieval from robbing and killing a vagabond, a modern halts before the knowledge that he or she will almost certainly be caught and punished. This is far from an altogether

403 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 196.

404 What MacIntyre calls the “Enlightenment Project” has not been entirely unsuccessful: it really is true that, in a society with Enlightened institutions, egoism and altruism align most of the time—even if not remotely all of the time. But this should not be taken to imply, of course, that the surveillance state—what Michel Foucault calls the “panopticon”—is an altogether good thing. See MacIntyre, After Virtue, 36–78, and Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

405 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 196.
bad thing—though it would be foolishness to insist that it is pure gain: as Hume admitted, in those few situations in which a modern knows that he or she will not be caught and punished, nothing but sympathy stands in the way of sin.

7.4.2. Internal Goods

Why, then, shouldn’t one cheat at a language-game? If the question initially seemed confused, it was only because its answer was so obvious: one shouldn’t cheat at a language-game because one will thereby forsake the meaning that one finds in it—the satisfaction, that is, that one finds in playing the game for its own sake. MacIntyre calls the meaning that one derives from participation in a language-game an “internal good”—with which he contrasts what he calls an “external good”:

> There are thus two kinds of good possibly to be gained by playing chess. On the one hand there are those goods externally and contingently attached to chess-playing and to other practices by the accidents of social circumstance—in the case of the imaginary child candy, in the case of real adults such goods as prestige, status and money. There are always alternative ways for achieving such goods, and their achievement is never to be had only by engaging in some particular kind of practice. On the other hand there are the goods internal to the practice of chess which cannot be had in any way but by playing chess or some other game of that specific kind.\(^{406}\)

Internal goods are therefore scarce in a way that external goods are not: while one can attain what money, power, and status can buy from any number of language-games—the details of the situation determining which language-game is the most efficient means toward that end—one can attain the good internal to chess only in playing chess, the good

\(^{406}\) MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 188–189.
internal to college only in going to college, and so on. And because life is short, even the most fortunate will have to forsake many internal goods. Nonetheless, *external* goods are scarce in a way that *internal* goods are not:

> It is characteristic of what I have called external goods that when achieved they are always some individual’s property and possession. Moreover characteristically they are such that the more someone has of them, the less there is for other people… External goods are therefore characteristically objects of competition in which there must be losers as well as winners. Internal goods are indeed the outcome of competition to excel, but it is characteristic of them that their achievement is good for the whole community who participate in the practice.⁴⁰⁷

My money, power, and status are limited by the money, power, and status of others: all of these are merely forms of power—and just as power is magnified by power aligned with it, so power is diminished by power turned against it.⁴⁰⁸ If this sounds cryptic, consider the most obvious example—the foundation of neoclassical economics: the totality of external goods is limited—for, again, we live in a world of qualification. Therefore, what one might call the “price” of money—how much it can buy—is determined by how much money there is altogether: if others also have money, then *my* money is worth less—and so, insofar as I seek what money can buy, I seek to prevent others from attaining money.⁴⁰⁹

So it is with all external goods. But the situation is radically otherwise with internal goods: when Black and White *compete* for the external good of victory in chess,

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⁴⁰⁸ Indeed, this is just the definition of “power”: it possesses no direction of its own. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Stephen Houlgate, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁴⁰⁹ Of course, whatever money, power, and status can buy are also merely forms of power: to take an obvious example, food is the power to prevent starvation. The power of food is not limited, of course, in the same way that the power of money is limited: while money is limited because its value is entirely conventional, food is just limited—period. There’s only so much of it.
they cooperate in achieving the good internal to chess—playing an excellent game of chess. Just so, when two philosophers compete for the external good of victory in an argument, they cooperate in achieving the good internal to that argument—what is true without qualification.

7.4.3. Authority

In his On Certainty, Wittgenstein reiterates the point that the rules of a given language-game are not justified by something beyond themselves—including by their instrumentality toward some end beyond themselves:

Giving grounds… comes to an end;—but the end is not certain propositions’ striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game.410

To play a language-game for its own sake—to persevere in a practice even when it costs one what money, power, and status can buy—is to inhabit, without irony, a certain form of life. And to inhabit a certain form of life without irony is, as MacIntyre notes, to submit oneself to an authority beyond that of the preferences that one happens to have:

A practice involves standards of excellence and obedience to rules as well as the achievement of goods. To enter into a practice is to accept the authority of those standards and the inadequacy of my own performance as judged by them. It is to subject my own attitudes, choices, preferences and tastes to the standards which currently and partially define the practice… If, on starting to listen to music, I do not accept my own incapacity to judge correctly, I will never learn to hear, let alone to appreciate, Bartok’s last quartets. If, on starting to play baseball, I do not

410 Wittgenstein, On Certainty, § 204.
accept that others know better than I when to throw a fast ball and when not, I will never learn to appreciate good pitching let alone to pitch.\textsuperscript{411}

White plays chess at first only for the candy that Black promises: he does not yet know the vocabulary of chess, the only vocabulary within which the goods internal to chess might be understood. And thus it is for all children: no one can understand the goods internal to a given language-game without learning to play that language-game—but children are not born with an understanding of \textit{any} internal goods \textit{at all}. Rather, they are motivated to learn to play language-games because of the external goods they offer—whether those external goods are candy, fun, or mere parental approval.\textsuperscript{412}

The same is often true of adults: they are often motivated to learn to play language-games because of the external goods they offer—including, sometimes, the external good of approval, parental or otherwise. Nonetheless, an adult—insofar as he or she is an adult—has learned to play \textit{some} language-games for their own sake, and so has \textit{some} understanding of internal goods. An adult can therefore learn to play a language-game motivated primarily by the internal good that he or she expects it to offer—even though he or she cannot yet know precisely what that internal good will be. An adult, that is, can learn to play a language-game for its own sake on faith—as Wittgenstein implies:

If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not \textit{true}, not yet false. If someone asked us [nonetheless] “but is [the ground] \textit{true}?" we might say “yes” to him; and if he demanded grounds we might say “I can’t give you any grounds, but if you learn more you too will think the same.”\textsuperscript{413}

\textsuperscript{411} MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 190.

\textsuperscript{412} That children be naturally and powerfully motivated by the approval of their parents seems necessary for anything even remotely like our form of life—as is the condition of that approval that children come to be motivated by something more than approval. See Alasdair MacIntyre, \textit{Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues} (Chicago: Open Court, 1999).

One who learns to play a given language-game will, in time, come to understand the good internal to that language-game: he or she will come to see the rules that he or she accepted on faith—and, by extension, the authority of those who teach those rules—as justified. Of course, this justification will not be *theoretical*—will not, that is, be a matter of derivation of those rules from something beyond themselves. Rather, it will be *practical*—will be, that is, a matter of the internal goods that those rules make possible:

> It belongs to the logic of our… investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted.\(^\text{414}\)

Because he is considering skepticism, Wittgenstein puts the point in terms of philosophy—but the same is true of every language-game: the internal good that we pursue—whether truth or whatever else—depends on the rules that we refuse without qualification to violate. Authority is therefore not a matter of our limitations—not, anyway, of limitations that we might someday overcome:

> It isn’t that… we just *can’t* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. [Rather,] if I want to the door to turn, the hinges must stay put. My *life* [therefore] consists in my being content to accept many things… [For] I must recognize certain authorities in order to make judgments at all.\(^\text{415}\)

All of this is, MacIntyre notes, profoundly Augustinian:

> The intellect and the desires do not naturally move towards that good which is at once the foundation for knowledge and that from which lesser goods flow. The will which directs them is initially perverse and needs a kind of redirection which will enable it to trust obediently in a teacher who will guide the mind towards the discovery both of its own resources and of what lies outside the mind, both in nature and in God. Hence faith in authority has to precede rational understanding. And hence the acquisition of that virtue which the will requires to be so guided, humility, is the necessary first step in education or in self-education. In learning therefore


we move toward and not from first principles and we discover truth only insofar as we discover the conformity of particulars to the forms in relation to which those particulars become intelligible, a relationship apprehended only by the mind illuminated by God. Rational justification is thus essentially retrospective.\textsuperscript{416}

Lest my celebration of authority seem a fascist screed, it is crucial to note that authority does not always, or even usually, justify itself in retrospect. Indeed, even when it seems that it does, this might well be because one has been brainwashed. Discussing the motto of the University of Oxford, Lovibond makes something like this point:

“The Lord is my light,” my source of truth: however, a “lord” is primarily a holder of temporal power... [The motto therefore] draws attention to the link between truth, or objectivity, and material control... Reflection on these matters prompts the inevitable question: who says what is to count as an “objective” view of the world? Who determines the spot where the “ideal observer” is to stand?\textsuperscript{417}

It would be foolish to deny the power of this concern. But it would also be foolish to deny that authority is nonetheless inevitable—for authority is necessary if we are to seek internal goods, if we are to take up practices, at all.

We tend to use the word “brainwashed” to malign those who see authorities other than our own as retrospectively justified. This connotation aside, however, “brainwashed” is a fair description for all of us: the difference between authorities is, at the most fundamental level, a difference between what they teach, not how they teach it.\textsuperscript{418} For better or worse, the question of what authorities should teach—the question, that is, of the right language-games to play—is a question for a later chapter.

\textsuperscript{416} MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 84.

\textsuperscript{417} Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics*, 60.

\textsuperscript{418} This should not be taken to imply that all training into a language-game is fundamentally manipulative—much less that manipulation is therefore not so bad: both manipulation and rational
7.5. Conclusion

In the meantime, let us admit that the *Philosophical Investigations* misses something fundamental—something that MacIntyre sees: there is a deep tension in ordinary language—a tension between practices and institutions. Wittgenstein realizes—and Wittgensteinian Fideism is the most obvious elaboration of this realization—that language-games cannot conflict *theoretically*: since each has its own grammar, none can contradict any other. Nonetheless, MacIntyre realizes, language-games can conflict *practically*: when Black has the opportunity to cheat White, should he interpret himself as involved primarily in the *institution* of chess or primarily in the *practice* of chess? In other words, should he interpret the rules of chess as admitting of exception or not? And this is a dilemma that quietism cannot solve.

The *Investigations* fails insofar as it is insufficiently practical—and it is insufficiently practical insofar as it is insufficiently sociological. Nor is this the only way in which this failure afflicts Wittgenstein. Consider again MacIntyre’s infamous suggestion that the interminability of contemporary moral arguments indicates that we have lost our shared moral foundation—specifically, that we live in a culture of fragments:

The different conceptually incommensurables premises of the rival arguments deployed in these debates have a wide variety of historical origins… The surface rhetoric of our culture is apt to speak complacently of moral pluralism in this regard, but the notion of pluralism is too persuasion presuppose that the hearer already speaks the relevant language—already inhabits, that is, the relevant form of life.
imprecise. For it may equally well apply to an ordered dialogue of intersecting viewpoints as to an unharmonious melange of ill-assorted fragments. The suspicion… that it is the latter with which we have to deal is heightened when we recognize that all those various concepts which inform our moral discourse were originally at home in larger totalities of theory and practice in which they enjoyed a role and function supplied by contexts of which they have now been deprived.  

Our moral arguments never end because our moral premises are different and incommensurable. Our moral premises are different and incommensurable because our language—in its moral aspect, anyway—is what remains of millennia of history. As such, it is far from a monolith: our culture has inherited countless different language-games from countless different sources. Faced with the tensions among these practices, it has repeatedly broken them apart and reconnected the fragments in new ways—with varying degrees of consistency. We are left with a mess.

Of course, Wittgenstein is no less aware that language is shaped deeply by the details of its history:

The symbolism of chemistry and the notation of the infinitesimal calculus… are, so to speak, suburbs of our language… Our language can be regarded as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old an new houses, of houses with extensions from various periods, and all this surrounded by a multitude of new suburbs with straight and regular streets and uniform houses.  

Though MacIntyre describes specifically moral language rather than language as a whole, the parallel between his description and that of Wittgenstein is obvious: different “neighborhoods” of our language—that is, different language-games—were “built”—that is, constructed or adopted—at different times. As such, their “streets”—that is, the rules that define them—were laid out with greater or lesser degrees of reflection. However,

419 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 10.

even the oldest neighborhoods are continually modified by “commerce” with—that is, conflict with or reinforcement by—other neighborhoods.

None of this implies, of course, the dystopian tone that MacIntyre takes. That Wittgenstein came of age during the First World War and MacIntyre during the Second is not irrelevant to the difference in tone between their descriptions:

[The Wittgensteins lived] in the style of the aristocracy. Their home in Vienna… was known outside the family as the Palais Wittgenstein, and was indeed palatial, having been built for a count earlier in the century. In addition to this, the family owned another house… on the outskirts of Vienna, and a large estate in the country, the Hochreit, to which they retired during the summer.421

What is, for Wittgenstein, a beautiful metropolis is, for MacIntyre, a bombed-out wasteland. So it is with both Vienna and London; so it is—not entirely coincidentally—with ordinary language.

MacIntyre makes practical—and this is the upshot of this chapter—what might otherwise seem entirely theoretical: the Wittgensteinian Picture of Language, as offered by Wittgenstein, is not itself practical—is not itself a motivation for anything beyond quietism. But MacIntyre realizes that the Wittgensteinian Picture of Language—which motivates us to rest content with language as it is—is less and less true of our society. For we more and more instrumentalize our language, and thereby one another—paradigmatically, by manipulating one another. Insofar as manipulation is bad, MacIntyre motivates us to change our language-games—that is, to change ourselves—so that the Wittgensteinian Picture of Language might be as true as Wittgenstein apparently assumed it was.

CHAPTER 8

MACINTYRE ON INCOMMENSURABLE TRADITIONS AND NARRATIVES

It is a question of some interest to me, and I hope also to you, whether or not these lectures that I am about to deliver are in fact going to be Gifford Lectures.

—Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*

How should we see ourselves?

8.1. Introduction

For there are, it seems, several ways to see ourselves.

Some of us look at ourselves and see what Hobbes, Descartes, and Darwin saw: we are but contractors with one another—are but clockwork, however exquisite—are but conscripts into the primeval war of all against all.

Others of us look at ourselves and see what Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche saw: we are but bourgeoisie and proletariat fighting over the means of production—are but primal lust sublimated into art and music, into cities and empires—are but aggression turned back upon itself and become knowledge.
Yet others of us look at ourselves and see what Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle saw: we are but broken gods in desperate need of redemption—are but wayfarers with our science and our laws to a destination more than mortal—are but acolytes, though few of us remember it, of a god whom we cannot name.

As they stand, these traditions are in profound conflict with one another. How is this conflict to be resolved? Unfortunately, each tradition has a different answer to this question. The first tradition—what MacIntyre calls “Encyclopedia”—sees in the other two mere superstition. The second tradition—what MacIntyre calls “Genealogy”—sees in the other two mere masks for aggression. The third tradition—what MacIntyre calls, confusingly, “Tradition”—sees in the other two mere denials of our brokenness. How should we resolve this disagreement?

8.1.1. Epistemological Crisis

Well, how do we usually resolve disagreement?

Consider an example: a tree, you insist, has many hundreds of leaves, while I insist that it has very few leaves indeed. Our argument grows more and more heated until we realize, to our mutual embarrassment, that you saw the tree during the height of summer, while I saw it during the depth of winter.

422 Though MacIntyre uses the word “tradition” for his conception of rationality, he also calls rival conceptions of rationality “traditions.” Though this is confusing, it is inevitable: though the rival conceptions of rationality do not see themselves as traditional—this is what makes them rival—nonetheless MacIntyre, a traditionalist, sees them as traditions. Indeed, MacIntyre insists that rival traditions are flawed precisely because they do not see themselves as traditions—because they are confused, in other words, about what rationality is. But more on this in a moment.
Consider another example: the tree, you insist, stands to the right of a barn, while I insist that it stands to the left of that barn. Our argument grows more and more heated until we realize, to our mutual embarrassment, that you saw the tree from the north, while I saw it from the south.

In each of these cases, we come to see our previous convictions as subjective: each of us sees the tree as he or she does because of the perspective that he or she brings to the tree. You saw the tree as though it were to the right of the barn and full of leaves because this is precisely how the tree would look to someone standing to the north during the summer; I saw the tree as though it were to the left of the barn and bare of leaves because this is precisely how the tree would look to someone standing to the south during the winter. Thus do our perspectives explain why we see things as we do: our convictions are the product of reality interacting with our respective positions in space and time. In realizing this, we move from subjectivity to objectivity: we construct a representation of the tree not indexed to any particular point in space or time—of the tree, in other words, as it really is.

Consider a third example: the leaves of the tree, you insist, are red, while I insist that they are green. Our argument grows more and more heated until we realize, to our mutual embarrassment, that you are colorblind, while I am not. This allows us to see that there is a sense in which both of us are right—precisely because there is another sense in which neither of us is right: the leaves of the tree appear red to you, and appear green to

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423 As it happens, Edmund Gettier owns the barn. But this is not relevant to the example.

424 Abstraction from my particular perspective is required if I am to exist at all: I not only occupy a different perspective than you do, I also occupy a different perspective now than I did in the past or will in the future. If I am to exist at all, I must become more than the sum of my temporal parts. But more on this in a moment.
me, because our eyes are structured differently and so interact with the light reflected by
the leaves in different ways. The colloquial expression for this fact—namely, that one of
us is “colorblind”—is misleading: each of us sees perfectly well, insofar as each of us
sees exactly what he or she is determined to see by the interaction of his or her eyes with
the leaves. René Descartes admits as much:

A clock constructed with wheels and weights observes all the laws of its
nature just as closely when it is badly made and tells the wrong time as
when it completely fulfills the wishes of the clockmaker. In the same
way… if… a body suffers from dropsy… and is affected by the dryness of
the throat which normally produces in the mind the sensation of thirst, the
resulting condition of the nerves and other parts will dispose the body to
take a drink, with the result that the disease will be aggravated. Yet this is
just as natural as the body’s being simulated by a similar dryness of the
throat to take a drink when there is no such illness and the drink is
beneficial.425

Though the time seems early to one clock and seems late to another, in reality the time is
neither early nor late. Just so, though the leaves seem red to you and seem green to me, in
reality the leaves merely reflect light of a certain wavelength.426 The question of whether
to call this tendency “red” or “green” is merely the question of which vocabulary is most
convenient:

Admittedly, when I consider the purpose of the clock, I may say that it is
departing from its nature when it does not tell the right time; and similarly
when I consider the mechanism of the human body, I may think that, in
relation to the movements which normally occur in it, it too is deviating
from its nature if the throat is dry at a time when drinking is not beneficial
to its continued health. But I am well aware that “nature” as I have just

425 Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy, § 6.84–85.

426 One with a taste for Kantian vocabulary might say that, compared to the “empirically real”
reflective propensity of the leaf, the colors of red and green are “empirically ideal.” See Kant, Critique of
Pure Reason, A28–A30/B44–B45.
used it has a very different significance from “nature” in the other sense.  

A “broken” clock is merely a clock that tells “broken” time—and tells it with perfect precision. Just so, a “colorblind” individual is merely one who sees the kinship of red and green—and sees it with perfect precision. For my experience of things is always precisely the product of the interaction of those things with the peculiarities of my perspective—in this case, with my eyes:

I might consider the body of a man as a kind of machine equipped with and made up of bones, nerves, muscles, veins, blood and skin.  

Once again do we come to see our previous convictions as subjective: each of us sees the tree as he or she does because of the perspective that he or she brings to the tree.  

You saw the tree as though its leaves were red because this is precisely how the tree would look to someone who was colorblind; I was the tree as though its leaves were green because this is precisely how the tree would look to one who was not. Thus do our perspectives explain why we see things as we do: our convictions are the product of reality interacting with our respective ocular structures. In realizing this, we again move from subjectivity to objectivity: we construct a representation of the tree not indexed to any particular ocular structure—of the tree, in other words, as it really is.

427 Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy, § 6.85.

428 Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy, § 6.84.

429 Note that “perspective,” previously literal, has now become a metaphor.
8.1.1.1. Scientific Conflict

And so it is, MacIntyre notes, for every disagreement:

When an epistemological crisis is resolved, it is by the construction of a new narrative which enables the agent to understand both how he or she could intelligibly have held his or her original beliefs and how he or she could have been so drastically misled by them.\textsuperscript{430} The truth explains why anyone is ever tempted toward falsehood: if we see things as they really \textit{are}, then we will also see why things sometimes \textit{seem} otherwise.\textsuperscript{431} To see the tree as it really is, for example, is to see that it is west of the barn, that it gains leaves in the spring and loses them in the fall, and that those leaves reflect light of a certain wavelength. The false convictions that some hold of the tree are precisely the convictions that those with their perspectives would hold were the tree as it really is. According to MacIntyre, this insight marks the turning point of his career:

What I learned from Kuhn... was... to enquire whether the various problems on which I had made so little progress had baffled me not... because of their difficulty, but because they were bound to remain intractable so long as they were understood in the terms dictated by those larger assumptions which I shared with many of my contemporaries.\textsuperscript{432}

But this insight is older than Thomas Kuhn—far older. Consider again what Parmenides has Night tell her initiate of the sun and the moon:

You shall know...
the unseen works of the pure torch
of the blazing sun...
And... the revolving works of the round-[faced] moon...


\textsuperscript{431} I learned this from MacIntyre himself.

\textsuperscript{432} Alasdair MacIntyre, “Preface,” in \textit{The Tasks of Philosophy} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), viii.
[which shines] by night, wandering around the earth with borrowed
light…
Ever peeking toward the rays of the sun.433

Though the moon seems to wax and wane, this is the product of our particular perspective. For the moon reflects the light of the sun—even at night, when the sun is unseen. Since the moon is spherical, half of the surface of the moon is always bright. But because the sun and moon orbit the earth at different speeds—and because we are on the earth—we do not always see the bright half of the moon in its entirety: we usually see only some of it—and, occasionally, none of it. Our perspective is therefore misleading—but this is only because we see precisely what those with our perspective would see.

8.1.1.2. Ethical Conflict

As Plato sees, this insight applies not only to our theoretical but also to our practical convictions. Consider again the Allegory of the Cave:

Do you suppose such men would have seen anything… other than the shadows cast by the fire on the side of the cave facing them? … Then most certainly such men would hold that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of artificial things.434

Debra Nails argues that the Republic was born as at least two independent works—the Thrasymachus and the Ideal State—and that the Assemblywomen of Aristophanes was a


434 Plato, Republic, 515a, 515c.
parody of the proposals of the latter.\textsuperscript{435} If this is so, then it seems likely that what Plato added to the \textit{Thrasymachus} and the \textit{Ideal State} was a rebuttal to the \textit{Assemblywomen}: the proposals of the \textit{Ideal State} seem farcical, Plato insists, only because the Athenians are systematically misled by those whom they trust—for example, by playwrights like Aristophanes. In this, the proposals of the \textit{Ideal State} are like exercising in the nude:

It was possible for the urbane of the time to \textit{make a comedy} of all that… But… what was ridiculous to the eyes disappeared in the light of what’s best as revealed in speeches. And this showed that he is empty who believes anything is ridiculous other than the bad, and who \textit{tries to produce laughter} looking to any sight as ridiculous other than the sight of the foolish and the bad.\textsuperscript{436}

Though the proposals of the \textit{Ideal State} seem laughable, this is the product of the particular perspective of the Athenians: they evaluate every proposal through the lens of conventional wisdom—a conventional wisdom that Aristophanes merely echoes. The perspective of the Athenians is therefore misleading—but this is only because they see precisely what those with their perspective \textit{would} see.

8.1.2. Incommensurability

With regard both to our theoretical and to our practical convictions, then, the truth \textit{explains} why anyone is ever tempted toward falsehood: if we see things as they really are, then we will \textit{also} see why things sometimes \textit{seem} otherwise. Usually, to resolve

\textsuperscript{435} See Debra Nails, \textit{The People of Plato: A Prosopography of Plato and Other Socrates} (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 324–326.

\textsuperscript{436} Plato, \textit{Republic}, 452c–d. Italics mine.
disagreement, we invoke this insight: if one way of looking at things explains why anyone is ever tempted toward other ways of looking at things, then we usually conclude that the former is true while the latter are false.

But suppose that, of several ways of looking at things, each of them explains why anyone is ever tempted toward the others. How then do we resolve the disagreement?

8.1.2.1. Too Much in the Sun

Well, consider Hamlet.

Hamlet is a protagonist in search of a genre: he does not know whether events at Ellsinore constitute a comedy—a story wherein what seems irresolvable conflict turns out to be mere misunderstanding—or a tragedy—a story wherein what seems mere misunderstanding turns out to be irresolvable conflict. This matters because, whereas a comedy ends in marriage, a tragedy ends only in death: Hamlet does not know how to continue his own story. Specifically, he does not know whether he should marry Ophelia—and thus vindicate the narrative of Claudius—or kill Claudius—and thus vindicate the narrative of the ghost.

The protracted indecision of Hamlet—so mysterious to generations of interpreters—is therefore not so mysterious after all: he struggles to determine not whether a murderous tyrant deserves to die but rather whether Claudius actually is a murderous tyrant. For Hamlet does not know at first whether what seems the ghost of his
father is an immortal soul speaking truth from beyond the grave or, as the natural philosophers would have it, an illusion—nothing more than atoms in the void:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.\footnote{William Shakespeare, \textit{Hamlet}, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), § 1.5.187–188.}

Before the rise of the new science, Hamlet would not have had this problem—but, like so many of us, he had the misfortune of going to a thoroughly modern college:

Hamlet arrives back from Wittenberg with too many schemata available for interpreting the events at Ellsinore of which already he is a part. There is a revenge schema drawn from the Norse sagas; there is a Renaissance courtier’s schema… Until he has adopted some particular schema he does not know [whom to believe, but] until he knows [whom to believe] he does not know which schema to adopt.\footnote{MacIntyre, “Epistemological Criseses, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science,” 4. Obviously, Shakespeare’s reference to Wittenberg is intensely anachronistic: though Martin Luther nailed his theses to the door of its Castle Church in 1517—thus birthing the Protestant Reformation and the Scientific Revolution that followed on its heels—\textit{Hamlet} is set centuries earlier. Indeed, that Hamlet should mention the reductive natural philosophy of Horatio is so anachronistic that it \textit{demands} an allegorical interpretation.}

Though the stakes are rather higher, Hamlet needs what every modern college student needs—a way to discern whom to believe. His solution is, of course, \textit{The Mousetrap}—his modification of \textit{The Murder of Gonzago}:

The play’s the thing wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king.\footnote{Shakespeare, \textit{Hamlet}, § 2.2.539–540.}

A play within a play, \textit{The Mousetrap} is a retelling, in microcosm, of \textit{Hamlet} itself—and, insofar as it is that, it is a certain \textit{interpretation} of \textit{Hamlet}: it applies to \textit{Hamlet} not the sunny Renaissance courtier’s schema—the comic schema of Claudius—but rather the darker Norse revenge schema—the tragic schema of the ghost. The test is, of course, whether Claudius recognizes himself in Lucianus, the murderer of \textit{The Mousetrap}—
whether, despite the narrative of innocence that he would impose on his court, he is haunted by his crime.

8.1.2.2. Frailty, Thy Name Is Woman

In all of this, Shakespeare teases his queen: just as The Mousetrap is an allegory for Hamlet, so is Hamlet an allegory for the Elizabethan Age—and just as Lucianus is an allegory for Claudius, so is Claudius an allegory for Elizabeth.

With Hamlet, Shakespeare hopes to awaken his motherland to the fact that her king, though he presents himself as an enlightened monarch, is in fact a murderous tyrant. Obviously, Shakespeare reverses the gender of said tyrant: his Claudius is a man, whereas Elizabeth is a woman. However, the allegory demands this reversal: Claudius represents the genocidal Tudor theocracy of Elizabeth so that Gertrude, the mother of Hamlet, can represent England, the motherland of Shakespeare. For England, like Gertrude, has been seduced by an usurper—has forgotten her true Lord, the Father of all of her sons and daughters. Moreover, it is not as though Elizabeth—who never takes a husband—does not trade on her own masculinity:

[I am] resolved in the midst and heat of the battle to live and die amongst you all, to lay down for my God and for my kingdom and for my people mine honor and my blood even in the dust. I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king and of a king of England too—and take foul scorn that Parma or any prince of Europe should dare to invade the borders of my realm. To the which rather
than any dishonor shall grow by me, I myself will [venture] my royal blood; I myself will be your general... in the field.\textsuperscript{440}

At Tilbury—as ever—Elizabeth seeks to impose a certain narrative upon her subjects: she is the defender of freedom and piety—that is, Protestantism—against authoritarianism and superstition—that is, Catholicism. The Duke of Parma is an invader who threatens to enslave England: he would compel the whole island to bow before idols—not only the Pope but also his instrument, the King of Spain.

Yet Shakespeare carries in his heart another narrative. Far from a defender of freedom and piety, Elizabeth rules a theocracy dedicated to the extermination of whomever opposes it—whether the Jesuits whom it executes at Tyburn or the rebels whom it slaughters in Ireland. Just so, the Duke of Parma is not an invader: he is a liberator who comes to end the fiery persecution of Catholics—men and women, that is, like Shakespeare.\textsuperscript{441}

\textsuperscript{440} Elizabeth I, “Speech to the Troops at Tilbury,” in Collected Works, ed. Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 326. Obviously, Elizabeth also traded on her femininity: it seems that the Elizabethan Religious Settlement was able to endure—as was Elizabeth herself on the throne—in part because the Virgin Queen assumed for her subjects the significance of the Virgin Mary. Thus did Catholic piety fuel a Protestant imperialist machine.

\textsuperscript{441} That Shakespeare was a Catholic seems—even if one ignores the biographical evidence—far beyond doubt: his Catholicism provides the interpretive key not only to his Hamlet but also, for example, to his King Lear and “The Phoenix and the Turtle.” See John Finnis and Patrick Martin, “Another Turn for the Turtle: Shakespeare’s Intercession for Love’s Martyr,” The Times Literary Supplement 5220 (2003): 12–14.
8.1.2.3. Like Hyperion to a Satyr

Again, just as *The Mousetrap* is an allegory for *Hamlet*, so is *Hamlet* an allegory for the Elizabethan Age—and just as Lucianus is an allegory for Claudius, so is Claudius an allegory for Elizabeth. Yet if she acknowledges this—if she, like Claudius, rises against the play—then she all but admits her crime: she all but admits that, though it presents itself as innocent—as, indeed, the defender of freedom against Catholic authoritarianism—the Tudor monarchy is in fact criminal—is, indeed, every inch the genocidal theocracy that it seems to us today.

*Hamlet* is a work of political philosophy. Its point is that, often, things seem as they do not because they *are* that way but rather because those in power would have us see them that way. More specifically, those in power would have us see their power as legitimate—but this does not mean that their power *is* legitimate. In stating this point, Shakespeare echoes Plato: even if a certain way of seeing things—in this case, the narrative that those in power impose on us—is not false in its details, it might nonetheless be misleading, even radically misleading. Claudius, for example, married Gertrude upon the death of his brother, her husband—but this was the *usurpation*, not the preservation, of his throne. Just so, the Armada was wrecked by cannon and storm—but this was the *damnation*, not the salvation, of England.

Or, at any rate, of her Catholics: subject to a monarchy that was absolute in a way that its forebears were not—a monarchy bent on their extermination—Shakespeare and company could only hope for salvation from across the sea. Nor was this hope unreasonable: the defeat of the Armada did not end Spanish attempts to invade England.
It is no coincidence, then, that *Hamlet* ends with the invasion of Denmark by Norway: Fortinbras—who secures the legacy, if not the life, of Hamlet—is an allegory for the King of Spain.

Just so, Hamlet is an allegory for Shakespeare himself: a hero who hides his own heroism, he modifies a play of the past in order to reveal to its audience that all is not as it seems. There is in this something sublime: if Hamlet is an allegory for Shakespeare, then the implication is that Shakespeare expects to die for his heroism—that, in writing his play, he is sacrificing his life on behalf of his countrymen.\(^4\)

8.1.2.4. The Rest Is Silence

But *Hamlet* is more than an echo of the Allegory of the Cave.

Suppose that, of several ways of looking at things, *each of them* explains why anyone is ever tempted toward the others. This is, MacIntyre notes, precisely the situation of Socrates and Thrasyymachus in the *Republic*:

The premises and presuppositions of the Platonic account certainly entail the falsity of any sophistic view and vice versa. But neither account is able to supply sufficient reasons for any sophisticated adherent of the opposing view to admit that a refutation has occurred.\(^5\)

\(^4\) My interpretation of *Hamlet*—and of Shakespeare as a Catholic moral philosopher—is inspired by John Finnis and Alasdair MacIntyre: though the details of this interpretation are my own, it is in outline merely the product of two premises—the conviction of Finnis that Shakespeare is preoccupied by his Catholicism and the conviction of MacIntyre that *Hamlet* is a meditation upon epistemological crises. But I must also acknowledge a deeper debt: for inspiring my love of *Hamlet*—indeed, my love of all of the humanities—I owe John Burke, my first teacher and my friend.

In order to resolve this disagreement, we need something that one way of looking at things *can* explain while the others *cannot*—some point at which the others *fail on their own terms*. In other words, we need a *test*.

In his Allegory of the Cave, Plato does not offer such a test. Indeed, in a situation like that in the Allegory of the Cave, the discernment of truth from falsehood is quite literally *miraculous*:

> You should be well aware that, if anything should be saved and become such as it ought to be in regimes in this kind of condition, it won’t be bad if you say that a god’s dispensation saved it.\(^{444}\)

Because those in the Cave cannot *see* the chains that imprison them in falsehood, it never occurs to them that they *are* imprisoned in falsehood. Because of this, they cannot free *themselves* from falsehood; only one who is *already* free can free them. But the freedom of *this* one is therefore miraculous—and is, like all miracles, rare indeed:

> My case—the demonic sign—isn’t worth mentioning, for it has perhaps occurred in some one other man, or no other, before.\(^{445}\)

But Shakespeare does what Plato does not: his Hamlet offers a test—*The Mousetrap*.

At first, both the tragic and the comic interpretations of *Hamlet* are plausible. Moreover, at first, each can *explain* the other: the former sees the latter as a sinister deception, while the latter sees the former as a paranoid delusion. But *The Mousetrap* changes all of this.

The play within the play is a test. If Claudius sees himself in *The Mousetrap*, then the tragic interpretation of *Hamlet* is true and the comic interpretation false; if not, then the comic interpretation of *Hamlet* is true and the tragic interpretation false. Either way,

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\(^{444}\) Plato, *Republic*, 492e–493a.

\(^{445}\) Plato, *Republic*, 496c. The “one other man” is, of course, Plato himself.
though, *The Mousetrap* disproves one of the two interpretations of *Hamlet*: during the second half of the play, there is no longer any doubt about whether Claudius is the villain.

8.1.3. College

Apparently Elizabeth did not recognize herself in *Hamlet*. Or perhaps she did but, seeing what happened when Claudius rose against *The Mousetrap*, she hid her reaction. Either way, Shakespeare should be taken far more seriously as a moral philosopher than he now is; certainly his *Hamlet* is a story of radical epistemological crisis—specifically, of what is often called “incommensurability.”

This story speaks to us today no less than it did four centuries ago. For Hamlet is just a college kid, home on break, who has learned that the world might be far more complicated than he had been led to believe. For Hamlet returns to Elsinore equipped with rival and incommensurable modes of interpretation. And which interpretation he chooses matters: his relationship to his parents—and, for that matter, to his home—might become quite other than it once was.

Though the details are obviously different, this story is that of every undergraduate today. For each of them is asked to choose a major—and the majors seem like rival, even incommensurable, modes of interpretation:

Consider the range of things that are said about human beings from the standpoints of each of the major disciplines. From the standpoint of physics human beings are composed of fundamental particles interacting

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in accordance with the probabilistic generalizations of quantum mechanics. From that of chemistry we are the sites of chemical interactions, assemblages of elements and compounds. From that of biology we are multicellular organisms belonging to species each of which has its own evolutionary past. From that of historians we are intelligible only as emerging from long histories of social and economic transformations. From that of economists we are rational profit-maximizing makers of decisions. From that of psychology and sociology we shape and are shaped by our perceptions, our emotions, and our social roles and institutions. And from that of students of literature and the arts it is in the exercise of our various imaginative powers that we exhibit much that is distinctive about human beings.\footnote{MacIntyre, God, Philosophy, Universities, 175.}

To choose among these, MacIntyre notes, is to answer a perennial question:

How do all these relate to each other? In what does the unity of a human being consist?\footnote{MacIntyre, God, Philosophy, Universities, 175. Italics mine. This is, of course, identical to the last of the four questions that Kant asks; remember that this one question contains the other three—and so contains all of philosophy. See Kant, Jäsche Logic, 9:25.}

To choose a major is to choose to interpret the human condition in a certain way. Because every student is human, this means that every student is asked to choose to interpret his or her own life in a certain way. How, then, should each student interpret his or her life? At this point, each student confronts what Hamlet confronts: how one interprets one’s life determines what counts as a good reason to choose one thing rather than another—and so to recognize any consideration as a reason to choose a major is already to have chosen. Those students who have not yet chosen choose according to their arbitrary preferences—or, just as often, according to what skills the market might value.

To resolve this disagreement among rival and incommensurable modes of interpretation, we need a test: we need something that one way of looking at things can explain while the others cannot—some point at which the others fail on their own terms.

\footnote{MacIntyre, God, Philosophy, Universities, 175.}
8.2. Traditions

The several disciplines reveal to us the several aspects of the human being. But which of these aspects is *revealing* rather than misleading? In which of them does the *unity* of the human being consist?

Each of us confronts this question: each of us is a human being—and each of us confronts the question of who he or she is. For it is only if I answer the *latter* question—only if I tell myself a *story* about who I am—that I answer the question of *what I should do*:

The unity of an individual life... is the unity of a narrative... To ask “What is the good for me?” is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion. To ask “What is the good for man?” is to ask what all answers to the former question must have in common.\(^{449}\)

Philosophy is something that we *do*: it is a way of dealing with the questions and concerns that arise as we live our lives. But the first and last question that I confront is the question of who I am; the first and last concern that I confront is the question of what I should do.

Were we gods—were we utterly beyond than the world—there would be no answer to either question: there would be nothing in particular that we were, and hence nothing in particular that we should do. But we are not gods: we are *within* the world—indeed, are parts of it. And so it is, in a partial way, within us:

What I am... is in key part what I inherit, a specific past that is present to some degree in my present. I find myself part of a history and that is

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generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognize it or not, one of the bearers of a tradition.\footnote{MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 221.}

If philosophy is something that we do—if it is a way of dealing with the questions and concerns that arise as we live our lives—then it inevitably reflects our perspectives. It is these perspectives that make philosophy possible in the first place:

Without… moral particularities to begin from there would never be anywhere to begin; but it is in moving forward from such particularity that the search for the good, for the universal, consists.\footnote{MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 221.}

In this, at least, MacIntyre echoes Thomas Nagel:

To acquire a more objective understanding of some aspect of life or the world, we step back from our initial view of it and form a new conception which has that view and its relation to the world as its object. In other words, we place ourselves in the world that is to be understood. The old view then comes to be regarded as an appearance, more subjective than the new view, and correctable or confirmable by reference to it. The process can be repeated, yielding a still more objective conception.\footnote{Thomas Nagel, \textit{The View from Nowhere} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 4. As I hope is obvious, this dissertation is profoundly indebted to Nagel.}

This movement \textit{from} our particular perspectives is a movement \textit{toward} what Nagel calls the “view from nowhere.” Philosophy—literally, the \textit{love} of wisdom—just is this movement:

We are in a sense trying to climb outside of our own minds, an effort that some would regard as insane and that I regard as philosophically fundamental.\footnote{Nagel, \textit{The View from Nowhere}, 11.}

Philosophy is insane insofar as we cannot ever \textit{achieve} the view from nowhere: every perspective remains a \textit{perspective}—remains, in other words, a view from \textit{somewhere}.
This is so even if “somewhere” refers to a perspective neither spatial nor temporal—for, no matter where we go, there we are:

The ambition to get outside of ourselves has obvious limits… Since we are who we are, we can’t get outside of ourselves completely… Objectivity itself leads to the recognition that its own capacities are… limited.\(^\text{454}\)

How we see things is inevitably conditioned by our cognitive architecture—by the language that we bear within us. In this, MacIntyre again echoes Nagel:

Particularity can never be simply left behind or obliterated. The notion of escaping from it into a realm of entirely universal maxims which belong to man as such, whether in its eighteenth-century Kantian form or in the presentation of some modern analytical moral philosophies, is an illusion.\(^\text{455}\)

There is an inevitable tension, then, within philosophy: we move toward seeing things as they really are—but, the more we see things as they really are, the more we see that we cannot ever see them entirely as they really are.

Sometimes this insight leads us toward despair—toward what contemporary philosophers call “skepticism.” But it can also be productive: it can move us to question our cognitive architecture—albeit from within that cognitive architecture itself.

Over time, then, we revise not only our convictions but also the language that we use to articulate them. This continual revision of our language constitutes what MacIntyre calls our “tradition.”

\(^\text{454}\) Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 6–7.

\(^\text{455}\) MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 221.
8.2.1. The Concept of a Tradition

What MacIntyre calls a “tradition” resembles what Wittgenstein calls a “form of life” insofar as both “tradition” and “form of life” refer to language in use: both refer to the linguistic perspective that we inhabit.

It is our linguistic perspective that renders our particular statements meaningful at all. Nonetheless, part of what it is to inhabit a linguistic perspective is to question that linguistic perspective—albeit on its own terms—and to revise it accordingly:

All reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought, transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of what had hitherto been reasoned in that tradition.  

Presumably it is this diachronic aspect of our linguistic perspective that the word “tradition” is meant to capture:

A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument. 

Of course, every tradition is at some point a living tradition: though one can abstract our language from our speaking of it—can abstract what Ferdinand de Saussure calls “langue” from what he calls “parole”—nonetheless the former remains an abstraction.

It is our speaking—that is, the practical—that is primary. Because of this, every tradition looks to the future as well as the past:

An adequate sense of the traditions to which one belongs… is not to be confused with any form of conservative antiquarianism… It is rather the

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456 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 222.

457 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 222.

case that an adequate sense of tradition manifests itself in a grasp of those future possibilities which the past has made available to the present.  

Every tradition provides an answer to the question of *who we are*. Because of this, every tradition provides an answer to the concern of *what we should do*.

8.2.2. The Birth of a Tradition

Sometimes, of course, these answers are merely implicit. If we reserve the word “tradition” for any form of life that has rendered its convictions explicit, then not every form of life is a tradition. So how do traditions begin? Well, according to MacIntyre, they are born of *conflict*:

We are now in a position to contrast three stages in the initial development of a tradition: a first in which the relevant beliefs, texts, and authorities have not yet been put in question; a second in which inadequacies of various types have been identified, but not yet remedied; and a third in which response to those inadequacies has resulted in a set of reformulations, reevaluations, and new formulations and evaluations designed to remedy inadequacies and overcome limitations.

In other words, traditions are born when those who inhabit a form of life discover contradictions among their convictions—convictions that, until that time, they had left more or less implicit. If a form of life is without such contradictions, then it never

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459 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 223.

460 Forms of life, of course, do *not* begin—not, anyway, in *this* sense: to be human *just is* to already inhabit a form of life. Though there was certainly a time before humans—and thus before forms of life—the transition to the present is and must remain normatively mysterious. This would be so even if we had a *biological* description of every detail of the transition, for the normative is irreducible to the descriptive.

becomes a tradition. But because forms of life are somewhat arbitrary—at least initially—contradictions tend to reveal themselves:

Every such form of enquiry begins in and from some condition of pure historical contingency, from the beliefs, institutions, and practices of some particular community which constitute a given. Within such a community authority will have been conferred upon certain texts and certain voices. Bards, priests, prophets, kings, and, on occasion, fools and jesters will all be heard.\textsuperscript{462}

A \textit{tradition} is conceived when these voices—those of authority—are seen to contradict one another:

Authoritative texts or utterances may be shown to be susceptible to, by actually receiving, alternative and incompatible interpretations, enjoining perhaps alternative and incompatible courses of action. Incoherences in the established system of beliefs may become evident. Confrontation by new situations, engendering new questions, may reveal within established practices and beliefs a lack of resources for offering or for justifying answers to these new questions. The coming together of two previously separate communities, each with its own well-established institutions, practices, and beliefs, either by migration or by conquest, may open up new alternative possibilities and require more than the existing means of evaluation are able to provide.\textsuperscript{463}

There is, of course, no perspective \textit{outside} forms of life. Nonetheless, one can critique a form of life from \textit{within}: every form of life contains \textit{some} logic,\textsuperscript{464} no matter how implicit—and nothing prevents those who inhabit that form of life from rendering their convictions explicit and judging them \textit{by} that logic.\textsuperscript{465}

\textsuperscript{462} MacIntyre, \textit{Whose Justice? Which Rationality}? 354.


\textsuperscript{464} By “logic,” I mean a certain interpretation of the Law of Noncontradiction. Every language contains the Law of Noncontradiction because said law is \textit{constitutive} of language—but what \textit{counts} as a contradiction is another question, one that every language answers in its own way.

\textsuperscript{465} Among the convictions that they might judge by their logic is, of course, that logic itself.
When those who inhabit a form of life do this—when they *remake* their convictions in order to resolve the contradictions among them—their tradition moves from conception to birth:

What responses the inhabitants of a particular community make in the face of such stimuli toward the reformulation of their beliefs or the remaking of their practices or both will depend not only upon what stock of reasons and of questioning and reasoning abilities they already possess but also upon their inventiveness. And these in turn will determine the possible range of outcomes in the rejection, emendation, and reformulation of beliefs, the revaluation of authorities, the reinterpretation of texts, the emergence of new forms of authority, and the production of new texts.\(^{466}\)

Of course, all of this might lead to *new* conflicts. When those conflicts arise—and they always *might* arise—the cycle of explication and revision begins anew.\(^{467}\)

8.2.3. The Rationality of a Tradition

It is precisely the repetition of this cycle, MacIntyre insists, that renders traditions *rational*:

At every stage beliefs and judgments will be justified by reference to the beliefs and judgments of the previous stage, and insofar as a tradition has constituted itself as a successful form of enquiry, the claims to truth made within that tradition will always be in some specifiable way less vulnerable to dialectical questioning and objection than were their predecessors.\(^{468}\)

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\(^{467}\) This section is indebted to Naomi Fisher, my colleague and my friend.

This sort of justification is quite other than the justification by experience or analysis that everyday statements undergo. Rather, the convictions of a tradition are justified in a way that is entirely *historical*:

It is by reference to... first principles that subordinate truths will be justified within a particular body of theory... But such first principles themselves, and indeed the whole body of theory of which they are a part, themselves will be understood to require justification... They are justified insofar as in the history of this tradition they have, by surviving the process of dialectical questioning, vindicated themselves as superior to their historical predecessors.  

At every point, the convictions of the tradition are justified in a way that their predecessors were not. However, because their justification is entirely historical, there is never a guarantee that the convictions of a tradition do not contain implicit contradictions:

Implicit in the rationality of such enquiry there is indeed a conception of a final truth, that is to say, a relationship of the mind to its objects which would be wholly adequate in respect of the capacities of that mind. But any conception of that state as one in which the mind could by its own powers know itself as thus adequately informed is ruled out... No one at any stage can ever rule out the future possibility of their present beliefs and judgments being shown to be inadequate in a variety of ways.

Every tradition is born into arbitrariness—an arbitrariness that it never entirely transcends. The rationality of a tradition therefore differs from what others have called “rationality”:

The conception of rationality and truth as thus embodied in tradition-constituted enquiry is of course strikingly at odds with both standard Cartesian and standard Hegelian accounts of rationality.

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The rationality of a tradition differs from what Descartes calls “rationality” insofar as the convictions of the tradition never somehow justify themselves. Just so, the rationality of a tradition differs from what Hegel calls “rationality” insofar as the tradition can never prove that its convictions do not contain implicit contradictions.\(^{472}\)

8.3. The Problem

Traditions, then, are forms of life made partially rational. This does not mean, of course, that anything could be more rational than a tradition: despite what Descartes and Hegel assume—albeit implicitly—there is no perspective outside a form of life. And traditions are as rational as forms of life get:

There is no standing ground, no place for enquiry, no way to engage in the practices of advancing, evaluating, accepting, and rejecting reasoned argument apart from that which is provided by some particular tradition or other.\(^{473}\)

Nonetheless, there is a problem:

It does not follow that what is said from within one tradition cannot be heard or overheard by those in another.\(^{474}\)

After all, there are countless human communities—and so countless forms of life. It is no surprise, therefore, that there are several rival traditions:


We are confronted with the rival and competing claims of a number of traditions to our allegiance… among which we can have no good reason to decide in favor of any one rather than of the others. Each has its own standards of reasoning; each provides its own background beliefs. To offer one kind of reason, to appeal to one set of background beliefs, will already be to have assumed the standpoint of one particular tradition. But if we make no such assumption, then we can have no good reason to give more weight to the contentions advanced by one particular tradition than to those advanced by its rivals.\textsuperscript{475}

To his credit, Wittgenstein saw this problem—even wrestled with it at the end of his life.

Consider the example of physics:

Should I say “I believe in physics,” or “I know that physics is true”?\textsuperscript{476}

Certainly the \textit{particular} statements of physics are true. After all, they are justified by experiment:

I am taught that under \textit{such} circumstances \textit{this} happens. It has been discovered by making the experiment a few times. Not that that would prove anything to us, if it weren’t that this experience was surrounded by others which combine with it to form a system. Thus, people did not make experiments just about falling bodies but also about air resistance and all sorts of other things.\textsuperscript{477}

Every experiment assumes the truth of countless statements; by necessity, almost all of these are left implicit. Because of this, every experiment tests a whole \textit{theory} rather than any particular statement \textit{in} that theory.\textsuperscript{478} Nonetheless, particular statements in a theory are justified by experiment insofar as the theory is \textit{itself} justified by experiment.

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\textsuperscript{476} Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, § 602.

\textsuperscript{477} Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, § 603.

\textsuperscript{478} This point is often called the “Duhem-Quine thesis”; like most every kind of holism, it is difficult to deny in theory—but is often ignored in practice. See William van Orman Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” in \textit{From a Logical Point of View: Nine Logico-Philosophical Essays}, 2nd edition, revised (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1980).
But what about the experimental method itself? As Wittgenstein implies—echoing Hume—any justification of experiment by experiment is rule-circular:

In the end I rely on these experiences, or on the reports of them... But hasn’t this trust... proved itself? So far as I can judge—yes.\footnote{Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, § 603.}

Physics \textit{itself} is not justified by experiment—not, anyway, if “justification” refers to what might convince a skeptic. But this does \textit{not} mean that physics is illegitimate: it is not that physics was tested by experiment and \textit{failed}. Rather, physics does not \textit{admit} of justification by experiment:

Is it wrong for me to be guided in my actions by the propositions of physics? Am I to say I have no good ground for doing so? Isn’t precisely this what we call a “good ground”?\footnote{Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, § 608.}

Even if it is legitimate to practice physics, however, there are those who do \textit{not} practice it—who, that is, inhabit another form of life altogether:

Supposing we met people who did not regard that as a telling reason. Now, how do we imagine this? Instead of the physicist, they consult an oracle. (And for that we consider them primitive.) Is it wrong for them to consult an oracle and be guided by it?—If we call this “wrong” aren’t we using our language-game as a base from which to combat theirs?\footnote{Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, § 609.}

In the end, it seems, it all comes down to war. Some will insist, of course, that war is \textit{justified}:

Are we right or wrong to combat it? Of course there are all sorts of slogans which will be used to support our proceedings.\footnote{Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, § 610.}

But these slogans are just that:

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\footnote{Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, § 603.}
\footnote{Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, § 608.}
\footnote{Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, § 609.}
\footnote{Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, § 610.}
Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and a heretic… At the end of reasons comes persuasion. (Think what happens when missionaries convert natives.)

“Persuasion” is, of course, a euphemism: our missionaries converted natives only insofar as they subdued them—even if the missionaries themselves did not quite see things in this way.

When those who inhabit the same form of life disagree with one another, they can resolve their disagreement by appealing to the convictions that they share. But when those who inhabit different forms of life disagree with one another, they by definition cannot do this. At this point, they can—and, it seems, often do—give themselves over to skepticism. Just as often, though, they give themselves over to war—even if only to a war of words: each side tries to shout down the other—since, after all, they share no convictions to which to appeal. Or so Wittgenstein seems to admit.

What, then, are the incommensurable traditions that stand as rivals for our allegiance?

8.3.1. Encyclopedia

MacIntyre calls the first tradition “Encyclopedia” after what he takes to be its canonical text—the ninth edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica. Like the Gifford Lectures themselves, this encyclopedia was the product of Victorian Scotland. However, MacIntyre insists that this encyclopedia is the expression, even the culmination, of a

\footnote{Wittgenstein, On Certainty, §§ 611–612.}
broader movement: his “Encyclopedia” refers at least to what he in *After Virtue* calls the “Enlightenment Project”—and, probably, to modernity itself, at least when one contrasts modernity with postmodernity.

At the heart of Encyclopedia, MacIntyre insists, is the denial that incommensurable traditions of enquiry could stand as rivals for our allegiance:

For Adam Gifford and almost all his educated Edinburgh contemporaries it was a guiding presupposition of thought that substantive rationality is unitary, that there is a single, if perhaps complex, conception of what the standards and the achievements of rationality are, one which every educated person can without too much difficulty be brought to agree in acknowledging.  

It is not that Adam Gifford and company were blind to the way that our cognitive architecture determines how we see things. It is rather that they assumed, with Immanuel Kant, that all of us share the same cognitive architecture—with one crucial qualification:

Gifford... took it for granted... that all rational persons conceptualize data in one and the same way and that therefore any attentive and honest observer, *unblinded and undistracted by the prejudices of prior commitment to belief*, would report the same data, the same facts.

It is difficult to deny—and has become more difficult to deny over the course of history—that different communities see things in different ways. But Adam Gifford and company assumed that those who see things other than we do—those, in other words, outside Victorian Scotland—merely refuse to see things as we do: their convictions would not survive reflection, but they value those convictions more than they do rationality. For Adam Gifford and company insisted that rationality begins in radical skepticism:

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The hostility to the imposition of religious tests which Adam Gifford shared with so many of his contemporaries prevented any recognition even of the possibility that commitment to some particular theoretical or doctrinal standpoint may be a prerequisite for—rather than a barrier to—an ability to characterize data in a way which will enable enquiry to proceed.\(^{486}\)

But radical skepticism is only the beginning of rationality, not the end. For Adam Gifford and company assumed, with René Descartes, that it led inevitably toward the truth:

> It is characteristic of genuine science, as contrasted with the thought of the prescientific and the nonscientific, that it has a particular kind of history, one of relatively continuous progress.\(^{487}\)

The natural sciences, anyway, seemed to reflect this inevitability: since the Scientific Revolution, human insights into the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology had increased exponentially. Moreover, these insights seemed to be converging: individuals like Isaac Newton, Dmitri Mendeleev, and Charles Darwin had revealed that particular laws of physics, chemistry, and biology were merely implications of more general laws. The hope of Adam Gifford and company was that humanity—that is, Victorian Scotland—was on the verge of a similar result in the social sciences:

> The human sciences, like all natural sciences, exhibit progress in enquiry, but progress of all kinds, moral, scientific, technological, theological, is their central subject matter and conceptions of progress and of its inevitability are among their most important unifying conceptions. So the sciences concerned with the distinctively human were taken to reveal to us a law-governed history whose climax so far is their own emergence.\(^{488}\)

Adam Gifford and company assumed, with Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, that rationality was on the verge of full awareness of itself—an awareness that would somehow justify it, both theoretically and practically, once and for all. Hopefully this

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\(^{486}\) MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 17.

\(^{487}\) MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 20.

justification would reveal that the upheaval of the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution had been worthwhile.

8.3.2. Genealogy

If the tradition that MacIntyre calls “Encyclopedia” is rooted in the denial that incommensurable traditions could stand as rivals for our allegiance, then the tradition that he calls “Genealogy” is rooted in the insistence that incommensurable traditions inevitably stand as rivals for our allegiance:

To think and speak of truth, knowledge, duty, and right... is to... sustain... a blindness to the multiplicity of perspectives from which the world can be viewed and to the multiplicity of idioms by means of which it can be characterized; or rather, a blindness to the fact that there is a multiplicity of perspectives and idioms, but no single world which they are of or about.  

If the canonical text of Encyclopedia is the ninth edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, then the canonical text of Genealogy is Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morality. According to this text, the pursuit of what is true without qualification is merely the latest variant of asceticism—and asceticism is merely aggression repressed, turned back on itself:

To be... a member of the professoriate... is to be a deformed person, deformed by whatever drive it is whose inhibition and distortion have led to an unacknowledged complicity in a system of suppressions and

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489 MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, 35–36.
repressions expressed in a fixation whose signs and symptoms are the
treatment of highly abstract moral and epistemic notions as fetishes.\textsuperscript{490}

If the method of the encyclopedist is \textit{discovery}, then the method of the genealogist is
\textit{unmasking}. For every “discovery” is yet more aggression:

The task of the genealogist more generally was to write the history of
those social and psychological formations in which the will to power is
distorted into and concealed by the will to truth.\textsuperscript{491}

If the penultimate task of the encyclopedist is the \textit{discovery} of morality, then the
penultimate task of the genealogist is the \textit{unmasking} of morality. For morality is merely
an especially clever weapon—is, indeed, a way for slaves to enslave their masters:

The specific task of the genealogist of morality was to trace both socially
and conceptually how rancor and resentment on the part of the inferior
destroyed the aristocratic nobility of archaic heroes and substituted a
priestly set of values in which a concern for purity and impurity provided
a disguise for malice and hate.\textsuperscript{492}

Science and morality—the twin obsessions of Encyclopedia—are merely the latest
iteration of this obsession with purity: encyclopedists seek what is true and right \textit{from no}
\textit{perspective whatsoever}—that is, in abstraction from \textit{any} authentic human concern. And
this is, Nietzsche insists, delusional:

Those genealogists who speak only of “true-from-a-point-of-view”
recognize in utterances about \textit{the} truth, or what is “true as such,” a
mystifying reified extension of their own concept, while the encyclopedist
understands “true-from-a-point-of-view” as a diminished, misleading, and
self-undermining reworking of “true as such.”\textsuperscript{493}

\textsuperscript{490} MacIntyre, \textit{Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry}, 35.

\textsuperscript{491} MacIntyre, \textit{Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry}, 39.

\textsuperscript{492} MacIntyre, \textit{Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry}, 39–40.

\textsuperscript{493} MacIntyre, \textit{Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry}, 43.
Encyclopedia and Genealogy are therefore incommensurable: there seems no way to
decide between these two rivals for our allegiance. But this is precisely what Genealogy
predicts:

A blindness to the possibility of genuine alternative conceptual schemes is
a necessary part of the encyclopedist’s point of view, while an openness to
that possibility is equally necessary on the part of the genealogist.494

If the ultimate task of Encyclopedia is to reveal its own justification, then the ultimate
task of Genealogy is to reveal its own utter lack of justification. Now, this might make
Genealogy seem as though it undermines itself. But this is to miss the point of
Genealogy:

The genre of the academic treatise… represents no more than a temporary
stance, a mask worn only for the purposes of certain particular addressings
of certain particular audiences.495

Genealogy holds that all convictions—itself included—are masks for aggression. It is not,
in other words, that the convictions of Genealogy are true—merely that those who hold
them intend to win:

Nietzsche’s… standpoint… cannot be expressed as a set of statements.
Statements are made only to be discarded… Nietzsche did not advance a
new theory against older theories; he proposed an abandonment of
theory.496

The last discovery of rationality is of its own utter lack of justification; the Genealogy of
Morality adopts rationality as a mask in order to show how, carried to its conclusion,
rationality inevitably undermines itself.

494 MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, 44.
495 MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, 47.
496 MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, 49.
If one reads Nietzsche’s *Genealogy* and is inspired by it to read another of his books, then one has missed the point. For Nietzsche wants one to *stop* reading books—even his *own* books: the demand of Genealogy is that one admit that *every* text—even this one—is a weapon deployed against one. And, as such, is something to be overcome.

8.3.3. Tradition

Encyclopedia has become something like the orthodoxy of the natural and social sciences, while genealogy has become something like the orthodoxy of the arts and the humanities. Just so, Encyclopedia is something like the orthodoxy of what is often called “analytic” philosophy, while Genealogy is something like the orthodoxy of what is often called “continental” philosophy. And anyone who spends enough time in contemporary philosophy—or, for that matter, in a contemporary university—knows that the rivalry between these denominations is intense: to identify with one denomination is to renounce the other—and inquisitors search fervently for signs of heresy. Nonetheless, Encyclopedia and Genealogy concur on one crucial point:

Genealogist and encyclopedist agree in framing what they take to be both exclusive and exhaustive alternatives: *either* reason is thus impersonal, universal, and disinterested or it is the unwitting representative of particular interests, masking their drive to power by its false pretensions to neutrality and disinterestedness.\(^\text{498}\)

\(^{497}\) Indeed, it is *this* rivalry, rather than any geographic or stylistic rivalry, that seems to mark the real division.

\(^{498}\) MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 59.
But the tradition that MacIntyre calls “Tradition”—one rooted in canonical texts like Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*, and Saint Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae*—denies this as a false dilemma:

What this… conceals from view is a third possibility, the possibility that reason can only move towards being genuinely universal and impersonal insofar as it is neither neutral nor disinterested, that membership in a particular type of moral community, one from which fundamental dissent has to be excluded, is a condition for genuinely rational enquiry.⁴⁹⁹

Encyclopedia insists that, of all of the ways to see things, only one is legitimate at all; in this, Encyclopedia echoes the position of Parmenides. Genealogy insists that, of all of the ways to see things, none is more legitimate than any other; in this, Genealogy echoes the position of Protagoras. Perhaps one should not be surprised, then, that Tradition echoes the position of Plato: precisely because there are several legitimate ways to see things, to see things in the *most* legitimate way—to see them, in other words, as they *really are*—demands a certain conversion. And this is not so much to *speak* differently as it is to *live* differently:

The enquirer has to learn how to make him or herself into a particular kind of person if he or she is to move towards a knowledge of the truth. What kind of a transformation is required? It is that which is involved in making oneself into an apprentice to a craft, the craft in this case of philosophical enquiry.⁵⁰⁰

To apprentice oneself to a craft is to hold its masters as *authorities*: one should not judge their work but rather hold their work as the standard by which to judge other work. More specifically, to apprentice oneself to the craft of inquiry is to hold certain *convictions* as authoritative: one should not judge those convictions but rather hold those convictions as


the standard by which to judge other statements. And to hold certain convictions as
authoritative is just to listen to a teacher:

Only insofar as we have already arrived at certain conclusions are we able
to become the sort of person able to engage in such enquiry so as to reach
sound conclusions… We… need a teacher… We shall have to learn from
that teacher and initially accept on the basis of his or her authority within
the community of a craft precisely what intellectual and moral habits it is
which we must cultivate and acquire.\textsuperscript{501}

At the heart of Tradition is the conviction that our allegiance to one tradition rather than
another \textit{matters}: it is precisely \textit{because} there are several ways to see things that only \textit{one}
of them reveals to us things as they really are. Rationality therefore \textit{demands} certain
convictions.

8.4. The Solution

Of course, Encyclopedia sees its rivals as mere superstition—as rationality traded for
convictions that would not survive reflection. Just so, Genealogy sees its rivals as masks
for aggression—as weapons deployed against those who would see things in other ways.
Tradition, for its part, sees its rivals as denials, born in pride, of our brokenness:
Encyclopedia denies that we are now less than gods, while Genealogy denies that we
were ever more than animals.

These traditions, in other words, are incommensurable: each of them explains
why anyone is ever tempted toward the others. To decide among them, we—like
Hamlet—need a \textit{test}: we need something that one tradition \textit{can} explain while the others

\textsuperscript{501} MacIntyre, \textit{Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry}, 63.

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cannot—some point at which the others fail on their own terms. And this is precisely what MacIntyre provides:

It is in respect of their adequacy or inadequacy in their responses to epistemological crises that traditions are vindicated or fail to be vindicated.\(^{502}\)

In his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn explains how the decision for one incommensurable paradigm and against another can nonetheless be rational.\(^{503}\) MacIntyre merely applies his insight across the board—involving, inevitably, the Primacy of the Practical.

8.4.1. Tradition

The convictions of a tradition are justified only *historically*—only, that is, in those ways that their predecessors were not. Because of this, there is no guarantee that those convictions do not contain implicit contradictions. But neither is there any guarantee that, when these contradictions are revealed, those who inhabit the relevant tradition will be able to resolve them:

All attempts to deploy the imaginative and inventive resources which the adherents of the tradition can provide may founder, either merely by doing nothing to remedy the condition of sterility and incoherence into which the enquiry has fallen or by also revealing or creating new problems, and

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revealing new flaws and new limitations. Time may elapse, and no further resources or solutions emerge.\textsuperscript{504}

No tradition ever entirely transcends the arbitrariness in which it is born. Because of this, it \textit{might} be that the convictions of a tradition \textit{inevitably} lead to contradictions that the relevant tradition apparently \textit{cannot} resolve. It is the resulting epistemological crisis that, for a tradition, serves as \textit{test}—as a point at which the tradition might fail on its own terms. And this is relevant because \textit{another} tradition might not fail the same test:

The adherents of a tradition which is now in this state of fundamental and radical crisis… may find themselves compelled to recognize that within this other tradition it is possible to construct from the concepts and theories peculiar to it what they were unable to provide from their own conceptual and theoretical resources, a cogent and illuminating explanation—cogent and illuminating, that is, by their own standards—for why their own intellectual tradition had been unable to solve its problems or restore its coherence.\textsuperscript{505}

When this occurs, MacIntyre insists, the only rational thing to do is to switch sides—to undergo what Kuhn calls “paradigm shift.” MacIntyre offers the Scientific Revolution—specifically, the revolution in physics—as a paradigm of paradigm shift:

The late medieval physics… was defeated in just this way by… a theory which not only did not suffer from the defects of impetus theory, but which was able to furnish the materials for an explanation of why nature is such that impetus theory could not have avoided the discovery of its own resourcelessness and incoherence, at just the points at which these defects in fact appeared.\textsuperscript{506}

Medieval physics and modern physics were incommensurable. For the latter interpreted the world in terms of \textit{efficient} causality: things move as they do, it held, because \textit{other} things push and pull them. But the former interpreted the world in terms of \textit{final} causality.

\textsuperscript{504} MacIntyre, \textit{Whose Justice? Which Rationality}? 364.

\textsuperscript{505} MacIntyre, \textit{Whose Justice? Which Rationality}? 364.

\textsuperscript{506} MacIntyre, \textit{Whose Justice? Which Rationality}? 365.
causality: things move as they do, it held, because they seek the places where they
belong.

The more that medieval physics learned of the world, however, the less clear it
was where things belonged. But only modern physics could explain why medieval
physics found itself in an epistemological crisis: things do not belong anywhere—for all
motion is relative. Now, one cannot even state this in the vocabulary of medieval physics
without subverting that vocabulary: modern physics held, somehow, that all motion is
unnatural motion. But modern physics had reinterpreted the world—had brought to it
another vocabulary: it was a mechanism—was clockwork that, in its breathtaking
subtlety, revealed the hand of its creator. It was precisely because medieval physics did
not see this that it could not answer the questions that it inevitably asked of itself.

Even though medieval physics and modern physics were incommensurable, then,
the former was nonetheless inferior to the latter. For medieval physics demanded that its
practitioners answer questions that they apparently could not. Modern physics,
meanwhile, could answer these questions—and, more relevantly, could explain why
medieval physics could not:

We cannot say wherein the rational superiority of Newtonian physics
consisted except historically in terms of its relationship to those
predecessors and rivals whom it challenged and displaced. Abstract
Newtonian physics from its context, and then ask wherein the rational
superiority of one to the other consists and you will be met with insoluble
incommensurability problems.\footnote{507}

To insist that a tradition is true without qualification is just to predict that the tradition
will never undergo an epistemological crisis that it cannot resolve. But to insist that a
tradition is justified without qualification is a contradiction: this is just to insist that a

\footnote{507 MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 268.}
tradition has met the relevant standard while also insisting that there is no relevant standard. It is for this reason that neither modern physics nor any other tradition has ever been justified—or, for that matter, has failed to be justified—except historically.

8.4.2. Encyclopedia

The Primacy of the Practical is the insight that philosophy is something that we do: it is a way of dealing with the questions and concerns that arise as we live our lives. Because questions and concerns inevitably do arise, each of us is always and already a philosopher:

Every moral agent no matter how plain a person is at least an incipient theorist, and the practical knowledge of the mature good person has a crucial theoretical component… We study philosophical ethics, not only for the sake of theoretical goals, but so as ourselves to become good.\(^{508}\)

Moral philosophy answers the question of what we should do. Insofar as everyone answers this question—specifically, by doing one thing rather than another—everyone is an implicit moral philosopher. But because their moral philosophizing remains implicit, they often philosophize badly. Those who render their moral philosophizing explicit—that is, those who call themselves “moral philosophers”—are merely better at philosophizing. They are, in other words, better people.

The absurdity of this suggestion is not an indication that the practical is not primary; rather, it is an indication that philosophy—or at least moral philosophy—has badly lost its way. It is not a coincidence that Encyclopedia—the dominant tradition

\(^{508}\) MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 175.
within contemporary moral philosophy—denies that moral philosophy answers the question of what we should do:

Plain persons do not need the moral theorist to tell them what the requirements of morality are, except insofar as religious or political interests have obfuscated and distorted true morality, sometimes with the aid of false moral theory, which has often enough been the case.509

Moral philosophy cannot answer the question of what we should do, Encyclopedia holds, everyone already knows what he or she should do. But this leaves only one task for those who call themselves “moral philosophers”:

The implication is that the central function of... moral theory is to combat the influence of bad moral theory.510

Lest this seem a caricature, note that even Kant—by far the subtlest moral philosopher of Encyclopedia—more or less admits this:

Common human reason... knows very well how to distinguish in every case that comes up what is good and what is evil, what is in conformity with duty or contrary to duty... There is, accordingly, no need of science and philosophy to know what one has to do in order to be honest and good, and even wise and virtuous... Indeed... a philosopher... can easily confuse his judgment by a mass of considerations foreign and irrelevant to the matter and deflect it from the straight course.511

It seems downright mad to insist that everyone already knows what he or she should do: we disagree wildly—even, at times, with ourselves—over what we should do. Of course, neither Kant nor the other Encyclopedists were unaware of this:

When... writers proclaimed the universality of moral agreement upon fundamentals, they were not unaware of some of the crucial differences

509 MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, 175.

510 MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, 175.

511 Kant, Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, 4:404. To be fair, Kant qualifies this slightly: the task of moral philosophers, he insists, is to remind everyday men and women not to make excuses for themselves.
between the cultures of modern Europe and those of other times and places.\textsuperscript{512}

Initially, the hope was that our moral confusion was the product of centuries of manipulation by kings and priests—with the implication that, if only we could strangle the last king with the entrails of the last priest, this confusion would yield to consensus:

Diderot… perceived… in cultures untouched by Western civilization morality as it really is, uncontaminated by either superstition or philosophy.\textsuperscript{513}

As more and more kings and priests met their ends, however, this hope became less and less plausible: our moral confusion only increased over nineteenth century. So Adam Gifford and company exchanged this hope for another:

The distinctness of morality appeared not as a timeless, but as an emerging, phenomenon. It was through a process in the course of which moral rules were disengaged from a variety of nonrational, superstitious entanglements both with rules concerning pollution and contagion and with rules prescribing ritual observances that moral progress was taken to have occurred, a progress towards just such an apprehension of moral truths as [Diderot] had envisaged but one exhibited in full clarity only by the civilized rather than the primitive or savage mind.\textsuperscript{514}

Granted, we disagree wildly over what we should do. Nonetheless, everyone already knows what he or she should do in the sense that this confusion would yield to consensus over time—that, eventually, we would converge on a morality purified of every superstition; Victorian Scotland had merely been the first to arrive. Or so Adam Gifford and company assumed.

Encyclopedia finds itself in an epistemological crisis: we have not converged on anything like the morality of Victorian Scotland—or, for that matter, any other morality

\textsuperscript{512} MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, 176.

\textsuperscript{513} MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, 176.

\textsuperscript{514} MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, 176.
at all. Indeed, our moral confusion seems to become more profound by the day—precisely insofar as it is purified of every “superstition.” It seems that Encyclopedia, with its conception of rationality as purification, cannot explain this—but Tradition can. Or so MacIntyre insists.

8.4.2.1. Taboo

To see Victorian morality as it really is, MacIntyre asks that we compare it with Hawaiian morality—that of kapu, or taboo. Initially, this morality was rooted in a rich theology and cosmology:

The whole within which the taboo rules of the older traditional Hawaiian culture… found their function as parts was a ritual enactment and reenactment through which, at sacred places and times and as a result of sacrifice, especially human sacrifice, the gods were reestablished in their actions, transactions, and relationships to human beings, so that the specifically Hawaiian conception of humanity was represented and re-presented and the hierarchical human order of kingship, kinship, and relationships to land was exhibited in its cyclical complexity. What is kapu within this system is marked out as divine.

Taboo rules were justified by these convictions: one should conduct human sacrifice, for example, precisely because human sacrifice reestablishes the hierarchical order of the world. After all, it was this hierarchical order that defined the identity of every Hawaiian:

The rules are not to be thought of… as serving some independently definable interests of this or that individual or group occupying this or that social role; for it is only in and through the structure sustained by

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compliance with the rules that what is good for whom, when, where, and how receives its definition.\textsuperscript{516}

It has been some time, of course, since the last human sacrifice in Hawaii. It seems that the turning point was the arrival of Europeans:

In… the forty years after the Hawaiians first discovered Europeans… rules became gradually separated from their older and original function within the total representation that had been Hawaiian culture. And in being thus detached the use of \textit{kapu} rules… began to take on the appearance of a distinct phenomenon.\textsuperscript{517}

First contact apparently led to something like an epistemological crisis for the Hawaiians: it seemed the world was quite otherwise than their rich cosmology indicated. Over time, therefore, they abandoned this cosmology—but this left their taboo rules unjustified.

Initially, at least, this did not matter: most of the time, what the rules demanded remained clear—even if those demands now seemed arbitrary. In hard cases, however, what the rules demanded became \textit{unclear}: without the cosmology that had justified them, there was no way to decide among rival interpretations. Because of this, the interpretations of the \textit{powerful} won the day—and those interpretations inevitably served their desires rather than those of the powerless:

The invocation of \textit{kapu} was now used to serve the sectional interests of the aristocracy in the acquisition and consumption of new kinds of goods at the expense of the interests of commoners.\textsuperscript{518}

Previously, taboo rules had articulated the \textit{obligations} that, if discharged, would reestablish the hierarchical order of the world. In time, however, the invocation of these rules became the invocation of \textit{rights}:

\textsuperscript{516} MacIntyre, \textit{Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry}, 183.

\textsuperscript{517} MacIntyre, \textit{Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry}, 184.

\textsuperscript{518} MacIntyre, \textit{Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry}, 184.
The appearance of uses of “kapu” to claim rights for individuals considered apart from their role and status in the older Hawaiian scheme… signals some measure of loss of… some previous social solidarity. Rights are claimed against some other person or persons; they are invoked when and insofar as those others appear as threats.519

Taboo rules had become a weapon—a way for some Hawaiians to exploit other Hawaiians. As such, they were ripe for unmasking.

8.4.2.2. Morality

Compare what became of the taboo rules with Victorian morality—in other words, with what contemporary moral philosophers still call “morality.” Like those taboo rules, Victorian morality was isolated from any theological or even cosmological convictions:

Morality was a distinct and relatively autonomous area… ordered in accordance with a scheme of rigid compartmentalization of life. The moral was sharply and clearly distinguished from the aesthetic, the religious, the economic, the legal, and the scientific.520

Without those theological and cosmo logical convictions, morals rules—interpreted precisely as such—were all that were left:

Morality was primarily a matter of rule-following and of ritualized responses to breaches of rules: to others by utterances of moral condemnation… to oneself by reproaches of conscience.521

Moreover, these rules were interpreted as demanding that one refrain from acting in particular ways toward others—interpreted, that is, in terms of rights:

519 MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, 184.

520 MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, 26.

521 MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, 26.
The rules… were negative prohibitions. The penalties of condemnation and of exclusion from particular areas of social life were peculiarly attached to breaches of the negative rules.\textsuperscript{522}

However, these invocation of these rights now seemed utterly arbitrary—that is, \textit{unjustified}:

Social agreement, especially in practice, on the importance and the content of morality coexisted with large intellectual disagreements concerning the nature of its rational justification.\textsuperscript{523}

MacIntyre draws a conclusion that by now is obvious:

Morality, understood as these late Victorians understood it… [was] a set of survivals, that is, rules, attitudes, and responses which had once been at home within some larger context in terms of which their intelligibility had been spelled out and their rationality justified but which had become detached from that context… Its separateness from other social phenomena [was] a sign, not of its universality, but of its being a fragment, broken off and separated from something else.\textsuperscript{524}

Victorian morality was as it was—isolated, deontological, and arbitrary—for the same reason that the taboo rules were this way: the rich theology and cosmology that had \textit{justified} each—and, for that matter, had granted each nuance—had been abandoned. Indeed, this abandonment was \textit{precisely} the “purification” that Adam Gifford and company sought:

Were… a Hawaiian… to reflect upon the corresponding features of the modern European culture… it would surely have struck him or her that a precisely similar degeneration seemed to have taken place in that culture but with this astonishing difference, that what he or she could perceive as degeneration was precisely what… Europeans… accounted moral progress.\textsuperscript{525}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{522} MacIntyre, \textit{Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry}, 26.
\bibitem{523} MacIntyre, \textit{Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry}, 26.
\bibitem{524} MacIntyre, \textit{Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry}, 29.
\bibitem{525} MacIntyre, \textit{Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry}, 185.
\end{thebibliography}
In time, Victorian morality would go the way of the taboo rules. For the abandonment of theological and cosmological convictions leads not to convergence but rather to confusion:

The subsequent history of moral philosophy has been a history of ramifying disagreement… The certitude of those who maintain each point of view is matched only by their inability to produce rational arguments capable of securing agreement from their adversaries.  

Like the taboo rules of the Hawaiians, our morality has become ripe for unmasking. It is no surprise, then, that outrage has become such a prominent feature of our social landscape: every moral rule is inevitably interpreted as the expression of one gender, race, or class asserting itself at the expense of another. Nor are these interpretations implausible: when individuals no longer identify with society—when, in other words, community is shattered—one would predict that individuals would interpret moral rules so as to privilege themselves over others.

8.4.2.3. Philosophy

The heirs of Adam Gifford—especially those who call themselves “moral philosophers”—are aware of our moral confusion: they are aware that we disagree radically about the justification of morality—and so disagree radically about what morality demands in hard cases. But they are also aware that, without something like morality, society itself would implode. It is for this reason that, over the past century, those who call themselves “moral philosophers” have proposed increasingly desperate

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526 MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, 189.
explanations for our inability to justify morality: perhaps morality is just *intuitive*, for example, or is merely *expressive*.

Entire careers have been spent attacking and defending these suggestions; it seems obvious that there is *something* wrong with them, but it is less than obvious what this something is. In order to see just *what* is wrong with these suggestions, MacIntyre asks that we again consider taboo rules:

Had the Polynesian culture enjoyed the blessings of analytical philosophy it is all too clear that the question of the meaning of taboo could have been resolved in a number of ways. *Taboo*, it would have been said by one party, is clearly the name of a non-natural property; and precisely the same reasoning which led Moore to see *good* as the name of such a property and Prichard and Ross to see *obligatory* and *right* as the names of such properties would have been available to show that *taboo* is the name of such a property. Another party would doubtless have argued that “This is taboo” means roughly the same as “I disapprove of this; do so as well”; and precisely the same reasoning which led Stevenson and Ayer to see “good” as having primarily an emotive use would have been available to support the emotive theory of *taboo.*

Obviously, this is ludicrous. But what is crucial is the *reason* that it is ludicrous:

The pointlessness of this imaginary debate arises from a shared presupposition of the contending parties, namely that the set of rules whose status and justification they are investigating provides an adequately demarcated subject matter for investigation… We from our standpoint in the real world know that this is not the case.

*There are no Polynesian gods.* And so nothing is taboo.

The point of the taboo rules was to reestablish the hierarchical order of the world—to reestablish, in other words, the right relationships among the Hawaiians and their gods. But the Hawaiians abandoned their faith when it became clear that things were not as that faith had told them. Without this faith, however, one could not justify the

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527 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 112.

528 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 112.
taboo rules: they really were arbitrary, really had become masks for aggression. But it is the same, MacIntyre insists, with our morality:

The deontological character of moral judgments is the ghost of conceptions of divine law which are quite alien to the metaphysics of modernity... The teleological character is similarly the ghost of conceptions of human nature and activity which are equally not at home in the modern world.\(^{529}\)

Without the theological and cosmological convictions that justified it—if you like, “purified” of them—our morality cannot be justified; far from surprising, therefore, it was inevitable that we find ourselves in moral confusion. Contemporary philosophy—that is, Encyclopedia—prevents us from seeing this; in this way, it fails on its own terms.

8.4.3. Genealogy

Thus does MacIntyre unmask our morality: though Encyclopedia pretends that it is somehow justified, in reality it is yet another mask for aggression. In this, of course, MacIntyre is inspired by Nietzsche:

Why should we think about our modern uses of good, right and obligatory in any different way from that in which we think about late... Polynesian uses of taboo? And why should we not think of Nietzsche as the Kamehameha II of the European tradition?\(^{530}\)

But Genealogy is merely a mask that MacIntyre sometimes wears. For he insists that Genealogy, like Encyclopedia, fails on its own terms: in the end, the activity of the

\(^{529}\) MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 112.

\(^{530}\) MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 113.
genealogist—that is, unmasking—depends on the identity of the genealogist over time. And this identity is one of the things that the genealogist is determined to unmask.

8.4.3.1. Identity

In order to reveal this, MacIntyre asks that we consider what it means for one to be identical to oneself over time. Because the normative is irreducible to the descriptive, identity is irreducible to any particular psychological or even biological facts. For identity is a matter of accountability:

Part of being one and the same person throughout this bodily life is being continuously liable to account for my actions, attitudes, and beliefs to others within my communities.531

To be accountable is for one to bind oneself—or, at any rate, to find oneself bound—by rules. And to be bound by rules is to see the moment of binding as normatively simultaneous with the moment of following—or failing to follow—those rules. In other words, to be accountable is to see oneself as a story—specifically, a story that one tells oneself:

My life has the unity of a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end, beginning with birth and ending, so far as concerns the final judgment to be passed on it—in respect of the achievement of my good—with death.532

531 MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, 197.

532 MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, 197. Elsewhere, MacIntyre calls this story a “narrative.” See MacIntyre, After Virtue, 204–225.
Genealogy, of course, denies that *anything* is identical over time: every identification—indeed, every statement whatsoever, even this one—is yet another mask for aggression.

But it is precisely at this point that Genealogy fails on its own terms:

The genealogist almost invariably and perhaps inescapably uses language in such a way as to presuppose ascriptions of… identity… to persons.\(^533\)

One can, it seems, unmask almost anything. But one *cannot* unmask *oneself*—not, anyway, insofar as one *is* the one unmasking.

8.4.3.2. Unmasking

This might sound odd—but, really, the point is fairly straightforward:

Behind the genealogical narrative there is always a shadow self-congratulatory narrative.\(^534\)

To unmask something is to see it in a *new* way—that is, in a way other than one *previously* did. For this to make any sense at all, there must *be* someone who now sees other than he or she did—someone, that is, who is *identical over time*:

We can enquire whether… the genealogist does not have to fall back into a mode of speech in which the use of personal pronouns presupposes just that metaphysical conception of accountability which genealogy disowns.\(^535\)

Remember that the genealogist insists that *all* things are masks for aggression—even the genealogist himself or herself. What *seems* a genealogist, in other words, is *really* nothing

\(^{533}\) MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 205.

\(^{534}\) MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 209.

at all—nothing, in other words, more than *différance*. But *without* the genealogist, MacIntyre warns, the narrative of unmasking has no *protagonist*—and so is no *narrative* at all. The only way for the genealogist to avoid this fate is for him or her to *exempt* himself or herself from unmasking:

Can the genealogist legitimately include the self out of which he speaks in explaining himself within his or her genealogical narrative? Is the genealogist not self-indulgently engaged in exempting his or her utterances from the treatment to which everyone else’s is subjected?\footnote{MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 210.}

The *conclusion* of the genealogist might seem to undermine itself: if all things are masks for aggression, then the conviction that all things are masks for aggression is not *true* but is itself merely a mask for aggression. Thus Genealogy seems a snake that eats its own tail.

According to the genealogist, though, this is a feature rather than a bug: the point of genealogy was never for us to take it as *true*. Rather, the point of genealogy is for us to stop *asking* what is true—in other words, to abandon rationality altogether.\footnote{There is in this an echo of Wittgenstein—albeit a perverse one.}

But the point is not that the *conclusion* of the genealogist undermines itself but rather that the *activity* of the genealogist undermines itself. For in unmasking all things, the genealogist cannot but unmask unmasking itself: it *seemed* that there was a genealogist here, but *really* there is nothing at all. Thus Genealogy seems a snake that eats not only its own tail but also its own head:

If the genealogist is inescapably one who disowns part of his or her own past, then the genealogist’s narrative presupposes enough of unity, continuity, and identity to make such disowning possible.\footnote{MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 214.}
In reality, of course, genealogists do not unmask themselves—do not, that is, disavow their activity as genealogists: Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche signs his books “Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche,” Michel Foucault signs his books “Michel Foucault,” and Richard Rorty signs his books “Richard Rorty.” And it could be no other way.

8.4.3.3. Philosophy

The activity of the genealogist undermines itself precisely insofar as it an activity—something, that is, that someone does. The one thing that the genealogist cannot unmask is the genealogist—specifically, his or her activity of unmasking. It is on this point that Genealogy fails on its own terms: it demands that its practitioners do something that it forbids them from doing. But only Tradition can explain this failure:

Where Nietzsche saw the individual will as a fiction, as part of a mistaken psychology which conceals from view the impersonal will to power, the Thomist can elaborate… an account of the will to power as an intellectual fiction disguising the corruption of the will. The activity of unmasking is itself to be understood from the Thomistic standpoint as a mask for pride. 539

We are broken gods in desperate need of redemption. For we are born into forms of life—and so are born into arbitrariness. Nonetheless, we seek to transcend this arbitrariness: we render our forms of life into traditions and reflect—abandoning what is illusory, and retaining what is not. But to insist that all things are masks for aggression is to abdicate this birthright—is, in other words, to surrender. The genealogist is too proud

539 MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 147.
to admit that he or she should be more than he or she is, so he or she insists that he or she is less— is, indeed, nothing at all.

8.5. Conclusion

We can decide, then, among the incommensurable traditions that stand as rivals for our allegiance: two of those traditions suffer epistemological crises, while the third explains these epistemological crises. MacIntyre admits, though, that another tradition could come along that did not suffer epistemological crisis:

Nothing that I have said goes any way to show that a situation could not arise in which it proved possible to discover no rational way to settle the disagreements between two rival moral and epistemological traditions… There are no successful a priori arguments which will guarantee in advance that such a situation could not occur. 540

There is no guarantee, then, that incommensurability can be overcome. However, even the recognition of incommensurability is an achievement:

Genuine incommensurability… can only be recognized and characterized by someone who inhabits both alternative conceptual schemes… Such persons are rarely numerous. They are the inhabitants of boundary situations, generally incurring the suspicion and misunderstanding of members of both of the contending parties. 541

MacIntyre is speaking, of course, about himself; he has certainly incurred the suspicion and misunderstanding of all contending parties. Nonetheless, he has decided among those parties:

540 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 277.

541 MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, 114.
It becomes evident that in characterizing the variety of standpoints with which I have been and will be concerned, I too must have been and will be speaking as a partisan. The neutrality of the academic is itself a fiction of the encyclopedist, and I reveal my antiencyclopedic partisanship by calling it a fiction.\(^{542}\)

There is no standpoint \textit{outside} rival and incommensurable traditions from which to decide among them. Nonetheless, MacIntyre insists, one of those traditions vindicates itself: both Encyclopedia and Genealogy fail on their own terms—and, though neither Encyclopedia nor Genealogy can \textit{explain} its failures, Tradition can explain both. It is therefore according to Tradition that—at least for now—we should see ourselves: we are less exquisite clockwork or sublimated lust than we are broken gods.\(^{543}\)

How to awaken college kids to this is, of course, another question.

\(^{542}\) MacIntyre, \textit{Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry}, 117.

\(^{543}\) As I hope is obvious, I am quoting G. K. Chesterton. See G. K. Chesterton, \textit{Orthodoxy} (London: John Lane, 1908), 173.
Morality is not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy.

—Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity

What was the point of all of this?

9.1. Introduction

Philosophy is something that we do: it is a way of dealing with the questions and concerns that arise as we live our lives. Because of this, philosophy inevitably reflects our perspectives; these perspectives make philosophy possible—even as they constrain what philosophy can say.

Call this the “Primacy of the Practical.” It is the insight at the heart of philosophy. Indeed, it is what marks philosophy—literally, the love of wisdom—as something other
than wisdom *itself*: it is, in the end, our insight into the limitations of our insight.\(^{544}\) There is a tension in this, obviously, but it is not a tension that we can dissolve—not, anyway, without dissolving philosophy itself.

This dissertation did not seek to *demonstrate* that the practical is primary. Indeed, precisely *because* this is the insight at the heart of philosophy, we *cannot* demonstrate it—not, anyway, from any insight more obvious than itself. Rather, this dissertation sought to show that, again and again, it is those philosophers who insist that the practical *is* primary who achieve insights into the human condition—insights, in other words, that might *matter* to us.

The Primacy of the Practical is therefore of more than merely theoretical interest: its implications *teach* us something about ourselves—about who we are and what we should do.\(^{545}\) But it is also practical in a more immediate way: it is precisely when philosophers *forget* the Primacy of the Practical that they put philosophy *itself* at risk. Or at least its status as a discipline in the contemporary university.

**9.2. The Contemporary University**

What is the point of the contemporary university? Unsurprisingly, more and more individuals—not only students and their parents but also those politicians who determine

\(^{544}\) One implication of this is that philosophy began with Socrates. Or, rather, that what came *before* Socrates—the stories of the poets, the science of the presocratics, and the skills of the sophists—was philosophy only *because* Plato reinterpreted all of it in the light of the his teacher.

\(^{545}\) As I hope is obvious by now, a *merely* theoretical interest is a contradiction. For theories are the result of *theorization*, and theorization is a *practice*—something, in other words, that we *do*. And we do *whatever* we do for *reasons*.
the fates of our public universities—seem to be asking this question. The reason is fairly obvious: the contemporary university is fantastically expensive. Consider an example close to home: a Notre Dame undergraduate not receiving financial assistance should expect to pay at least $235,100 in tuition, fees, room, and board over the course of four years. And this example does not even crack the top ten.

9.2.1. Job Skills

So what is the point of the contemporary university? Surprisingly, this turns out to be a hard question to answer:

When… critics of the university… have proposed… measures by which the achievements of contemporary universities should be evaluated and in accordance with which from now on resources and privileges should be allocated to them, the official spokespersons of the academic status quo have with rare exceptions responded with stuttering ineptitudes.

The problem is not that these spokespersons have nothing to say. Indeed, one answer is fairly obvious:


549 MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, 221.
Research universities... provide the specialized and professionalized human resources and skills needed in an advanced capitalist society.\footnote{MacIntyre, \textit{God, Philosophy, Universities}, 173.}

The contemporary university teaches job skills. By their own admission, our students go to college in order to learn what they need in order to secure and retain employment. Indeed, one who borrows a quarter of a million dollars for any \textit{other} reason risks the accusation of insanity.

But the problem is that most of what the contemporary university does is irrelevant to job training. It seems doubtful that any degree in the humanities, for example, is a prudent investment—and it seems downright ludicrous that a degree in \textit{philosophy} is a prudent investment. If the point of college is job training, then the contemporary university should not waste time teaching the humanities: rather, every student should major in engineering or one of the hard sciences. Or, for that matter, in business.\footnote{It is not obvious that a \textit{degree} in business—something earned after four years at a liberal arts college—makes any sense at all: certainly internship and apprenticeship seem more sensible ways to learn any business—especially as neither demands that one borrow a quarter of a million dollars. One slightly cynical might suppose that the point of a degree in business is to prove to employers that one is willing to put up with an arbitrary amount of boredom in order to secure even moderate economic security; one slightly more cynical might suppose that the point of a degree in business is to entertain oneself with an extraordinarily expensive party—attendance at which proves to employers that one is of the “right” social class. And all of this is in addition to the more general problem that, given the mediocre quality of our secondary schools, many students are so unprepared for college that they \textit{cannot} be learning much once they arrive there.}

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9.2.2. Research

Fortunately, this is not the *only* justification for the contemporary university. Indeed, another is almost as obvious:

The modern research university has been successful... unsurprisingly... in research: in topology and number theory, in particle physics and cosmology, in biochemistry and neurophysiology, in archaeology and history, and in many other areas—the list of discoveries and advances in almost any year is extraordinary.\(^{552}\)

Certainly the discoveries of the contemporary university are astonishing: research in physics, chemistry, and biology has utterly remade our lives—made them happier, or at least longer.

But the problem is that most of the research at the contemporary university is *not* like this—is not, in other words, *technological*. Research in the humanities, for example, has not made our lives longer by even one day.

There is a sense, of course, in which research in the humanities has made our lives *happier*: insight into texts is, in the end, insight into the human condition—insight, that is, into *our* condition. And certainly insight into our condition matters to us if anything does.

But the problem is that the humanities are not really like this. For the contemporary university values insight into our condition less than what it calls “research”—books and articles, that is, written by experts for experts:

*It is one of the marks of the professionalization and specialization of the disciplines that the practitioners of each discipline are preoccupied with addressing only those within their disciplines rather than anyone outside them... So their mode of writing presupposes not only shared expertise*

\(^{552}\) MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities*, 173.
and familiarity with a semitechnical vocabulary, but also a mastery of the relevant professional literature.\footnote{MacIntyre, \textit{God, Philosophy, Universities}, 176.}

The thought that those outside the ivory tower might so much as \textit{understand} the latest work in the humanities—much less \textit{care} about it—seems slightly ludicrous. Nor is this particularly mysterious:

Their mode of writing… obscures from view what it is that might give to their elucidations some more general importance. They successfully exclude from the discussion all but their colleagues.\footnote{MacIntyre, \textit{God, Philosophy, Universities}, 176.}

Work in the humanities concerns itself with precisely that—humanity. Nonetheless, work in the humanities tends to echo the inhuman vocabulary of physics, chemistry, and biology. As a result, those outside the ivory tower—and even those in other disciplines—do not hear in this work their own questions and concerns. Indeed, one slightly cynical might suppose that this was the point: only if they exclude those without the relevant technical training can the humanities preserve themselves as \textit{professions}. And only if they preserve themselves as professions can the humanities preserve all of the financial and social capital that comes with professionalization.\footnote{Professions inevitably insulate the relevant professionals from competition. See Louis Menand, \textit{The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University} (New York: Norton, 2010).}

9.3. Philosophy

Perhaps this is something of a caricature of the contemporary humanities. Unfortunately, it seems a faithful rendering of contemporary philosophy:
Plain persons in our society think of philosophers as very different from themselves—and about the professional teachers of philosophy in contemporary universities they are manifestly right.\textsuperscript{556}

To forget that the practical is primary is to see philosophy as merely theoretical. And this is just to insist that philosophy is irrelevant to merely human questions and concerns—that, in other words, it offers no insight into the human condition. Unsurprisingly, contemporary philosophy tends not to ask questions like these:

1. \textit{What should I believe?}
2. \textit{What should I do?}

Rather, contemporary philosophy tends to ask questions like these:

1. \textit{What is true in abstraction from what anyone could actually believe?}
2. \textit{What is right in abstraction from what anyone could actually do?}

Contemporary philosophers tend to seek the view from nowhere—or, rather, tend to assume that they somehow already \textit{occupy} the view from nowhere. Because of this, they tend to abstract from whatever rendered their questions relevant to one or another aspect of their lives. Because of \textit{this}, those questions cannot be answered:

\begin{quote}
Certain types of basic disagreement are recurrent and ineliminable. Agreement on method, technique, and the evaluation of skill is often sufficient to ensure further agreements on what is involved in upholding one solution to some particular problem rather than its rivals... But there is no or insufficient shared agreement as to how these commitments... are to be evaluated, on what standard it is by which gain in one respect is to be measured against loss in another, and sometimes indeed on what constitutes gain and what is to be accounted loss.\textsuperscript{557}
\end{quote}

It is the relevant linguistic context that provides the rule for discerning the answer to any particular question; because it abstracts utterly from this linguistic context, contemporary

\textsuperscript{556} MacIntyre, \textit{God, Philosophy, Universities}, 9.

\textsuperscript{557} MacIntyre, \textit{Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry}, 159.
philosophy cannot answer the questions that it asks. Consider an example from contemporary metaphysics—a subfield that tends to see itself not as seeking insight into the human condition but rather as seeking answers to questions about which, almost by definition, no human could really care.

David Lewis famously asks whether there are holes.\footnote{I am not making this up. See David Lewis and Stephanie Lewis, “Holes,” in \textit{Philosophical Papers}, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 3—9. Note that David Lewis is an influential contemporary philosopher—indeed, by one estimate, is the most influential contemporary philosopher. See Kieran Healy, “Lewis and the Women,” \textit{Kieran Healy} (blog), last modified 19 June 2013, http://kieranhealy.org/blog/archives/2013/06/19/lewis-and-the-women/. Nor is his influence entirely undeserved: Lewis is the cleverest—or at least the bravest—contemporary metaphysician. My admiration for him is sincere.} Apparently this question seems straightforward to Lewis—but, stripped of its linguistic context, there is no rule for discerning its answer. For Lewis is not asking whether anything anywhere has a hole in it. Nor is he asking whether holes are somehow illusory—whether to see things as they \textit{really} are is to see \textit{through} the holes.\footnote{So to speak.} But then what \textit{is} Lewis asking? Stripped of its linguistic context, his question has \textit{no} determinate meaning—and therefore no determinate answer. Lewis himself admits as much:

> Whether or not it would be nice to knock disagreeing philosophers down by sheer force of argument, it cannot be done. Philosophical theories are never refuted conclusively... The theory survives its refutation—at a price... When all is said and done, and all the tricky arguments and distinctions and counterexamples have been discovered, presumably we will still face the question of which prices are worth paying.\footnote{David Lewis, “Introduction,” in \textit{Philosophical Papers}, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), x.}

\footnote{558 I am not making this up. See David Lewis and Stephanie Lewis, “Holes,” in \textit{Philosophical Papers}, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 3—9. Note that David Lewis is an influential contemporary philosopher—indeed, by one estimate, is the most influential contemporary philosopher. See Kieran Healy, “Lewis and the Women,” \textit{Kieran Healy} (blog), last modified 19 June 2013, http://kieranhealy.org/blog/archives/2013/06/19/lewis-and-the-women/. Nor is his influence entirely undeserved: Lewis is the cleverest—or at least the bravest—contemporary metaphysician. My admiration for him is sincere.}

\footnote{559 So to speak.}

We still face the question of which prices are worth paying because, when a theory is irrelevant to our lives, the price for holding it is effectively zero. We can speak any words at all if those words do not mean anything to us.\(^{561}\)

9.4. Conclusion

The other humanities concern themselves with particular texts—literary, musical, architectural, and so on. But philosophy concerns itself with the human condition itself. When the other humanities forget that the practical is primary, they render their work irrelevant to those outside the ivory tower. But when philosophy forgets that the practical is primary, it renders itself meaningless:

> When professionalized academic philosophy makes the rational discussion of questions of fundamental import the prerogative of an academic elite with certified technical skills, using a vocabulary and writing in genres which are unavailable to those outside that elite, the excluded are apt to respond by repudiating the rationality of the philosophers.\(^{562}\)

And indeed, when students or parents or politicians ask the point of philosophy, contemporary philosophers have nothing to say. It is for this reason that contemporary philosophy is at risk. But philosophy might become more than contemporary—might become once again perennial:


\(^{562}\) MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 168. It is for this reason that MacIntyre calls contemporary philosophy a second “scholasticism.” See MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 158.
One of the tasks of philosophers now has to be to do philosophy in such a way as to address the deeper human concerns that underlie its basic problems, without sacrificing rigor or depth.\textsuperscript{563}

To do philosophy in this way would be to see research and teaching as extensions of one another—as two aspects of the same practice. To see research and teaching in this way would be to see the questions that we ask in the library as echoes of those that we ask in the classroom—and this would just be to see ourselves as students.

Likely this would demand some humility. Certainly it would demand that we renounce some of the social capital that comes with professionalization.\textsuperscript{564} But it would be worth doing—at least if philosophy is worth saving.

That was the point of all of this.\textsuperscript{565}

\textsuperscript{563} MacIntyre, \textit{God, Philosophy, Universities}, 176.

\textsuperscript{564} For better or worse, the financial capital has already evaporated.

\textsuperscript{565} This chapter is indebted to Stuart Reeves, my colleague and my friend.
CHAPTER 10

POSTSCRIPT

Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius. See to it, and don’t forget.

—Plato, Phaedo

This dissertation is an echo of my teaching. Insofar as it is that, it is my way of explaining to myself what I hope will be the work of my life. That work is saving teenagers from the banality of the world they inherit—in other words, from themselves. For I am still in my heart one of those teenagers: I would become to them the voice that, when I was a college kid, I needed so badly to hear.

This might not be the noblest vocation. But remember that Socrates too devoted his life to saving teenagers from themselves. Save for one teenager, it seems, he failed. Fortunately for us, that teenager was the most brilliant playwright who ever lived—and he spent the rest of his life trying to understand what Socrates had tried to teach him.
Socrates died because he was perverse: he just happened to love justice more than power and mercy more than justice. Socrates died, in other words, because he had a conscience:

Something divine and daimonic comes to me… A sort of voice comes, and whenever it comes, it always turns me away from whatever I am about to do.\textsuperscript{566}

But what would the world have to be like if justice, in the end, meant more than power—and mercy even more than justice? What would the world have to be like, in other words, if the death of Socrates was a sacrifice rather than a suicide?

This was, it seems, the crucial question for Plato—one that he tried to answer in terms of the genres of theater available to him. The most obvious evidence of this is the conclusion of his Symposium, where Socrates is talking circles around the comedian Aristophanes and the tragedian Agathon:

Socrates was compelling them to agree that the same man should know how to make comedy and tragedy; and that he who is by art a tragic poet is also a comic poet. They were compelled to admit this, though they were not following too well and were nodding.\textsuperscript{567}

A comedy is a play at the end of which the hero wins. A tragedy is a play at the end of which the hero dies. A play is both a tragedy and a comedy when, at the end, the hero wins \textit{by} dying. Of course, there was at the time of Socrates no genre of theater that was both comic and tragic—that was comic \textit{by being} tragic. To capture the fundamentally


\textsuperscript{567} Plato, \textit{Symposium}, 223d. This is, of course, supposed to be funny.
new kind of life that Socrates had led, Plato had to invent a fundamentally new genre of theater—philosophy.  

10.2. Sacrifice

The Athenians had gone to war in the name of democracy: they insisted that they were defending themselves—and liberating those ruled by a tyrant. Of course, this was only half true: the Athenians also wanted for themselves the resources held by that tyrant. Perhaps this greed blinded them—for the war went disastrously: the Athenians assumed that their victory would be swift, but instead they found themselves in a brutal war of attrition that they never really understood—and so could never really win. In the end, they crippled not only those they sought to liberate but also themselves.  

In the aftermath, the Athenians were desperate to blame someone, anyone, for their loss—anyone, that is, besides themselves. Alcibiades and Critias, both traitors to Athens, were the obvious candidates—but, with both dead, their teacher would serve: Socrates, the devotee of Apollo, accepted his death, as a voluntary scapegoat. He had failed to see his vision for Athens become a reality, and no doubt if he were still free he would think that the continuation of his mission was the best chance Athens had for regeneration. But that was in the past. If, even in a temporary fit of post-war zeal, the Athenians thought it would take the death of a troublesome thinker to heal the rifts in the city and to create the concord that all politicians appeared to be committed to,

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568 For this insight, I again owe Vittorio Hösle.

569 All of this might sound familiar.
and that he himself had worked for in his own way, so be it. Rather than escape, as he easily could, he let himself be killed.\textsuperscript{570}

Socrates had spent his life trying to save Athens from itself: he had tried to make Alcibiades and Critias—boys who would someday be kings—into philosophers. The knowledge that he had failed in this—that, indeed, he had done more harm than good—must have haunted him.

But he could redeem himself—could, that is, save Athens after all: he need only die. That he saw his submission as the only way to save Athens is implied in the speech that Socrates invents for the laws in the \textit{Crito}:

By this deed that you are attempting, what do you think you’re doing, if not destroying us laws and the whole city, as far as it lies in you? Or does it seem possible to you for a city to continue to exist, and not to be overturned, in which the judgments that are reached have no strength, but are rendered ineffective and are corrupted by private men?\textsuperscript{571}

But why would flight have meant destroying Athens and its laws? Well, after Critias and his Thirty Tyrants had been overthrown, the oligarchs and the democrats had instituted an amnesty:

Anyone who wished could go and join the oligarchs who had already fled to Eleusis, which was to be a semi-independent enclave… [But] if any of the Thirty and their henchmen chose to stay in Athens and submit to trial, the verdict of that trial was to be taken to be final. There was to be no reprise.\textsuperscript{572}

So a verdict of innocence meant innocence—but a verdict of guilt meant guilt. Socrates mentions this in the \textit{Crito}:

\textsuperscript{570} Robin Waterfield, \textit{Why Socrates Died: Dispelling the Myths} (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2009), 204.


\textsuperscript{572} Waterfield, 131, 133-134.
Someone… would have many things to say on behalf of this law if it were destroyed—the law that orders that the judgments reached in trials be authoritative.\textsuperscript{573}

For Socrates to flee, therefore, would not only have been for him to defy his jurors: it would have been for him to defy the laws themselves—to violate the amnesty that was, at that point, the social contract holding Athens together. Flight risked a rift between the oligarchs and the democrats—risked, that is, a return to civil war. For Socrates to submit, on the other hand, was for him to offer himself as a sacrifice to his brothers and sisters—born of their fatherland and of their virgin mother, Athena. It was for him to make the Myth of the Metals a reality, even if only in his own heart. For a man who had spent his life trying to save Athens from itself, the decision must have seemed an easy one.

10.3. Revolution

Or so Robin Waterfield suspects. My own suspicion—and it can be only that, a suspicion—is that Waterfield is only half right: sometimes, to destroy a law is to uphold it—and to uphold a law is to destroy it. What I mean is this: had Socrates fled, it would have been easy for the Athenians to dismiss him as a coward—as a fugitive from justice. But by forcing the Athenians to take their own judgment seriously—by forcing them \textit{literally} to kill their scapegoat—Socrates forced them to admit to themselves that their war had made them murderers, that their “justice” was nothing more than what Thrasymachus had said it was:

\footnote{Plato, \textit{Crito}, 50b.}
If you [die] now, you will [die] having been done injustice not by us laws, but by human beings.  

With his trial, the Athenians sought to construct a narrative: Socrates, in his pride, had betrayed them. With his defiance, Socrates shattered this narrative: the Athenians, in their pride, had betrayed themselves.

10.4. Pedagogy

Socrates reminded the Athenians of what they were so desperate to forget: they had only their own folly to blame for their loss. Socrates taught them, in other words, to know themselves. And this is no small thing:

The unexamined life is not worth living for a human being.  

Humanity is broken divinity: we seek a transcendence, inevitably, that we cannot achieve. To live, therefore, is to lack wisdom. But to live well is to love it nonetheless.

I hope to teach this to teenagers—to awaken them to what and who they really are. This might not be the noblest vocation; certainly it is not the vocation of a Plato, or a Kant, or a Wittgenstein, or a MacIntyre. But perhaps it is the vocation of a Socrates. In any case, if I can get through to even one of them, then it will have been worth it.

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574 Plato, *Crito*, 54b–54c.

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