

# THE LOGIC OF METAPHYSICAL THINKING

by

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# Abstract

This essay offers an analysis of the logical structure of classical metaphysics, with respect to its ontological, epistemological, and ethical assumptions; a consideration of the resilience of this structure, three means by which its critics have countered that resilience, and two errors of excess to which those means have led; and a brief discussion of the philosophical tradition's turn from metaphysics to science and government, and of the conversational tradition at its origin.

I wrote this in order to fit myself and my friends for decent conversation. It is dedicated to them—to their forbearance, and for the measure of decency they lent my poor tailor to begin with.

τὸ γὰρ ἀκριβὲς οὐχ ὁμοίως ἐν ἅπασιν τοῖς λόγοις ἐπιζητητέον, ὥσπερ οὐδ' ἐν τοῖς δημιουργουμένοις ... πεπαιδευμένου γὰρ ἐστὶν ἐπὶ τοσοῦτον τὰκριβὲς ἐπιζητεῖν καθ' ἕκαστον γένος, ἐφ' ὅσον ἡ τοῦ πράγματος φύσις ἐπιδέχεται

For precision is not to be sought alike in all discussions, no more than in the practice of all crafts. ... For it is a mark of education to seek, for each sort of topic, just such a measure of precision as its nature admits.

—Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b.\*

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I have not written the essay that I once hoped to write, but I am grateful to those who have helped me to muddle along with more honesty, kindness, and courage than I might otherwise have managed.

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# 1

## Introduction

This is an essay about metaphysics. But my aim in writing it has been to contribute not to the metaphysical tradition but to the tradition of scholarship to which I prefer to belong, the tradition of plain-spoken intellectual travellers, by describing a territory that I surveyed during my passage through philosophical country: that held by metaphysics and contested by its discontents. For I find myself able to make sense of that territory only from a distance at which my labours cease to belong to its tradition and become something else: historical studies, natural inquiries, or, as in this work, formal analyses.

In the belief that directions through confusing terrain, while made better by wide knowledge, are given best with brevity, I have tried to make my account brief by eschewing history and exegesis in favour of abstract description of the logical structure of metaphysical thinking and its discontents (Chapters 3 and 4). This description is preceded by the introductory remarks below and a discussion of the origin and meaning of the word ‘metaphysics’ (Chapter 2), and followed by a discussion of the impact on the philosophical tradition of the past century or so of sustained antimetaphysical critique (Chapter 5).

But let us begin carefully, with some definitions.

By ‘a type of thinking’ I mean a species of beliefs, values, and practices that together constitute a distinct conception of the nature, aims, and authority of intellectual activity.

‘Metaphysical thinking’ is the type which aims to grasp something across from or behind (μετά) whatever things initially or ordinarily show up (φυσικά). (By ‘thing’ I mean whatever can be picked out: rocks, unicorns,  $n$ -tuples, whatever. I use the word in the vague sense that it ordinarily has, following Aristotle in thinking that precision amounts to achieving just so much clarity as one’s topic admits.) I define this type in detail in Chapters 2 and 3.

By ‘the discontents of a type of thinking’ I mean those who attempt to halt the propagation of a species by drawing its conception into question or otherwise overturning the attitudes and activities that instantiate and preserve that conception. Although the discontents of metaphysical thinking have mostly succeeded only in obliging it to alter its superficial features, an account of metaphysical thinking would be incomplete that neglected the skirmishes that define its borders. I discuss three means by which metaphysical thinking has been drawn into question in Chapter 4.

Finally, by ‘logic’ in this context I mean the organic structure of a type of thinking; that is, I mean to indicate that I wish to give an account of metaphysical thinking as a naturalist would study the anatomy of a species of animal, by cutting it open and laying out its parts so that the shape and relation of each to the rest can be seen clearly; save that in this essay I do not dissect any specimens of metaphysical thinking, much less recount a history of their comings and goings, but attempt instead to describe the structure common to them all which defines the species and by reference to which the nature and movements of its specimens can be better understood. My hope in so doing is that I shall have woven a net so broad and simple of use that even the beginning scholar might hold it up to the current of intellectual history and catch such a wealth of details as the measure of his interest and understanding admits.

In a longer work, I would substantiate my anatomical description with detailed studies of particular specimens and their historical relations. In this brief work, I have confined myself to describing the structure of metaphysical thinking in abstraction from its realizations in the course of philosophical history. This comes at the cost of thoroughness but brings the

benefit of concision, which I find preferable in an introductory account. A map, to return to my earlier simile, is useful because it describes not the entirety of some terrain but only such of its features as serve to illuminate a set of interests or a way of going on. As for authority, it has seemed to me better to produce a good work that must be proved against learning than to risk overburdening it with the same.

In like spirit, I have avoided reference to other thinkers, other than to illustrate a point or to own a debt, and tried to write as plainly as the topic admits, out of the stock of words that form the common inheritance of well-read speakers of English, and to avoid jargon wherever it does not serve clarity and concision. However, in describing the structure of metaphysical thinking, I have found it useful to use three words that belong to the philosophical tradition: ‘ontology’, ‘epistemology’, and ‘ethics’. These words were originally Greek. I use the first two literally to mean an account (λόγος) of things (ὄντα) and of knowledge (ἐπιστήμη), and by the third I mean the project of coming up with a system of general rules for ordering our beliefs, values, and practices. Philosophers have often made much of words like ‘thing’ and ‘knowledge’; I am content to use them in the uncomplicated manner of everyday speech, in which a thing is whatever can be picked out and knowledge is a matter of being familiar with how things are or how to go about them.

The interest of my account is, I believe, twofold. Although I do not argue in this essay for the lesson that I have taken from my study of metaphysical thinking—that it runs contrary to the demands of precision, which asks also that we not impose on our topic more exact and certain constructions than that topic admits—making this lesson accessible amounts to part of its interest: that it might remove a stone from the common path. But metaphysical thinking is also of more general interest to the scholar of ideas. For not only is metaphysical thinking to be found wherever humans attempt systematically to regulate their beliefs, values, and practices, posing an anthropological question and a cultural problem of some weight; some of the most influential philosophers of the last century and a half also took it up as a central topic of their thinking.

Those philosophers were concerned to understand the conception of intellectual activity that they supposed to have given rise to the tradition into which they were educated, binding its diverse texts and personalities together, and to draw that conception into question. Foremost among them were Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger in Europe and William James and Ludwig Wittgenstein in the English-speaking world, each of whom called the topic of his inquiry and the target of his critique ‘metaphysics’.<sup>1</sup> I do not propose to explain in this essay why the twentieth century should have seen a repudiation of the higher ambitions of the philosophical tradition, nor do I suppose that these thinkers were altogether of one motive, much less that each understood his topic in just the manner in which I have presented metaphysical thinking here. But I do suggest that to understand metaphysical thinking is to lay the groundwork for understanding the recent history and current state of the philosophical tradition, and I hope that this work might stand as a modest contribution to that task.

*A note on translations*

Where I have had access to a good translation, I have cited to it. Where, for accuracy or convenience, or out of fondness for the text, I have given my own translation, I have cited to the original text by its English title and marked the citation with an asterisk: ‘Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b.\*’ Where I have revised an existing translation, I have cited to the original text and noted the revision: ‘Isocrates, *Antidosis*, 271. Revised from George Norlin, trans., *Isocrates*.’

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein was Austrian but has been most influential in the English-speaking academy.

## 2

# The word ‘metaphysics’

*The origin of the word ‘metaphysics’.—Its topical, critical, and classical senses.—The topic of this essay.*

### SECTION 2.1

#### *The origin of the word ‘metaphysics’*

The word ‘metaphysics’ originates with Aristotle, although it does not occur in his writings. It first came into usage when later scholars compiled a collection of his lectures under the heading ‘τὰ μετὰ τὰ φυσικά’—‘After the *Physics*’.<sup>1</sup> The *Physics* is a treatise in eight books on φυσικά, or natural things.<sup>2</sup> More precisely, since it includes no specific studies, it is a treatise on the concepts *nature*, *cause*, and *motion*, natural things being those that show up

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle’s published works are lost; what remain are lecture notes, perhaps recorded by his students, which later scholars compiled into the texts we have now.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Τὰ φυσικά’ means ‘the (class of) natural things’. The adjective ‘φυσικά’ derives from the verb ‘φύειν’, which means variously to grow, to arise, to appear, to come into being. Its earliest known ancestor is the Proto-Indo-European root ‘\*b<sup>h</sup>eu-’, which means something like to show up or to become and survives in the copula of most descendant languages. ‘Natural’ derives from the Latin translation of ‘φυσικά’ and has a similar meaning: to be born, hence, to come into being.

and change. The usual story, dating from at least Asclepius of Tralles in the sixth century A.D.,<sup>3</sup> has it that later scholars compiled Aristotle's ontological lectures into 14 books under the heading 'τὰ μετὰ τὰ φυσικά' in keeping with his frequent claim that study should begin with what is closest to us and proceed to what is most general,<sup>4</sup> the study of 'the principles and causes of things [...] as things',<sup>5</sup> or ontology, being more general than the study of natural things, or indeed of things of any other particular sort.

## SECTION 2.2

### *Its topical, critical, and classical senses*

Since its invention by later scholars of Aristotle, 'metaphysics' has come to name at least three other things that bear on our discussion: in its *topical* sense, a family of questions; in its *critical* sense, a practice of thinking; and in its *classical* sense, the intellectual project with which this essay is concerned.

Among academic philosophers and well-read speakers of English, the word 'metaphysics' usually names a loosely-defined family of questions: roughly, those discussed in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, others since thought similar, and, as the word has become literalized to name inquiry into what stands over against (μετά) natural things (φυσικά), questions about matters thought to transcend and so to provide a measure for regulating inquiry and activity.<sup>6</sup> I call metaphysics in this sense *topical* metaphysics and, leaving it as vague as I find it, mean by it more-or-less whatever is now taught in academic courses titled 'Metaphysics'.

But the word 'metaphysics' can also be construed somewhat literally to name thinking that aims to push past (μετά) what shows up (φυσικά).<sup>7</sup> Thinking in this sense, as I propose

<sup>3</sup> See 'metaphysic, *n.*<sup>1</sup>', *OED Online*, June 2008.

<sup>4</sup> S. Marc Cohen, 'Aristotle's Metaphysics', tells us that this claim occurs in *Posterior Analytics* 71b32, *Prior Analytics* 68b35–7, *Physics* 184a16–20, *Metaphysics* 1029b3–12, and *Topics* 141b2–142a12.

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1025b.\*

<sup>6</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'metaphysics' in this sense when it informs us that metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that inquires into 'the first principles of things or reality, including questions about being, substance, time and space, causation, change, and identity (which are presupposed in the special sciences but do not belong to any one of them)'. See 'metaphysics, *n.*', *OED Online*, June 2008.

<sup>7</sup> On the origin and meaning of 'φυσικά', that its most primitive meaning is *to show up*, see note 2. 'Μετά'

to understand it, as plainly as possible, is simply thinking that questions, complicates, or otherwise problematizes how things ordinarily or initially present themselves or are taken to be. We usually call such thinking *critical*, contrasting it with thinking that merely calculates over what stands unquestioned before it; and its value lies in the expectation that attempting to see otherwise, and so perhaps coming to see more, and more clearly, might enable us to get along in life with greater sensitivity and skill. I call thinking in this manner *critical* metaphysics. This name is unusual and somewhat artificial, but it will facilitate my definition of classical metaphysics below and my concluding reflections in Chapter 5.

Finally the word ‘metaphysics’ can name the species of critical metaphysics that objectifies its movement of transcendence, which I call *classical* metaphysics. Critical metaphysics is uncomplicatedly transcendent in its relation to the initial and the ordinary. But since it pushes past things only to arrive at *more and other* things, critical metaphysics is not transcendent in the manner to which classical metaphysics aspires in attaching to that critical movement the presumption that there is a ground *over and against* things toward which it tends and by which their proper unity and order may be secured. We will define classical metaphysics in detail in Chapter 3. For now, an analogy: Where critical metaphysics turns over the soil of things so as to come to a fuller and freer sense of how they happen to be, classical metaphysics does so on the presumption that an immovable ground lies beneath them, a secret subterranean measure, and understands itself accordingly not only as problematizing things but also and primarily as pushing past them thereby to their origin and answer.

### SECTION 2.3

#### *The topic of this essay*

This essay is mainly an account of the logic of classical metaphysical thinking: of its distinctive conception of the nature, aims, and authority of intellectual activity, and of the

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more usually meant ‘across from’, ‘beside’, or ‘along with’ than ‘behind’ among the Greeks but now has the colour given to it here. Compare the Latin ‘supernatural’.

more effective means by which its discontents have tried to overthrow that conception. Its concluding reflections on postmetaphysical philosophy also draw on the notion of critical metaphysics. As for topical metaphysics, I mention it only to say that this essay does not intend to address it at all. It may be that what I have to say bears on the topics of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and the seminars and texts now going under that name; it may also be that we pass one another by.

# 3

## Classical Metaphysics

*Introduction.—A simple example.—The interest and situation of classical metaphysics.—  
The structure of metaphysical thinking.*

### SECTION 3.1

#### *Introduction*

By ‘classical metaphysical thinking’ I mean the project of thinking that proposes to recollect a fixed and incontestable measure by which to reveal the proper unity and order of things and thereby to regulate definitively our beliefs, values, and practices.<sup>1</sup> Metaphysics as such rests on three assumptions: the *ontological* assumption that over against whatever is various and contestable stands such a measure, that over against ‘the many’ stands ‘the one’; the *epistemological* assumption that there is a reliable method by which thought (or some other faculty) might recollect (or otherwise grasp) that measure and thereby attain knowledge of (or otherwise align us with) the proper unity and order of things; and the *ethical* assumption that we should bring our beliefs, values, and practices into accord with that knowledge (or

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<sup>1</sup> For brevity, I will drop ‘classical’ in this and the next chapter.

whatever) and, in the first instance, that we should live so as to attain it, that we should live the ‘contemplative life’.<sup>2</sup> Metaphysics as the project of these assumptions is the topic of this chapter. I first present a simple example of that project, next indicate its interest and situation, and then analyze its conception of the nature, aims, and authority of intellectual activity. Then I turn in Chapter 4 to some attempts to overthrow that conception, to metaphysics’ discontents.

## SECTION 3.2

### *A simple example*

It may be helpful to begin with an example. For this I have chosen a metaphysical project sometimes encountered in the milieu of popular psychology. In its structure the reader will have an overview of the analysis to come and a point of reference should it at times prove less clear than I have hoped.

Consider the assumption that behind the everyday self, ‘conditioned’ by custom and circumstance, stands the true self, an unconditional authority on personal well-being.<sup>3</sup> This assumption divides things into two sorts: as encountered by the everyday self and subject to its conditions, and as the true self is supposed to see them, that is, in the unity and order proper to its well-being. This division poses an epistemological problem and an ethical injunction. The epistemological problem is, practically, the confusion and clumsiness of the conditioned self and, theoretically, how recovery of the true self is to be understood; and the ethical injunction is, initially, to recover the true self—by submitting to inquiry and analysis, for instance—and, then, to regulate one’s beliefs, values, and practices in light of it.

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<sup>2</sup> These assumptions are roughly those that Jürgen Habermas identifies as ‘the theme of unity within the philosophy of origins, the equations of being with thought, and the redemptive significance of the contemplative life’. See Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, 29.

<sup>3</sup> I have chosen this example from popular thinking for its simplicity and to emphasize the general interest of metaphysical thinking, that it is not peculiar to traditional philosophy but arises wherever people undertake to systematize and to secure their beliefs, values, and practices.

In this rather unlikely project can be seen the structure outlined above: (1) an ontological presumption dividing its area of concern into (1.1) a uniquely authoritative regulative measure and (1.2) an apparently irregular domain; (2) an epistemological problem which (2.1) practically amounts to our initial situation within the irregular domain and (2.2) theoretically appears as the question concerning how to grasp that measure; and (3) an ethical injunction that we undertake (3.1) first to answer that question, (3.2) next to recollect the measure in light of that answer, and (3.3) thereafter to bring our beliefs, values, and conduct in accord with it.

### SECTION 3.3

#### *The interest and situation of classical metaphysics*

Metaphysical thinking is of specifically philosophical interest because of its immaturity and of more general interest as a species of what we might call the ‘religious impulse’. Metaphysical thinking is of specifically philosophical interest because it is usually the first and often the final form of thinking entered into by those who undertake to systematize and to secure their beliefs, values, and practices. Metaphysics is ‘first philosophy’, not, pace Aristotle, because most fundamental but because most common and least mature. This is apparent in three respects: that those who begin to think systematically often begin with its aim and assumptions; that they often do so unthinkingly, that is, without acknowledging that beginning, so that it is less they who think than the structure of metaphysics that thinks through them; and that metaphysical thinking has not worked out, that history has proven it a species of foolishness, widespread, grand, fertile but also and on the whole an impediment to useful inquiry, personal responsibility, and rational management of public affairs.

But metaphysical thinking is also of more general interest as the usual response to what Richard Bernstein has called

the illusion which has haunted modern thinkers—that they must dignify the contingent social practices which have been hammered out in the course of history with something that pretends to be more solid and substantial<sup>4</sup>

—save that Bernstein’s phrasing is too modest. The desire for solid ground is surely as old as humanity, and the broader significance of metaphysical thinking is accordingly that its motive is neither peculiarly modern nor peculiar to thinkers. On the contrary, the impulse to secure social solidarity and spiritual stability by falsifying understanding of which it is the systematic intellectual development, is none other than the religious impulse, by all accounts an anthropological universal and in many respects still central to our affairs.<sup>5</sup>

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz usefully defines religion as

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.<sup>6</sup>

As the systematic intellectual development of the religious impulse, metaphysical thinking has typically aspired, in Bernstein’s terms, either to secure the dignity of our established

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Bernstein, ‘What is the Difference that Makes a Difference’, 346.

<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche makes a similar point at §151 of *The Gay Science*:

The metaphysical need is not the *origin* of religions, as Schopenhauer supposed, but merely a late offshoot. Under the rule of religious ideas, one has become accustomed to the notions of “another world (behind below, above)” —and when religious ideas are destroyed one is troubled by an uncomfortable emptiness and deprivation. From this feeling grows once again “another world,” but now merely a metaphysical one that is no longer religious. But what first led to the positing of “another world” in primeval times was not some impulse or need but an *error* in the interpretation of certain natural events, a failure of the intellect.

I disagree with Nietzsche that religion has its source not in need but in error, both and more seeming most likely; but otherwise I agree.

<sup>6</sup> Clifford Geertz, ‘Religion as a Cultural System’, 4. I note that religion so understood is something other than religion in what I think of as its highest sense, as uncomplicated commitment to humility and friendship; nor does this definition, useful for our purposes, capture all that shelters under the wide roof of our word ‘religion’.

practices by disclosing genuine fact beneath their aura of factuality or to reclaim our dignity by dispelling that aura and overturning those practices. In the first case, it understands itself as an intellectual continuation and completion of a pre-intellectual religiosity and proposes to systematize and substantiate its established body of moods and motivations. In the second case, it understands itself as an intellectual advance over a pre-intellectual religiosity and proposes rather to institute a new body of moods and motivations, in fact uniquely realistic, in opposition to the fictions of an earlier age.

Measured against their promises, both projects have historically ended in failure, collapsing back into fantasy, and the second doubly so, since it not only fails to substantiate its system but also, in failing, recapitulates the religious impulse it pretends to renounce.<sup>7</sup> This failure reveals a further aspect of the immaturity of metaphysical thinking, namely, that in failing to recognize itself as the most recent cut of ‘auragenic’ clothing it is in fact less honest—less self-conscious, that is, and less understanding—than the religiosity which it would ground or replace. It also shows us, as Karl Marx said in his ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, that the problem posed by such thinking is primarily not philosophical but cultural: a problem of how one gets along in the world, with others, and with oneself.<sup>8</sup> For the religious impulse to falsification, I submit, arises primarily under cultural conditions that do not permit the ready satisfaction of pressing social and spiritual needs by more straightforward means; and if I am correct, and if metaphysical thinking is, as I suppose, a development of this impulse under conditions rich enough to sustain systematic reflection but not to satisfy social and spiritual needs without recourse to falsification—rich enough to call religion into question but not to render religiosity useless—then to outgrow metaphysical thinking what is wanted at bottom is not philosophical advance but cultural transformation,

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<sup>7</sup> I will return to the idea of renunciation and recapitulation in discussing metaphysics’ discontents in Chapter 4.

<sup>8</sup> The eleventh thesis runs: ‘Philosophers have *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point however is to *change* it.’ See Karl Marx, ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, 84.

not intellectual clarity but alleviation of social and spiritual malaise.<sup>9</sup>

Finally we can ask what the peculiar appeal of metaphysical thinking is; for certainly, in addition to sprouting from the soil of immaturity and malaise, metaphysical thinking issues a powerful appeal of its own. Are not otherwise sound students still charmed by the aspirations of earlier thinkers who should, in terms of possibilities if not powers, be reckoned their inferiors? And the answer is plain. It is the same appeal that Plato made to the noble youth of Athens when he proposed that our social and spiritual problems might be resolved in a manner approximating the agreement and certainty to be had in the resolution of our mathematical ones, that calculation might come to take the place of judgement in human affairs. What metaphysics seems to promise, and why it corrupts in particular the young, is a way of bypassing experience to arrive more directly at wisdom, a way of becoming roundly sensitive and skilful without having paid the price of travelling widely and tasting much.<sup>10</sup> To dream with Plato or to doubt with Descartes is to imagine a surer guide to life than wide experience and long practice and a greater measure of justification than can be had through practical success, public deliberation, and private delight.

So much for the interest and situation of metaphysical thinking. My position is clear: to see how such thinking works, and to set this vision next to the history of philosophy, is to see it as a clumsy artefact of harder days. In a longer work, I would like to defend this assessment; here I advance it only provisionally, as background to my account of the structure of metaphysical thinking, and leave for the reader to decide in light of what follows whether the lesson I have drawn from history is correct.

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<sup>9</sup> Compare this passage with Bertrand Russell's sentiments in 'Philosophy's Ulterior Motives'. 'The more profound the philosopher,' writes Russell, 'the more intricate and subtle must his fallacies be in order to produce in him the desired state of intellectual acquiescence'; and later in that same essay: 'Philosophy is a stage in intellectual development, and is not compatible with mental maturity. In order that it may flourish, traditional doctrines must still be believed, but not so unquestioningly that arguments in support of them are never sought [...].' See Bertrand Russell, 'Philosophy's Ulterior Motives', 56 and 67.

<sup>10</sup> The first known use of the word 'philosophy' occurs in the *Histories* of Herodotus, at 1.30.2, where Croesus receives the Athenian legislator Solon: 'My Athenian guest, we have heard a lot about you because of your wisdom [σοφίης] and of your wanderings, how as one who loves learning [φιλοσοφέων] you have traveled much of the world for the sake of seeing it [...].'

## SECTION 3.4

*The structure of metaphysical thinking*

I have so far defined metaphysics as the project of thinking that aims to recollect a fixed and incontestable measure by which to reveal the proper unity and order of things and thereby to regulate definitively our beliefs, values, and practices. In this section, I will refine that definition by looking more carefully at the structure that arises from the ontological, epistemological, and ethical assumptions that constitute metaphysical thinking.

1 *Ontology.* Metaphysical thinking assumes that over against *the many* things which show up as various and contestable stands *the one* fixed and in contestable measure by which their proper unity and order may be definitively secured.<sup>11</sup> This is its assumption about things, or *ontological* assumption.

1.1 *The ontological assumption.* The ontological assumption of metaphysical thinking divides things into two sorts, the many and the one. Under the idea of the many, on the low side of the dividing line, it places whatever is various and contestable; and under the idea of the one it imagines a uniquely fixed and incontestable measure, above and away from things, by which their proper unity and order may be secured. Neither idea itself is the ontological assumption; which is to say, especially, that metaphysical thinking does not merely add the idea of the one to our ordinary understanding of things as changing and open to question. Rather the many and the one arise as aspects of a single assumption, each of which serves as a backdrop against which the other shows up as plausible and important. That assumption is the division itself—between God and Man, nature and culture, the numinous and the phenomenal, or whatever—by which the many and the one are held apart, or what we might call the *dividing line*. But then both the idea of the many and the idea of the one, which arise when it is drawn, are foreign to our ordinary understanding of things. And in elevating the idea of the one, metaphysical thinking does not merely raise it above things

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<sup>11</sup> The terms ‘the one’ and ‘the many’ occur early in philosophical history, in the *Enneads* of Plotinus. More recently, William James’ titled the fourth lecture in his collection *Pragmatism* ‘The One and the Many’.

as we ordinarily understand them; it also debases things under the idea of the many.

1.2 *The one and the many.* That the idea of the one belongs to metaphysical thinking is evident from the fact that we do not ordinarily aspire to steer our passage among things by a fixed and incontestable measure. But the idea of the many also belongs to this thinking. For while we do ordinarily regard things as changing of their own account and our diverse beliefs, values, and practices as open to contention, we do not on that ground regard them as *alike and equally* unreliable but look rather to the relative firmness and contest-worthiness of each to the rest. It is only when held against the idea of the one that we come to think of them under the idea of the many, which is to say, to regard the bare fact of their being various and contestable as throwing them, indiscriminately and without remainder, into doubt.

Compare in this connection the *Meditations* of René Descartes and the allegory of the cave in the seventh book of Plato's *Republic*, both of which begin from extraordinary doubt and aspire to extraordinary clarity. One of the most direct expressions of metaphysical ontology occurs at the outset of Descartes' second meditation.

However I will strive and press again along the same path as I began yesterday, namely, by setting aside whatever admits even the least doubt just as though I should have found it to be altogether false; and I will go on until I should become aware of something certain, even if no more than this, that certainly nothing is certain. Archimedes required nothing but a fixed and immovable point to move the whole earth from its place; so great things may be hoped for should I come upon even the least things that is certain and unshakeable.<sup>12</sup>

In this brief passage Descartes at once assumes both that whatever admits of doubt, no matter how great or little, is to be regarded on that ground as 'altogether false' (*omnino falsum*), debasing things under the idea of the many, and, elevating above them the idea

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<sup>12</sup> René Descartes, *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, 'Meditatio II', ¶1.\*

of the one, that a fixed and immoveable Archimedean point might be the proper end of thought.

Plato describes a similar logic in his allegory of the cave, which debases things as we ordinarily encounter them as but ‘shadows cast by the fire on the wall of the cave’<sup>13</sup> and elevates in contrast as the proper aim of thought to exit the cave and see them under ‘the light of the sun’ (τὸ τοῦ ἡλίου φῶς).<sup>14</sup> In comparing things as we ordinarily encounter them to shadows on a wall, he not only draws our attention to the truism that things are various and contestable; he goes farther to claim that the differences among them should be reckoned at no account.

‘And if there had been honors and commendations among them which they bestowed on one another and prizes for the man who is quickest to make out the shadows as they pass and best able to remember their customary precedences, sequences and co-existences, and so most successful in guessing at what was to come, do you think he would be very keen about such rewards, and that he would envy and emulate those who were honored by these prisoners and lorded it among them, or that he would feel with Homer and “greatly prefer while living on earth to be serf of another, a landless man,” and endure anything rather than opine with them and live that life?’ ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I think that he would choose to endure anything rather than such a life.’<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, Plato’s image of the light of the sun does not symbolize merely that we should come to see more clearly, although it does that, but also marks out a sharp division between the world above and that below. For the sun in Plato’s thinking is a sign for ‘the idea of the good’ (ἡ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέα), and the proper aim of thinking is ‘to look upon the sun itself and see its true nature’, which ‘presides over all things in the visible region and is in some

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<sup>13</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 515a.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 515e.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 516c–516e.

sort the cause of all these things’—to see not only more clearly, that is, but to do so by first looking upon the one measure by which the proper unity and order of things is revealed.<sup>16</sup> And indeed for Plato it is only by first having caught sight of this measure than thinking may see things rightly.

But, at any rate, my dream as it appears to me is that in the region of the known the last thing to be seen and hardly seen is the idea of good, and that when seen it must needs point us to the conclusion that this is indeed the cause for all things of all that is right and beautiful, giving birth in the visible world to light, and the author of light and itself in the intelligible world being the authentic source of truth and reason, and that anyone who is to act wisely in private or public must have caught sight of this.<sup>17</sup>

In passages such as these it is apparent that the allure of the one is bound up with the debasement of the many, that these are two sides of a single assumption. But this is also evident when we once ask what would follow on renouncing the idea of the one without recalling things from under its shadow by renouncing also the idea of the many, the idea that the differences among things by which we ordinarily steer should be reckoned at naught unless secured by knowledge (or whatever) of the one. And the answer is clear: a resignation to disorder as hopeless as the idea of the one is ambitious, or what is often called nihilism; which answer, incidentally, is also presaged in Plato, who tells us that, the differences among the cave-shadows having once been revealed to him as of no account, the philosopher could not then return to the cave and take them seriously—that ‘those who have attained to this height are not willing to occupy themselves with the affairs of men’.<sup>18</sup> But ordinarily we no more despair of hitting on what is most firm and contest-worthy among things than we aspire to secure our attempts by reference to a fixed and incontestable measure.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 516b–517c.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 517b–517c.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 517c.

1.3 *The totalizing tendency of metaphysical thinking.* Although different specimens of metaphysical thinking vary in how they think of the many and the one, the tendency of all metaphysical thinking is to think of the many as the totality of things and the one as entirely unlike and apart from them—a uniquely unthinglike thing. This tendency is not simply a matter of ambition; a metaphysical project could undertake to secure only some narrow area of life. Rather a historical fact about all such projects pushes them to this extreme: that they have yet to come up with a measure around which variation and contention cannot gather. The problem is this. Because any supposed regulative measure can, as it happens, be drawn into question and so enrolled among the many as various and contestable itself, sooner or later a mature metaphysical project must either collapse or endeavour to locate its regulative measure entirely apart from things and beyond—almost beyond—the reach of understanding and its questions.

The story of the Indian sage who proclaimed ‘It is turtles all the way down!’ illustrates this tendency. I do not recall its origin or how it was first told, but the gist is this. An Indian sage claims that the world rests in the coils of a snake or something of that sort, whereupon he is asked what the snake rests on.—‘On the backs of four elephants,’ he replies.—‘And what do the elephants rest on?’ the question comes again.—‘On a turtle.’—‘And the turtle, what does it rest on?’—‘Oh no, sir,’ the sage is said to reply; ‘you are very much mistaken. It is turtles all the way down!’ As each measure is drawn into question, a yet more profound measure must be brought forth to redeem it until, finally, on the side of the many stand all things, and the one has taken on an aspect so *unthinglike*, so profound, so primordial, so transcendent—at bottom, so far removed from sense—as to bring all questioning to an end.

1.4 *The common function of metaphysical and mythological thinking.* Metaphysical thinking usually indicates the distance of the one and the totality of the many by describing its regulative measure as behind or across from things, as metaphysical in the literal sense of the word.<sup>19</sup> Such descriptions, hinting at another realm, suggest that metaphysical thinking

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<sup>19</sup> On this see Chapter 2.

is not far removed from mythological thinking and its central concern for other-worldly origins and intentions. For although metaphysical thinking does not share the mythological conception of things as the progeny of an initial, other-worldly intrusion into the historical, this-worldly flow of life, it does serve the same basic function: to enrol things within a common class, as if the progeny of a single god, and to assign them a definitive order, as if in reference to her intentions. Metaphysical thinking shares mythological thinking's meaning-giving orientation to origin and intent but understands that orientation in formal rather than narrative terms as an orientation to inherent unity and order.<sup>20</sup>

In his similar discussion of the relation between the one and the many, Jürgen Habermas also associates metaphysical thinking with mythological thinking when he writes that it

comprehends [this relation] as both logical and ontological: the one is both axiom and essential ground, principle and origin. From it the many is derived—in the sense both of grounding and of originating. And, thanks to this origin, the many is reproduced as an ordered multiplicity.<sup>21</sup>

Habermas is characteristically dense, but as I read this passage its point is that the regulative measure of metaphysical thinking functions both as the 'ancestor' and as the 'name-giver' of things. When the measure is understood as ontological origin, it functions as that common characteristic of all things by which they are alike identified and drawn into a unified whole; it functions as the idea of God, Nature, Being, Language, Mind, or whatever by which things appear alike as creations, natural kinds, beings, signifiers, ideas, or whatever and are thereby

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<sup>20</sup> I happen to think that this shift in understanding *was* an advance, because I think that it is desirable that a culture institute processes of institutional transformation, and because I think that coming up with more captivating arguments than have come before is easier than coming up with more captivating stories. (A good story tends to take hold in a way that a good argument, which must address and so keep alive its opponents, seldom does; on which see Section 4.3.) So I suggest that we see metaphysical thinking as standing between mythological thinking, out of which it arose, and the scientific and governmental thinking to which it gave rise.

<sup>21</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, 30; see also 117 ff.

enrolled in a single class and made commensurable. When the measure is understood as an axiomatic principle, it functions as the rule by which that class acquires definite structure; it functions as the Will of God, the Laws of Nature, the Essential Openness of Dasein, the Implicit Telos of Rational Discourse, the Will, or whatever by which things are ordered into a total structure that reveals the proper place, the proper meaning and value, of each.

1.5 *The aim of metaphysical thinking—not comprehensive knowledge but a comprehensive decision procedure.* To say that metaphysical thinking in its mature form proposes to reveal the proper unity and order of things is not to say that it proposes to deliver encyclopedic knowledge. That dream is seldom far; but in general the practical aim of metaphysical thinking—and we might recall my suggestion in Section 3.3 that its true but concealed aim is *not* understanding but the falsification thereof in service of social solidarity and spiritual stability—is not to stand in for our usual means of acquiring particular knowledge but to deliver a decision procedure for ranking the beliefs, values, and practices that bear on whatever areas of contention gave rise to its project in the first place. Its practical aim, that is, is not to substitute a cosmic encyclopedia for our knowledge of particulars but to put a universal calculus in place of our judgement in particular affairs. Accordingly most metaphysical systems purport to discover only so much unity and order among things as is wanted to display the majesty of their general rules and leave the details of their application to the particulars of our lives, the filling in of the encyclopedia, to be worked out as we go along.

1.6 *Summary.* The ontological assumption of metaphysical thinking (1.1) divides things into the many and the one, (1.2) debasing things as we ordinarily encounter them and elevating the one as the proper aim of thought, (1.3) tends in this to universality, and (1.4) preserves thereby the function of mythological thinking, to secure and reveal the total unity and order of life, (1.5) not by revealing everything but by revealing the unique general rule by which we may draw our beliefs, values, and practices into alignment with that unified order.

2      *Epistemology.* Metaphysical thinking further assumes both that we are initially and ordinarily among the many on the low side of the dividing line and that thought (or some other faculty) can recollect (or otherwise grasp) the one and attain knowledge of (or otherwise align us with) the proper unity and order of things.<sup>22</sup> This is its assumption about knowledge, or *epistemological* assumption.

2.1      *The epistemological assumption.* The epistemological assumption of metaphysical thinking locates us relative to its ontology by assuming that the many and the one are a *problem* and a *promise* for us. It makes the many a problem for us by assuming that we are initially and ordinarily among the many on the low side of the dividing line, as ignorant and ungainly as things are various and contestable; and it makes the one a promise for us by assuming that if we think, talk, pray, meditate, fast, or whatever long and hard enough we shall eventually hit upon the means of reaching over that line to grasp the one measure by which our passage among things may be secured. In this way, the dividing line of metaphysical ontology is extended ‘inwards’, from our understanding of things to our understanding of ourselves in relation to them, to divide our everyday concourse with things, now understood as a problem, from the promised knowledge that we should have were we to recollect the measure by which their proper unity and order may be revealed.

2.2      *The problem and the promise.* The sense and urgency of the project of metaphysical epistemology do not arise directly from our everyday practices of arriving at understanding. This is obvious when we consider that had we drawn no line to find ourselves on the low side of, the task of inquiry would then be merely *epistemic* and not epistemological—a matter of looking into things and not a matter of securing our relationship to them—and we should then do without complaint what Isocrates recommends when he proposes this definition of the philosopher:

Since it is not in the nature of man to attain a certain knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) by

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<sup>22</sup> For simplicity, I will here speak of thought, recollection, and knowledge. Elsewhere we might consider the variation among classical metaphysical project, which need not be cast in intellectual terms.

the possession of which he can know what he should do or what he should say, in the next resort I consider wise who thanks to his opinions (δόξα) is most often able to hit upon what is best, and a philosopher who occupies himself with such exercises from which he will most quickly attain such judgement (φρόνησις).<sup>23</sup>

It is interesting to observe that Isocrates, who has set aside the project of metaphysical thinking, still expresses himself in its terms, in terms of the contrast between knowledge (of things in their proper unity and order) and opinion (of the shifting and disordered many). It would be better to make no such concession but simply to use the words ‘knowledge’ and ‘opinion’ as we ordinarily do, to mark out degrees of uncertainty. Be that as it may, in Isocrates’ conception of intellectual activity we see an instructive lack of concern with the epistemological project those terms were used by philosophers to express. For Isocrates, as for most of us most of the time, there is no problem about securing the status of our beliefs or pointing out the way to attaining good ones and no need to work up a theory of knowledge to that end. The only problem is one of actually setting to work gathering beliefs that allow one to most often ‘hit upon what is best’, of carrying out careful inquiry into which different beliefs happen to work out well.<sup>24</sup> But then it is clear that the epistemological assumption of metaphysical thinking not only presumes and builds on metaphysical ontology but also derives its sense and urgency from that assumption.

But are we right to say that the epistemological problem of metaphysical thinking does not arise in the absence of its ontological assumption? I believe we are, and that its sense and urgency indeed derive only from that assumption, and from the circumstances and traits of character that motivate it, and not from our usual concurrence with things. For in the ordinary course of affairs, we are not out of touch with what is firm and contest-worthy

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<sup>23</sup> Isocrates, *Antidosis*, 271. Revised from George Norlin, trans., *Isocrates*.

<sup>24</sup> This does not involve giving up the distinction between beliefs which are true and beliefs which receive wide assent or otherwise prove useful; whether a belief’s value lies in directing our attention to how things happen to be or in facilitating one or another social or personal end is one more thing about which we may form opinions which we may then submit to inquiry.

in things, nor do we find learning about them a matter for which a theory of knowledge is wanted. On the contrary, we are generally possessed of understanding sufficient for the greater part of our wants, and the only problem we face in acquiring it is practical, not theoretical: the problem of confirming that we have looked into things as carefully as our topics and abilities admit and our aims demand. And although deciding just what suitably careful inquiry amounts to in one case or another is not always easy, it is nevertheless but one more line of inquiry of the same kind; and just as disciplined inquiry—scientific, scholarly, or whatever—does not stand apart in kind from our usual ways of learning about things but is merely the name we give to the work of applying them with an unusual degree of carefulness and collaboration, so inquiry into inquiry does not require a measure sure beyond question but merely reflection on how we have gone on previously and speculation on how we might go on now. Besides, that nothing more than this is wanted is obvious from the fact that we have gone along so far without anything more—and even more so when we notice that nothing more is helpful, that all attempts to provide a uniquely reliable measure by which to secure our understanding of things have failed, gathering about themselves even greater variation and contention than surrounds the inquiries they were meant to secure.

2.3 *The basic theme of distance and proximity.* If metaphysical epistemology has little relation to actual understanding, we must look for the source of its problem and promise in their structure and function within the logic of metaphysical thinking itself. Here we see that the problem and promise of metaphysical epistemology have been variously understood and expressed, often in terms of opinion and knowledge as we saw above, but also in terms of separation and unity, defilement and purity, seeming and being, et cetera. Thus, for instance, we see them presented in this passage from the sixth book of Plato's *Republic*:

When [the soul] is firmly fixed on the domain where truth and reality shine resplendent it apprehends and knows them and appears to possess reason; but when it inclines to that region which is mingled with darkness, the world of becoming and passing away, it opines only and its edge is blunted, and it shifts

its opinions hither and thither, and again seems as if it lacked reason.<sup>25</sup>

A good part of Plato's fame is owing to the clarity and force with which he expressed the problem and promise of metaphysical thinking. But our interest here is its basic structure; and with regard to this it seems to me that metaphysical epistemology takes its primary sense and motive not from our usual concourse with things but from metaphysical ontology, and that its expressions, however diverse and colourful, are at bottom variations on the basic theme of *distance* from and *proximity* to the one measure; in other words, that by one way or another, the problem of metaphysical epistemology always comes to the condition of being distant from the one and its promise to the possibility of overcoming that distance by turning away from our initial and ordinary situation among the many to grasp it; and whatever reference metaphysical epistemology makes to the actual business of learning about things is always subordinate to this theme. This matter deserves further discussion.

2.4 *The intractability of metaphysical epistemology.* Those who find that Isocrates' disinterest shows more insight than Plato's dramatization usually conclude that the epistemological problem and promise of metaphysical thinking arise not from our everyday work of finding things out but from its ontological assumption—from its division of things into the one and the many, and from its presumption that 'it is in the nature of man' both to find himself bereft among the many and thence 'to attain knowledge' of the one. This conclusion is confirmed practically when we notice that none of our intellectual activities that lead to understanding require anything more in the way of philosophical explanation than Isocrates gives us above. But it is even more apparent when we look more carefully at the theme of distance and proximity. For then we see that the project of metaphysical epistemology stands in inherent tension with the assumption of metaphysical ontology from which it draws its sense and urgency.

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<sup>25</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 508d–509a.

In light of the theme of distance and proximity, it is clear that the project of metaphysical epistemology is sustained not by its topic—as if the everyday matter of coming to know about things concealed a great if rarely appreciated difficulty—but rather by the tension inherent to the pursuit of a regulative measure that must be at once both distant enough from the many things to stand beyond the questioning that would enrol it among them, as we saw in discussing metaphysical ontology and the story of the Indian sage, yet near enough that we may recollect it from our position among the many. But if this is indeed the problem posed by metaphysical epistemology, then we should expect *never* to arrive at a satisfactory solution. For the result of placing the one beyond question, the requirement of metaphysical ontology, is to make it inaccessible to thought and so to frustrate the task of metaphysical epistemology. But the result of conceiving in what respect we are near enough to grasp it, the task of metaphysical epistemology, is to bring it within range of the questioning that would undermine the ontological dignity to which metaphysical thinking aspires in the first place.

This inherent tension between its ontology and epistemology would seem to be a difficulty for metaphysical thinking, but it is also the main source of its vitality. For this tension serves the actual function of metaphysical epistemology: not to secure knowledge, which was never in serious question, but to secure the contemplative life—to keep the epistemological business going and thereby to provide a measure of social solidarity and spiritual stability, not by delivering the one measure, but in the persistent form of that business itself.

2.5 *Summary.* The epistemological assumption of metaphysical thinking, (2.1) which locates us among the many and the one, as a problem and a promise, both (2.2) arises and takes its sense and urgency from the dividing line of metaphysical ontology, (2.3) understanding and expressing itself accordingly in terms of distance and proximity to the one, and (2.4) stands in inherent tension with that assumption, which tension both reveals its vacuity and, standing in for the measure which metaphysical thinking cannot but fail to

reach, also lends it substance.

3        *Ethics.* The *ethical* assumption of metaphysical thinking, its assumption about character and conduct, is that we should undertake first to resolve the epistemological problem, discovering a reliable manner in which its promised measure may be recollected, next to recollect that measure, fulfilling that promise, and thereafter to bring our beliefs, values, and practices in line with it.<sup>26</sup>

3.1        *The ethical injunction.* The ethical assumption of metaphysical thinking enjoins us to pursue three modes of life: the *contemplative life*, devoted to solving the epistemological problem; the *ascetic life*, devoted to fulfilling the epistemological promise, to recollecting the one measure by implementing that procedure; and the *virtuous life*, devoted to bringing our beliefs, values, and practices in line with the one measure and so completing metaphysical thinking in the pacification of life.

Of these, the virtuous life is the highest. The injunctions to contemplation and asceticism derive from this assumption, that virtue so conceived is possible and desirable. They are implied by it, in conjunction with the ontological and epistemological assumptions already discussed, and they take what force they have as means to the end it indicates. Nevertheless, contemplation and asceticism have practical priority over virtue. They come first in the actual course of metaphysical thinking, not only because one must first find and travel the path to the one measure before making it a rule, but also and primarily because of the historical failure of metaphysical thinking to advance beyond contemplation and asceticism to actually deliver its promised measure on the basis of which the virtuous life can be undertaken directly.

For the 2,500 years or so of well-documented intellectual history, we have come no nearer to virtue as conceived by metaphysical thinking than *the pursuit of virtue*.<sup>27</sup> We

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<sup>26</sup> Who ‘we’ names here I leave open. The most ambitious strains of metaphysical thinking aspire to legislate the spiritual and social life of all humanity; others are more exclusive; though here as in its ontology metaphysical thinking tends to totality.

<sup>27</sup> I note that virtue in the more ordinary sense is not impugned by the failure of metaphysical thinking to

have not yet come up with an answer to the epistemological problem that can be widely understood and conclusively shown to be reliable. On the contrary, students of metaphysical thinking have usually decided that the only satisfying answer to the epistemological problem is to recognize that the problem originates in the assumption of metaphysical ontology, and to set that assumption aside. Nor, where some epistemological theory has been taken up on faith and a body of policies or practices adopted on its authority, has asceticism resulted transparently in recollection.

3.2 *The elevation of the contemplative life.* It thus seems that the actual ethical injunction of metaphysical thinking is simply *to carry on thinking metaphysically*, to continue in the contemplative life; and the outcome of its logic is accordingly not that we should arrive at the virtuous life as metaphysical thinking understands it but rather that, by borrowing against its promise to deliver it, contemplation itself should take on an aura of virtue. It seems, in other words, that the contemplative life elevates itself by its own assumptions—by what community and commitment they gather and what measure of belief, value, and practice that community and community themselves provide. It is as though a tree should say to us, ‘It is the sun which draws me’, when in fact it has drawn on the sun to push itself up, by its roots.

This observation concludes our formal analysis of metaphysical thinking. For if we would understand it further we must now turn to historical scholarship and natural science, looking at the many actual metaphysical systems and communities of contemplation in their historical place and in light of the biological, sociological, and psychological bases of human thought and conduct. But none of these tasks belongs to this work, and about the ethical component of metaphysical thinking we might therefore conclude with two final observations. First, the actual manner in which the logic of metaphysical thinking is given expression, and the institutions, practices, and whatever which gather around that logic as the contemplative life, must satisfy the needs and delights of those who take them up—whether those be for

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secure virtue in its extraordinary sense.

social solidarity and spiritual stability, as I have suggested, or something else altogether or besides. Metaphysical thinking must work, even if not as it understands itself to work. Second, the contemplative life must carry out the logic of metaphysical thinking in such a manner that the actual work of that logic does not come too readily into contrast with its self-understanding. The tree must seem indeed to be drawn upwards by the sun, and to have such growth in it as might reach the sun, if its failure to do so is to renew and preserve it and not to draw it irretrievably into question.

3.3 *Summary.* Metaphysical thinking (3.1) enjoins a life of contemplation leading through ascesis to virtue but fails to move beyond contemplation, (3.2) which comes to take on the aura of virtue through its promise to achieve it—an aura sustained by the community and commitment that promise gathers: by what deliverance that gathering itself provides, and through blindness to how the logic of metaphysical thinking acts contrary to its self-understanding to sustain that gathering.

# 4

## Its discontents

*Introduction.—The resilience of metaphysical thinking.—Three antimetaphysical therapies.—  
Two errors of excess.*

### SECTION 4.1

#### *Introduction*

For much of its history, philosophy has been a tradition of metaphysical thinking. As such it has attracted discontent from the start, among the various schools of sceptics and the Roman men of letters for instance. But only in the past century have the critical attitudes of antimetaphysical thinkers—of Nietzsche, Marx, James, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and the like—spread throughout the tradition and the doorway to seeing its history as a gradual recognition and renunciation of the assumptions of metaphysical thinking opened to most of philosophy's students. In this chapter, although I will not undertake to trace that history, I will attempt to prepare its students to do so by discussing in general terms the resilience of metaphysical thinking, three strategies by which it has been overcome, and how attempts to overcome metaphysical thinking have often gone astray, through their own excess, either by

recapitulating what they claim to renounce or by renouncing too much. I will briefly discuss the scepticism of Sextus Empiricus and Ludwig Wittgenstein's 'grammatical therapy' for examples of these errors. Then, in Chapter 5, I will turn back to suggest that metaphysical thinking harbours a critical tradition of its own that is worth reclaiming—a tradition that retains the metaphysical will to push past the initial and the ordinary without taking up its immodest and unworkable ambition to arrive thereby at a fixed and final ground.

## SECTION 4.2

### *The resilience of metaphysical thinking*

Metaphysical thinking is highly resistant to criticism. In this section I will discuss two of the more common and powerful forms its resilience takes: (1) its *hermetic*, or self-enclosing, logic, and (2) its error of *renunciation and recapitulation*. Then I will discuss, in the next section, some of the ways by which critics of metaphysical thinking have attempted to overcome its resilience.

1     *The hermetic logic of metaphysical thinking.* The hermetic logic of metaphysical thinking appears wherever the metaphysician responds to his critic by demanding as a condition of serious conversation that she reveal the fixed and incontestable measure that secures her critical position. ('Your god is a fiction around which your tribe organizes itself.'—'Oh? And what god told you that?'—'Well, they're all fictions, actually.'—'Well, what *power* then?') This logic serves both to insulate metaphysical thinking from criticism and to induce others to think metaphysically. It raises a boundary which the critic must either pass and become metaphysical or resist and remain outside the pale of serious conversation.

The logic of metaphysical thinking encloses it against criticism at its beginning. A boundary is already raised by the dividing line of its ontological assumption, which debases the many various and contestable things as alike and equally unreliable to the eye of serious thought and raises in their place, as its proper object, the one fixed and incontestable

measure. In doing so, it decides metaphysical thinking's conception of intellectual activity and authority. The proper aim of thought is to recollect the one measure, and no other manner of intellectual activity or source of intellectual authority can be of consequence because all may be drawn into question and so enrolled among the many as themselves in need of the clarity that measure promises to bring. We have reviewed this structure in the previous chapter. Situated within it, the metaphysical thinker cannot but regard any critical challenge to that structure not issued from a variety of the same as unfounded and frivolous.

Of course a metaphysical thinker might recognize the self-understanding of metaphysical thinking as the consequence of an optional beginning and remain open to being shown that he went astray from the start, perhaps by being shown what has come of that assumption in the past and how its fruits compare to those of other beginnings. But even such a thinker, the basic character of whose thinking is to push past whatever is various and contestable in pursuit of the regulative measure to which he aspires, is liable to respond to any but the most striking critics by drawing whatever those critics have to say into question and so revealing their authority to lie on the low side of the line, over there among the many various and contestable things where it may be dismissed as unreliable. Indeed, in so far as he has entered into the logic of metaphysical thinking, so that it has come, as it were, to think through him, he cannot very well do otherwise. Nor is his response entirely unreasonable.

We can appreciate the good sense the metaphysician feels to suffuse his thinking by considering a similar response made by those committed to truth. While I have little patience with the metaphysical understanding of truth—as the one measure it would recollect, the proper unity and order of things it would reveal, the uniquely correct beliefs, values, and practices it would secure—I am committed to truth in its ordinary and original sense as what is firm, regular, straight, reliable. So I am inclined to say to its nay-sayers: ‘You claim: “There is no interesting concept of truth.” Fine. Then either your claim implies acceptance

of such a concept and so is false, or you are executing a performance in the expectation of teaching me a lesson or inducing my imitation—in which case please explain the lesson or the worth of going on in that way plainly, by making claims that I can evaluate as true or false, or admit that we are simply interested in different things and be on your way.’ This response seems sensible to me because I am already committed to thinking which aims to hit upon what is firm. I have difficulty imagining how someone could give up this standard and yet feel justified in claiming to believe one thing and not another, much less in claiming that I ought to do likewise. He might point to habit, upbringing, agreement, utility, delight, or whatever, all of which provide us with firmness of one sort or another. But I should be unlikely to engage with him long in serious discussion were he not to come around and profess in addition to all that an uncomplicated interest in getting at, as best we are able, how things happen to be—at the sort of firmness that I call truth.<sup>1</sup> Which is all to say that my commitment to truth is hermetic: it sets up a boundary beyond which my serious attempts at inquiry do not habitually pass.

In a similar manner and feeling his response no less sensible, the metaphysician might say to his own nay-sayers: ‘You claim: “There is no (need of your) fixed and incontestable measure.” Fine. Then either your claim implies that you already have such a measure in mind and so is disingenuous, or you are merely speaking on the basis of your observations of various and contestable things—in which case we are pursuing different projects and should go our separate ways.’ This response seems sensible to the metaphysician because he is already committed to thinking that aims to hit upon a fixed and incontestable measure that stands over and against whatever shows up as various and contestable. So long as he

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<sup>1</sup> ‘As best we are able.’ That means so far as our capacity to set character, custom, and circumstance aside admits. This capacity is limited. Like a person who only ever appears dressed, things appear swathed in the cloth of our approach to them. Yet neither is it beyond our capacity to think past the cloth of character et cetera. For just as I might come to have a reliable notion of the shape of a person’s body by observing it from various angles and in diverse raiment, learning from their changes what does not belong to it, so too with care and collaboration might I come to have a reliable notion of what is firm and regular in things.

takes his conception of intellectual activity and authority for granted, he too has difficulty imagining how someone could give up the measure of authority to which he aspires and still feel justified in telling him to go on in one way and not another. As it turns out, I am correct and the metaphysician mistaken. History is clear on this point. But he is no less sincere for his error; and although we have come to our respective commitments by different paths and stand for them on the ground of different conceptions of intellectual activity and its authority, our common manner of responding to criticism, an act of staking out a limit of seriousness, serves him no less than me both to coerce weaker critics into taking up his standard and to dismiss what stronger critics have to say as outside the pale of serious conversation.

The metaphysician's assertion of higher seriousness coerces his weak critic to admit that she lacks seriousness by casting doubt over her understanding of things. Thinking which is founded on anything less than a fixed and incontestable measure, he tells her, is less than serious. Either she must right herself by founding her criticism on some metaphysical system, or implicit to that criticism is the kernel of such a system which seriousness obliges her to make explicit. In a previous chapter, I suggested that the idea of the many, that the differences among various and contestable things are alike and equally unreliable is one aspect of a single assumption, the obverse of which is the idea of the one. If I am right, then by inducing his critic to doubt the seriousness of her thinking by questioning its ground in her ordinary concourse with things, the metaphysical thinker induces in her at the same time the precondition for seeing the one measure as the proper aim of thought. In this way metaphysical seriousness spreads first as an infection and then as a cure.

Even the strong critic, who knows how modest a measure of authority intellectual activity admits and so is mostly immune to infection, can be frustrated by the hermetic logic of metaphysical thinking. First, the metaphysician can always dismiss the critic as lacking intellectual seriousness. But often the metaphysician can do more than this. For the strong critic may resent being wrongly dismissed and endeavour to unseat the metaphysician's

immodest conception of intellectual activity by elaborating her own more modest conception in terms that will stand up to it—terms which if they are to be stiff enough for that purpose the metaphysician may easily recast as evidence that the critic too is a metaphysical thinker, ignorant of her god perhaps but not innocent of faith.<sup>2</sup> This ‘evidence’ will not convince the strong critic, but it will usually frustrate her attempt and drive her to silence.

Certainly the hermetic character of metaphysical thinking does not raise an insurmountable wall against criticism; it is possible, for instance, to tell a genealogical story so striking and powerful, the sort of story that Friedrich Nietzsche first taught philosophers to tell, that all but the most unthinking metaphysical thinkers must be thrown back into a re-evaluation of their project; and there are other means besides, which we will review below, of overcoming the resilience of metaphysical thinking. But it raises a wall high enough that most metaphysical thinkers are spared having to see whatever good sense stands aback of the words set against them.

2     *Renunciation and recapitulation.* The resilience of metaphysical thinking is also apparent in the error of renunciation and recapitulation. This error can be seen in the thinking of individual philosophers and over the course of philosophical history. It occurs in the thinking of a philosopher whenever he responds to criticism of metaphysical thinking by attaching it to the accidental features of some particular metaphysical project rather than to the structure of assumptions on which that project rests, and so puts himself in a position to renounce that project, and to seem thereby to renounce metaphysical thinking or at least to satisfy its critics, without giving up that foundational structure—the very structure that ensures his thinking will turn back to something much the same as what he takes himself to have overcome. Its occurrence in philosophical history I will come to below.

I have called this way of evading criticism the *error* of renunciation and recapitulation—rather, say, than partial renunciation—to mark that it is not an argumentative strategy but

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<sup>2</sup> We shall see this response again in discussing the status of ‘everyday observances’ and ‘everyday language’ in the scepticism of Sextus Empiricus and Wittgenstein’s ‘grammatical therapy’ below.

a genuine misunderstanding. The thinker who knowingly employed this strategy to evade his critics or otherwise buttress his position would still have to face up to their criticism, if only to himself; and his duplicity would do little to secure his commitment to it. But the thinker who unknowingly errs in this way, by passing criticism that properly applies to the species over to this or that specimen, provides himself with a fountain of eternal folly: he need only ever change his words and never his mind.<sup>3</sup> (It is as if a restaurateur, on seeing a man enter with his dog, were to say, ‘That dog is not welcome here,’ and the man were to reply, ‘Hold my table; I’ll come back with another.’)

We might express the error of renunciation and recapitulation in more colourful terms. The critic of metaphysical thinking, we might say, objects to the drawing of the dividing line that sets metaphysical thinking in motion as immodest and unworkable. But the proponent of metaphysical thinking, admitting on reflection that his particular project is indeed immodest and unworkable, nevertheless hears the critic as objecting to *where* the line is drawn, and so draws it otherwise, conceiving of the one and the many in terms that seem less immodest and more workable. (The dividing line is that between the one measure and the many things to which I referred in discussing the ontological assumption of metaphysical thinking in a previous chapter.) But what is objectionable is not simply *where* the line is drawn but *that* it is drawn at all.

When we describe the error of renunciation and recapitulation in these terms, we are well prepared to see how at each period of philosophical history—and by ‘period’ I mean what Richard Rorty had in mind when he spoke of ‘the vocabularies for which certain famous names serve as abbreviations’<sup>4</sup>—as awareness of the unquestioned assumptions of

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<sup>3</sup> This error becomes an especially strong source of resilience when the philosopher led astray by it appears, to himself and others alike, to have renounced the species indeed—when, for instance, he expresses his renunciation in terms that seem to suggest awareness of the specific structure to which his particular project belongs, or when he errs not only in attaching criticism of the species to some particular specimen but also in giving to that specimen the name of the species. We shall see in Section 4.4 that classical scepticism does something like this, claiming to oppose dogmatism but itself a form of the same.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 100.

metaphysical thinking grew among philosophers, one or another metaphysical project was renounced as immodest and unworkable and the dividing line of metaphysical thinking was pushed back into successively more defensible territory. In this way, by changing its terms, philosophy seemed to progress—and in fact did progress, if by ‘progress’ we understand rather a gradual recognition and renunciation of error than the furthering of metaphysics—though its logic remained unchanged. For each act of renunciation served initially only to push back the dividing line in an attempt to evade its critics by translating the basic structure of metaphysical thinking into terms that seemed less immodest and more workable without actually setting aside the source of that immodesty. Thus we see, for instance, the division in Plato between two worlds, of seeming and being; in Descartes between the mind and the world, between the certain consciousness of the *ego cogito* and the uncertainty of the external world; and later still, during the 20th century, between what Ferdinand de Saussure called *langue* and *parole*, between fixed linguistic structures and the serviceable, shifting, jumble of sounds and whatever with which we actually communicate. We see, to speak even more broadly, a translation of metaphysical thinking from ontological to psychological to sociological terms, from nature to self to society, from world to experience to language.

If this were a historical essay, we might compare metaphysical projects from various periods of philosophical history and show both that they rest on the same basic structure of assumptions despite their sometimes quite striking superficial differences, and that were this seen clearly the arguments later metaphysical projects advanced against their forerunners should serve also to undermine those projects themselves. But in this analytical essay I will confine myself to pressing two general points about the error of renunciation and recapitulation. First, although the overall shift of the dividing line has been toward modesty, each shift has been possible only because the proper source of immodesty was overlooked, because those who supposed that changing the terms of metaphysical thinking was enough to set it right did not notice that it is not the location of the dividing line alone that is immodest but the drawing of it. Second, only in the last century have we seen a genuine and

widespread renunciation of metaphysical thinking among philosophers. The result of this mature renunciation is the topic of the next and final chapter. In what remains of this one, we will first consider some general strategies by which metaphysics' critics have attempted to meet its resiliency, and then note how two of the most promising and instructive attempts, classical scepticism and grammatical therapy, have sometimes gone astray.

### SECTION 4.3

#### *Three antimetaphysical therapies*

Metaphysics' discontents have come up with diverse therapies by which to undermine its resilience and cure us of its assumptions and aspirations. In this section, we will review three of the most effective: (1) telling genealogical stories (e.g., Nietzsche), (2) remaining pointedly silent (e.g., the Buddha), and (3) setting metaphysical claims, idioms, images, et cetera against one another (e.g., Sextus Empiricus, Wittgenstein). Each has in common with the rest that it dispels to some extent the resilience of metaphysical thinking by resisting its hermetic logic and not falling into the error of recapitulating what it would renounce. Each, that is, refuses the metaphysician's challenge either to relinquish authority or to adopt the assumptions or idiom of metaphysical thinking, addresses its cure to the assumptions that define the species and not merely to the superficial features of this or that specimen, and carries out its cure in such a manner that others cannot easily create a new metaphysical project out of it. We will review these therapies in turn and then consider, in the final section of this chapter, two errors of excess into which such therapies have frequently fallen.

1 *Genealogical narrative.* One cannot prove that no gods exist to a man whose notion of validity in proof involves divine revelation, but one can attempt to show him that revelation is not yet at hand; to tell a story about how he came to await revelation which makes the form of life and thought that he has borrowed against it seem unattractive; and to show him how the motives and concerns which led him to wait might be better satisfied otherwise. So it goes with metaphysical thinking also. Because the assumptions of metaphysical

thinking insulate it from argument that does not begin from those assumptions, critics of metaphysical thinking have often set aside argument for therapeutic narrative of this sort.

Narrative is an effective counter to the hermetic logic of metaphysical thinking, which rejects all other thinking as less than serious, because it exercises an authority which lays a claim on us largely independent of our willingness to take it seriously. Just as a child who would close his ears to criticism of his actions can be brought to see their foolishness by a fanciful tale of talking rabbits and the like, so the hermetic logic of metaphysical thinking, which closes the metaphysician's ears to any argument against his assumptions that does not rest on them, can be circumvented by genealogical stories that do not rely for their authority on assumptions or argument but take their force rather from the striking image and the well-turned phrase.

Moreover, because genealogical narrative advances rather histories and characterizations than assumptions and arguments, it does not readily fall into the error of renunciation and recapitulation. It does not lend itself to being mistaken for yet another metaphysical project, and even the critic whose genealogy calls into question only one or another specimen of metaphysical thinking, passing the species by, is largely protected by the form of his critique from seeming to endorse some other. And indeed I suppose that those critics who take up narrative against metaphysical thinking do so precisely because they are aware of the danger, were they to advance arguments, of being either dismissed or assimilated by proponents of metaphysical thinking. They turn to narrative not because argument has failed them, much less because they repudiate it, but as a deliberate attempt to overcome the resilience of metaphysical thinking to arguments of their sort, arguments proper to thinking that has set the assumptions of metaphysics aside.

The first philosopher to tell such stories to wide and lasting success was Friedrich Nietzsche. His writings consist mostly of cutting aphorisms and accounts, more sketches than arguments, of the origin or background of metaphysical ideas and attitudes.<sup>5</sup> These

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<sup>5</sup> Good examples of this mode of therapy can be found throughout Nietzsche's writings but are perhaps

sketches cast doubt on the assumptions and aspirations of metaphysical thinking by revealing to the metaphysician that he too acts in service of base and ordinary motives—at bottom, as I suggested in Chapter 3, of social solidarity and spiritual stability—which the more courageous and honest few whom Nietzsche celebrates take more directly in hand. Consider this passage at the outset of *The Gay Science*:

‘Life is worth living,’ so every one of them calls out to you; ‘there is something to it: life has something behind it, beneath it—beware!’ This desire, which is at work in the highest and the lowest men alike, the desire to preserve the species, breaks out from time to time as reason and passion of the spirit, and gathers then a resplendent retinue of reason about it, and attempts with all force to forget that at base it is desire, instinct, foolishness, baselessness.<sup>6</sup>

We also see this form of therapy in Martin Heidegger’s somewhat fanciful history of metaphysics, William James’ account of the influence of personality on metaphysical views, John Dewey’s attack on the ‘quest for certainty’, Richard Rorty’s critique of metaphysics after the linguistic turn, et cetera.<sup>7</sup>

Metaphysical thinkers who have recognized and sought to resist this form of critique have sometimes pointed to their critic’s lack of argument as a sign of her lack of seriousness and unreasonability, and some critics have reproduced this error by speaking against argument themselves. This reprise is not without force; narrative is not the usual mode of philosophy. But the better critics have easily avoided it by explaining their form of critique much as I have done here, not in opposition to reason—at least in the modest sense of

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most forcefully developed in his *Beyond Good and Evil* and *On the Genealogy of Morals*. The fifth section of Nietzsche’s *Twilight of the Idols*, ‘How the “Real World” at last Became a Myth’, also seems to me to stand as a blue-print for a comprehensive genealogical critique of metaphysical thinking of the sort later attempted by Martin Heidegger.

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §1.\*

<sup>7</sup> See Martin Heidegger’s *Introduction to Metaphysics* and *Being and Time*; the first lecture of William James’ *Pragmatism*, ‘The Present Dilemma in Philosophy’; John Dewey’s *The Quest for Certainty*; and Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

conversation in which claims are advanced in terms that all participants can understand and supported by evidence that all participants can test—but as an exigency warranted by the metaphysician’s own unwillingness to reason about the assumptions that inform his thinking.

2 *Deliberate silence.* How do you kick over a god? Not by speaking against it and so gathering a crowd but, saying nothing whatsoever, by revealing how much more delightful is silence. Remarkably, after a lifetime of genealogical critique, Martin Heidegger concluded his 1962 lecture ‘On Time and Being’ by recommending this response:

A regard to metaphysics still prevails even in the intention to overcome metaphysics. Therefore our task is to cease all overcoming, and leave metaphysics to itself.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps Heidegger merely wanted to end on a high note, but I prefer to think that he came to see two dangers posed by genealogical critique: first, that speaking too forcefully against metaphysics might invite others to pay it attention better placed elsewhere, and second, that the potent genealogical critiques of antimetaphysical thinkers like Nietzsche and himself might cast as great a charm over philosophers as metaphysics itself—that deconstruction, to the detriment of honest inquiry, might become a tradition in its own right.<sup>9</sup> For if genealogical critique is perhaps the most potent antimetaphysical medicine, deliberate silence might be the wiser.

Deliberate silence overcomes the hermetic logic of metaphysical thinking in much the same manner as genealogical narrative. The genealogical critic sidesteps the metaphysician’s

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Heidegger adverts to this possibility in his 1966 interview with the German paper *Der Spiegel*, ‘Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten’:

From our human experience and history, at least as far as I am informed, I know that everything essential and great has only emerged when human beings had a home and were rooted in a tradition. Today’s literature is, for instance, largely destructive.

insistence that all argumentation begin from metaphysical assumptions by setting aside argument for narrative, which exercises an authority over us regardless of whether we take it seriously. The critic who, eschewing argument for admiration, relies on her evident practical success or personal charm to imbue her deliberate refusal to engage in metaphysical speculation with critical weight does likewise.

Deliberate silence also ensures that the critic will not fall into the error of recapitulating what she renounces. For her response provides nothing which could readily be elaborated into yet another metaphysical system, even where the critic herself rejects only one specimen of metaphysical thinking and has yet to see that her proper target is the structure common to the species. This is not to say that her response is purely negative, since a model of practical success and personal charm might be a constructive influence, but only that such a model offers little on which the logical of metaphysical thinking might elaborate.

Probably the best early examples of this response were made by the Buddha, who turned away the metaphysical questions of his admirers with silence and what is known in Indian philosophy as the tetralemma or fourfold negation (*catuṣkoṭi*). A sort of spoken silence, the *catuṣkoṭi* has the following form and is a manner of answering a question so as to clearly reject it. ‘Do you claim that P?’—‘No.’—‘Then not-P?’—‘No.’—‘Then both P and not-P?’—‘No.’—‘Then neither P nor not-P?’—‘No.’ In this manner, it is thought, all possibilities are exhausted, and there can be no mistaken that what is rejected is not one or another stance on the proposition P but the assumptions that make that proposition seem sensible and important in the first place.

The Buddha’s deliberate silence occurs in several interviews in the *Majjhima Nikāya* and *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, the middle-length and miscellaneous discourses of the Buddha.<sup>10</sup> In these interviews, the wanderer Vacchagotta asks the Buddha to elaborate his views in terms of classical Vedantic metaphysics, and the monk Māluṅkyaputta similarly insists that he elaborate the metaphysical scheme of the holy life. The Buddha refuses both. At 44.10

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<sup>10</sup> See for instance *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 44.10 and *Majjhima Nikāya* 63 and 72.

of the *Samyutta Nikāya* we see him respond with outright silence.

Having taken a seat to one side, Vacchagotta the wanderer said to the Master,  
‘Now then, Venerable Gotama, is there a self?’

When this was said, the Master was silent.

‘Then is there no self?’ For a second time the Master was silent.

Then Vacchagotta the wanderer got up from his seat and left.<sup>11</sup>

And the fourfold negation occurs in several interviews in the *Majjhima Nikāya* such as the following, in which the Buddha refuses to discuss the afterlife.

It’s not the case that where there is the view, ‘After death a Tathagata exists,’ there is the living of the holy life. And it’s not the case that when there is the view, ‘After death a Tathagata does not exist,’ there is the living of the holy life. And it’s not the case that when there is the view, ‘After death a Tathagata both exists [and] does not exist,’ there is the living of the holy life. And it’s not the case that when there is the view, ‘After death a Tathagata neither exists nor does not exist’ there is the living of the holy life.<sup>12</sup>

In both responses the Buddha does not directly explain what is wrong with the questions, presumably because he knows that argumentation on such matters inevitably gives rise to confusion and distress, that someone who ‘attends inappropriately in this way’ will end up entangled in ‘a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views’.<sup>13</sup> Instead, he relies on whatever of his admirable practical and personal characteristics drew the questioner to him in the first place. ‘You are shot with an arrow,’ the Buddha is reported to have said; ‘what is the point of asking the name

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<sup>11</sup> *Samyutta Nikāya* 44.10.

<sup>12</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya* 63. The Buddha usually refers to himself and other buddhas, or awakened persons, with the word ‘tathāgata’, literally ‘one who has thus come’.

<sup>13</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya* 2.

of the man who shot you, of his relations, of his village, of the construction of his bow, the making of its arrows, et cetera? What is wanted is to remove the arrow and to mend the wound.<sup>14</sup> The potency of the Buddha's silence rests in his ability, real or reputed, to remove the arrow and mend the wound; and so far as this reality or reputation is more seductive than the assumptions and aspirations of metaphysical thinking, his silence has critical force. Whoever falls under its sway must either overcome their admiration or give over metaphysical thinking.

Deliberate silence also often takes a third form, in addition to outright silence and the fourfold negation, as direct affirmation of the everyday. Consider following passage from the early Chinese philosophical text, the *Zhuangzi*:

Zhuangzi and Huizi were walking on a bridge over the moat. Zhuangzi said: 'How effortlessly the minnows dart. That's the joy of fishes!' Huizi replied: 'You are not a fish; how do you know the joy of fishes?' Zhuangzi said: 'You are not me; how do you know I don't know the joy of fishes?' Huizi replied: 'Not being you, I clearly don't know you; clearly you are not a fish, so it follows that you do not know the joy of fishes—and that's the end of it.' Zhuangzi said: 'Let's get back to the root of the matter (請循其本). You asked me "How do you know the joy of fishes?" after you already knew I knew it. I knew it over the moat!<sup>15</sup>

In this dialogue, Zhuangzi engages the dialectician Huizi in the sporting spirit that pervades that book, but his point is not to found his comment that the fish are happy on some incontestable basis. On the contrary, Zhuangzi deliberately rejects Huizi's attempt to push the conversation in that direction, first by turning his question playfully back on him, and then, when Huizi persists, by pointing out that their very interaction already presumes an overlap of sympathies—that argument arises out of and depends on a prior everyday

<sup>14</sup> This is my paraphrase of a well-known discourse at *Majjhima Nikāya* 63.

<sup>15</sup> This passage occurs at the end of the seventeenth chapter, 'Autumn Waters' (秋水).\*

understanding and cannot depart too far from that ‘root’ (本). The Scottish defender of common sense, Thomas Reid, made much the same point:

When men attempt to deduce such self-evident principles from others more evident, they always fall into inconclusive reasoning: and the consequence of this has been, that others [...] finding the arguments brought to prove such first principles to be weak and inclusive, have been tempted first to doubt of [those self-evident principles], and afterward to deny them.<sup>16</sup>

The pursuit of a measure more firm and contest-worthy, indeed fixed and incontestable, than those available to ordinary understanding often serves only to cast doubt on what cannot be superseded.

To point with Zhuangzi or Reid to our failure to do more than disparage the limits of our understanding, to point out as another early Chinese thinker did that ‘the way is not far from men’ (道不遠人), is not to fall silent; but, so far as it too relies on practical success and personal charm, it has much the same effect.<sup>17</sup> The metaphysician may attempt to resist this effect, claiming, as with narrative critique, that his critic’s refusal to argue only further betrays her frivolity. But the force of this resistance is limited. For the metaphysician, despite his intellectual seriousness cannot so easily set aside the authority of practical success and personal charm. Like narrative, which exercises a power over us even where we would not take it seriously, excellence too has a power to elicit our admiration and imitation which argument alone cannot easily overturn.

3     *Scepticism.* Two forms of scepticism might be set against metaphysical thinking:

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Reid, ‘Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man’, 359–360.

<sup>17</sup> The phrase occurs in the thirteenth passage of *The Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸),\* a text attributed variously to Confucius or his grandson Zisi (子思):

The way is not far from men. Men who for the sake of travelling on the way go far from men, cannot be travelling on the way. A poem has it, ‘Carving an axe, carving an axe; the pattern is not far.’ One uses an axe to carve an axe. Only if you look at it wrongly does it seem far off. Thus gentlemen govern men on the model of other men—and look no farther.

classical scepticism, associated with Pyrrho of Elis, Arcesilaus and Carneades, Sextus Empiricus, and others; and the ‘grammatical scepticism’ at work in the later writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein. From the tradition of classical scepticism might be drawn the method of setting two specimens of metaphysical thinking against one another such that the species is brought into disrepute; and from Wittgenstein we might take up the method of calling metaphysical thinking into question by showing how it arises and is sustained by ‘the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language’.<sup>18</sup> I consider each in turn.

Classical scepticism, understood in its simplest form as a method of argumentation, sets against one body of metaphysical assumptions, aspirations, arguments, images, et cetera some other, metaphysical or otherwise, which can be made to seem of equal force, with the result that both are called into question and, as it were, cancel one another out. Argumentation of this form is not always possible, some arguments being in truth more forceful than others; but it is usually possible against metaphysical arguments, since against one metaphysical system, which calls nearly everything into doubt, can always be set another, unfavourable to the peculiarities of the first; and indeed philosophers have argued to no end whether only consciousness is certain, for instance, or whether the inherent structure of rational discourse alone provides a sure measure of knowledge and action, and so in this way.

Like the other modes of antimetaphysical critique, sceptical argumentation avoids the hermetic logic of classical metaphysics—in this case, not by side-stepping that logic but by giving into it repeatedly. The sceptical critic accedes gladly to the metaphysician’s demand that she take up his logic, though she would reject it, because her aim is not to denounce metaphysical thinking from afar but to manifest its vacuity by bringing so fully to bear the force of each metaphysical system on the next that its allure is called irrevocably into doubt. She takes up the logic of the species, but only so as to call it into question by setting each specimen against the next.

As for the error of renunciation and recapitulation, the sceptic here runs a risk. This

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<sup>18</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, I.110.

is not—or at least the risk is not great—that her occasional arguments will be recast by her opponents or her admirers into a system of metaphysical thought, since in setting one system against the next she is unlikely to have left behind her a consistent body of views. Rather her risk is that, by too enthusiastically applying her sceptical medicine, she might make herself ill. This risk I will discuss below, in Section 4.4, on errors of critical excess.

The most famous classical sceptic is probably Sextus Empiricus, whose *Outlines of scepticism*, dated to the second century A.D., we will consider as an example of excess. But the tradition is many centuries older than that work. According to later commentators—Diogenes Laertius and Cicero being first among them, but also Photius I of Constantinople and Numenius of Apamea, fragments of whose writing survive in the *Praeparatio Evangelica* of Eusebius, among others—it begins with Pyrrho of Elis, in the fourth and third centuries B.C.; was carried on by his pupil Timon; was later taken up by Arcesilaus and Carneades, the former being head of the Academy in the third and second centuries B.C. and the latter a century or so later; was revived by Aenesidemus, a former member of the Academy, in the first century B.C.; and so on.<sup>19</sup> I mention here only some of the more well-known figures, and in what follows will cite only few passages about Pyrrho and Arcesilaus, which give the general flavour of the thing.

About the early sceptics little can be said with certainty. But we learn from the *Lives* of Diogenes Laertius that Pyrrho held ‘that nothing exists in truth but that men do everything on the basis of custom’; that his method was ‘a kind of display of appearances or thought according to which they are all juxtaposed and when compared are found to have much inconsistency and confusion’; and that its result was that, ‘because of the conflict among thoughts, one ought to put no trust in any of them, [and] the measure by means of

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<sup>19</sup> See Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*; Cicero’s *Academica* and *On Goals*; Photius’ *Bibliotheca*; and the selections from Numenius at 14.6–8 of Eusebius’ *Praeparatio Evangelica*. These and other sources are compiled in Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson’s *Hellenistic Philosophy* and the first volume of A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley’s *The Hellenistic Philosophers*.

which all things are to be [known] with precision will be destroyed'.<sup>20</sup> As for Arcesilaus, Diogenes tell us that he was, among the Academics, 'the first to argue both sides of a question and the first to change the doctrine handed down by Plato, that is, to make it more eristic by the use of question and answer';<sup>21</sup> and from Cicero we learn that he held that

no one should maintain or assert anything [...] and by arguing against everyone's opinions he drew most people away from their own, so that when reasons of equal weight were found on opposite sides of the same subject, the easier course was to withhold assent from either side.<sup>22</sup>

Much more could be said on classical scepticism, both its figures and its arguments; and in truth what I have presented here is only its method, in its barest form and abstracted from the manner in which it was most commonly understood—less as a method than as a manner of life. In the next section we will look to Sextus Empiricus to see how this method was applied, and how, applied rashly, it might easily lead to excess—as, for instance, may be seen in the assertion that one should 'not maintain or assert anything'. For now, I suppose that what little we have is clear enough as concerns the logic of metaphysical thinking, namely, how the critic might take it up, slipping past the seriousness of the metaphysician, without being taken in by it.

Another method of scepticism which might be set against metaphysical thinking, what I call grammatical therapy, may be found in the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. This method also has as its aim to vitiate the logic of metaphysical thinking. This it undertakes to do not by argument but by 'giving prominence to distinctions which our ordinary forms of language make us overlook'<sup>23</sup> in such a way that metaphysical argument is seen to depart

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<sup>20</sup> Diogenes, *Lives*, 9.61, 9.78, and 9.93, in *Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson, 285, 289, and 293. 'Known' occurs in brackets in the translation.

<sup>21</sup> Diogenes, *Lives*, 4.28, in *Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson, 261.

<sup>22</sup> Cicero, *Academica*, 1.45, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, ed. A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley, 438.

<sup>23</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, I.132.

from our everyday thought and talk not in the direction of greater depth and clarity but, on the contrary, eliding the complexities with which we have ordinarily to do, through having fallen under the charm of unusual and over-simple use of words—and so fallen below the usual standard of sensitive and skilful understanding.

The basic insight of this method is similar to that of the *Zhuangzi*'s 'Joy of Fishes', which we saw above. In that dialogue, the philosopher Zhuangzi reminds the logician Huizi that reason begins from and cannot, without ceasing to do work, depart too far from our usual ways of thought and talk. The grammatical therapist attempts to bring the metaphysical thinker to the same insight. In doing this she faces two difficulties. First, the nature and limits of our thought and talk are not obvious.

The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one's eyes.) The real foundations of his enquiry do not strike a man at all. Unless *that* fact has at some time struck him.—And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful.<sup>24</sup>

Second, the logic of metaphysical thinking is hermetic; the metaphysical conception of the nature and authority of thought draws a boundary beyond which metaphysical thinking is not willing to pass—and so forbids it to take up a view of things by which that conception might be called into question. 'A *picture* held us captive,' Wittgenstein says. 'And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.'<sup>25</sup>

In order to bring the metaphysician to see his error therefore the grammatical therapist must first bring him outside the metaphysical conception of the nature and authority of thought, which is also what genealogical narrative and, in so far as it relies on a

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., I.129

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., I.115.

demonstration of practical excellence or personal charm, deliberate silence also do. This she does neither through narrative nor by demonstrating her own sensitivity and skill but through revealing to the metaphysical thinker that the words by which he understands his own thinking—‘being’ and ‘seeming’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘opinion’, ‘vanity’ and ‘virtue’, or whatever—have ceased for him to make sense and become rather instruments of his enslavement. This wants further explanation.

The logic of metaphysical thinking, its peculiar conception of the nature and authority of thought, lives in a metaphysical thinker as a system of words; he explains his project to himself by some terms, which he draws from everyday speech, where they are employed with more or less sensitivity and skill, binding them to that logic and making of them a spell by which it is repeated to him inexorably. In this way those words cease to have their ordinary sense but move over from the service of understanding to something else—to the sorcery of images and ideas by which the metaphysician, believing himself to have moved toward greater understanding, acts in ignorance of ‘the real foundations of his enquiry’ to secure social solidarity and spiritual stability at its expense.

The grammatical therapist attempts to break this spell. The manner in which she does this is by drawing unusual distinctions and finding what Wittgenstein calls ‘intermediate cases’:

A main source of our failure to understand [the nature and limits of sense] is that we do not *command a clear view* of the use of our words.—Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicacity. A perspicacious representation produces just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connexions’. Hence the importance of finding and inventing *intermediate cases*.<sup>26</sup>

Where the metaphysician relies on an unusual and too-simple use of some word, ‘belief’ for instance, or makes too much of some distinction, perhaps between ‘being’ and ‘seeming’,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., I.122.

the grammatical therapist attempts to show him that his use, in departing from everyday thought and talk, has left the service of understanding and become something else. She points out to the metaphysician how we actually use those words, their richness and their flexibility, drawing distinctions which cut across his and finding cases halfway between sense and something else, with the result that the path by which his thinking has travelled, in taking on the logic of classical metaphysics, is made clear to him—the connections by which he was led astray.

When philosophers use a word—‘knowledge’, ‘being’, ‘object’, ‘I’, ‘proposition’, ‘name’—and try to grasp the *essence* of the things, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language which is its original home?<sup>27</sup>

This method I consider a mode of scepticism because, in treating her patient, the grammatical therapist also uses words in an unusual or too-simple sense, much as the sceptic turns metaphysical logic against itself. In doing this her aim is not ‘to reform language’—perhaps to make it less amenable to bewitchment.<sup>28</sup> On the contrary, Wittgenstein tell us, ‘[p]hilosophy can in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it.’<sup>29</sup> Neither does she wish ‘to refine or complete the system of rules for use of our words in unheard-of ways’ to which the metaphysician has fallen captive, as though he had not got it quite right, much less to to advance another. Rather her aim is ‘to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use’;<sup>30</sup> and in so far as she can be said in doing this ‘to establish an order in our knowledge of the use of language’,<sup>31</sup> drawing unusual distinctions of her own, she does so not in opposition to ordinary thought and talk but ‘with a particular end in view’—namely, that the metaphysician should be jarred out

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., I.116.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., I.132.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., I.124.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., I.116.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., I.132

of the narrow ambit of his thinking and come thereby to see that he had wandered too far from good sense.<sup>32</sup>

Like classical scepticism, grammatical therapy avoids the hermetic logic of metaphysical thinking but stands in risk of falling into error of renunciation and recapitulation through being applied to vigorously. It avoids the hermetic logic of metaphysical thinking much as genealogical narrative and deliberate silence do, by turning from argument to the words in which it is expressed; save that where those rely on posing another authority against argument, grammatical therapy, by challenging the metaphysical thinker to clarify his own use of language, reveals that the logic of metaphysical thinking draws its authority not from understanding but from something else. The manner in which grammatical therapy might fall into error we will take up below.

As for the metaphysical thinker, he has little recourse against sceptical critique. He might hope to best the critic who employs the method of classical scepticism by advancing arguments the force of which she cannot match; but if she is at all practiced in argument he is unlikely to succeed. For the force of metaphysical thinking derives, as we saw in Chapter 3, from its logic; and by drawing on the same logic, but changing the peculiarities of its expression, locating the one measure here rather than there, for instance, she should be able to match him without much difficulty.

In response to the critic who takes up grammatical therapy against him, the metaphysician may reply that how language is ordinarily used is not his concern, pointing to the technical vocabularies used by other expert cultures in defence of his own. But this response misses the mark. It is true that the grammatical therapist can have no objection to refining our language for practical purposes, because the things with which he have to deal, or the feelings to express, or whatever, ask or admit of more precision in one context than we are accustomed to use in most. In this language is not made to depart from the ambit of understanding but rather pressed more fully into its service. But the problem with

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, I.132

the metaphysical use of words is not simply that they are used in an unusual *manner*, as for instance ‘negligence’ is used in a much more specific way by the jurist than is ordinary. It is rather that the metaphysical use of words portends to be but in fact departs from the act of speech in which words serve to direct our attention in one way or another, becoming something else—a sort of music perhaps, or poetry—by which we are moved along some way by which not understanding but something else is obtained. But then what the metaphysician must do to fend off grammatical therapy is to show that his use of words is demanded by a more sensitive and skilful understanding of things, as he claims; and this, so far as our analysis is correct, he cannot do.

#### SECTION 4.4

##### *Two errors of excess*

Antimetaphysical critique is especially susceptible to two errors of excess: the error of renunciation and recapitulation, which we discussed above, and what we might call the anti-intellectual error. The first error typically comes about when a method of antimetaphysical critique, through being too enthusiastically adopted, ceases to be medicine and becomes rather a mode of life; sceptical critique is especially vulnerable to going astray in this manner. The second occurs where a method is too vigorously applied, and along with the logic of classical metaphysics the critic casts out also what in Chapter 2 I called critical metaphysics, reducing philosophy to a purely negative therapeutic of metaphysical assumptions and aspirations.

1 *Renunciation and recapitulation in Sextus Empiricus.* Scepticism, Sextus Empiricus tells the reader of his *Outlines of Scepticism*, arises from the project of achieving tranquillity (ἀταραξία) by hitting upon a measure of sure and certain knowledge.

Men of talent, troubled by the anomaly in things and puzzled as to which of them they should rather assent to, came to investigate what in things is true and what is false, thinking that by deciding these issues they would become

tranquil.<sup>33</sup>

More precisely, it arises from the failure of this project. The sceptic, his inquiry frustrated by the equipollence (ἰσοσθένεια) of evidence to be brought for and against any claim to have definitively sorted what is true from what is false, comes despite his initial inclinations to suspension of judgement (ἐποχή) and thence, fortuitously, to the tranquility he failed to find through inquiry.<sup>34</sup> His hope to definitively order his opinions frustrated, he finds the tranquillity he sought to achieve thereby in forsaking matters of opinion altogether.

Initially, suspension and tranquillity arise fortuitously from the failure of the sceptic's inquiry into what is true and false in things. Sextus Empiricus describes the accidental way by which 'men of talent' become sceptics by analogy to the painter Apelles.

They say that he was painting a horse and wanted to represent in his picture the lather on the horse's mouth; but he was so unsuccessful that he gave up, took the sponge on which he had been wiping off the colours from his brush, and flung it at the picture. And when it hit the picture, it produced a representation of the horse's lather.<sup>35</sup>

Afterwards, having discovered the outcome of suspension of judgement and possessed of the ability to induce the frustration by which it arises, the sceptic persists in his good fortune. For his own part, he suspends judgement in matters of opinion and practises 'moderation of feeling in matters forced upon us';<sup>36</sup> and in relation to others he continues to apply his sponge,

set[ting] out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all ... by which, because of the equipollence in the opposed objects and

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<sup>33</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, I.12.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, I.26.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, I.28.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, I.30

accounts, we come first to suspension of judgement and afterwards to tranquility.<sup>37</sup>

Going on in this way, the sceptic is not aimless. He continues, ‘attending to what is apparent, [to] live in accordance with everyday observances (βιωτική τήρησις) [...] guidance by nature, necessitation by feelings, handing down of laws and customs, and teaching of kinds of expertise’; which is to say, in accordance with his capacity ‘of perceiving and thinking’, impulses such as hunger and thirst, and the traditions and teachings by which are hand down to him such ordinary skill in getting along as his people, through their own attention and impulses, have accumulated. For although he abjures matters of opinion, setting aside the ‘standards adopted [by others] to provide conviction about the reality or unreality of something’, it is not open to him ‘to be utterly inactive’; neither can he set aside the ordinary ‘standards of action’ that arise from ‘what is apparent’. For although the sceptic has no opinion whether, for instance, honey ‘is actually sweet’, that ‘honey sweetens’ has no less force for him than for anyone else; ‘for [appearances] depend on passive and unwilled feelings and are not open to investigation’.<sup>38</sup>

This reliance naturally raises the question of where to draw the line between appearances and everyday observances on the one hand and matters of opinion on the other. Two answers have received vigorous defence over the course of the philosophical tradition. The first holds that all belief whatsoever falls under matters of opinion, and the second constrains matters of opinion to beliefs about how things actually are, as opposed to how they seem, and those held dogmatically—held more firmly, that is, than the shifting observances that arise from nature, feeling, custom, and craft.<sup>39</sup>

These two interpretations belong to two different projects, what we might call strong

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., I.8

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., I.19–24.

<sup>39</sup> In the recent literature, Myles Burnyeat has defended the first view and Michael Frede the second. See Miles Burnyeat, ‘Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?’ and ‘The Sceptic in His Place and Time’, and Michael Frede, ‘The Sceptic’s Beliefs’ and ‘Stoics and Sceptics on Clear and Distinct Ideas’. These essays can be found in Miles Burnyeat and Michael Frede, *The Original Sceptics*.

and weak scepticism. The first project I see as a form of classical metaphysics and consider to have fallen into the error of recapitulating what it would renounce. The second project does not fall into this error; it functions as a straightforward antimetaphysical therapy along the lines sketched in the preceding section. In my view the project defined in the *Outlines of Scepticism* is one of strong scepticism; and in what follows I will discuss why the project of weak scepticism is not problematic and how the scepticism of Sextus Empiricus falls back into metaphysical thinking.

Weak scepticism is a method of argumentation by which thinking is brought back from metaphysical excess and made sound. It consists in setting opinions against one another, not so as to bring all commitment to an end, but out of the salutary insight that the attempt to secure tranquillity by hitting on a fixed and incontestable measure, contrary to its promise, actually distracts us from the work of acquiring such tranquillity as arises through the ordinary cultivation of sensitivity and skill, the sort that comes by nature and feeling, is passed on in custom, and can be acquired through disciplined practice of a craft.

Scepticism of this sort adopts a division between seeming and being, between everyday observances and matters of opinions, but understands it in a manner that is neither profound nor invidious. The sceptic begins from the dividing line of metaphysical ontology only so as to say, first, that being is of no interest, matters of opinion coming to no end, and, second, that seeming is not as bad as the men of talent originally thought. He adopts it not as an ontological presumption but simply as an instrument, already fashioned well enough to his purpose by the metaphysical thinker, for directing attention back to the human-sized level of focus by which we might see our way clear to whatever tranquillity is open to us.

The sceptic's injunction, that we hold to appearances and everyday observances, is likewise straightforward and sensible. For it amounts, on this interpretation, merely to a piece of good advice: about matters of opinion that do not bear on any practical concerns, fall silent; and otherwise attend to what shows up, and to whatever part of nature or need, custom or craft, fits you to respond to it. Someone who follows this advice, to be sure, will

not cease to find things in some measure anomalous; but although she will not come upon a sure and certain law by which to bring them to order, nor will she desire it, she will at least achieve such sensitivity and skill in navigating life as can demonstrably be had in the absence of such a fixed star or infallible chart.

So much, then, for weak scepticism. Strong scepticism differs from it in two respects: first, that it sets aside all belief against which arguments of equal force can be raised, and, second, that much more than weak scepticism, which remains in most respects a method for reigning in intellectual error, strong scepticism occurs rather as a form of life. We might say in this connection that the strong sceptical critic has taken her antimetaphysical medicine in too strong a dose; so that, where the weak sceptic may with plain good sense contrast the intellectual error he sets aside with the fitness to be obtained by usual means, the strong sceptic seems rather to have been unfit by her medicine. Consider in this connection the famous anecdote about Pyrrho, told by Antigonus of Carystus and reported by Diogenes Laertius, that on seeing his teacher Anaxarchus lying in a ditch he passed him by as if no one were there—and was later praised by the poor fellow for doing so!<sup>40</sup>

This extreme project naturally gives rise to the question: Why suspend judgement on *all* matters of opinion, understanding this phrase now to name not only metaphysical questions, as to the proper unity and order of things, but any belief at all the truth of which may be disputed, for and against, by arguments of equal strength? For surely this is all or nearly all of our beliefs, if the force which the sceptical arguments advanced in Descartes' *Meditations* are by so many received is in any way indicative. And the answer must be: for tranquillity, that all beliefs are liable to disrupt tranquillity and none to secure it unshakeably.

But then we seem to have returned to metaphysical thinking, which debases whatever is various and contestable and seeks to draw our beliefs, values, and actions under the sway of a single measure which it would have be fixed and inconstestable; and the sceptic, seeking

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<sup>40</sup> Diogenes, *Lives*, 9.62, in *Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson, 285.

such a measure by which tranquillity might be secured, has renounced that project only to take up tranquillity as such a measure directly. For when we ask why it should be, as Sextus Empiricus claims, that the person is ‘happy [εὐδαίμων] who lives to the end without perturbation and, as Timon said, existing in a state of quietness and calm’, it would seem that only one of two answers may be given:<sup>41</sup>

- (1) the sceptic has recapitulated what she claims to renounce, taking up tranquility as a metaphysical measure by which her beliefs, values, and conduct may be determined;  
or
- (2) tranquility arises from her everyday observances by nature and as a demand of feeling, as the highest customary virtue, as the lesson of all craft, or whatever.

But the second possibility seems unlikely. For although I have known among monks and nuns those who value calm and quiet first among all things, and others who believe that they should, most of us neither desire to make tranquillity our rule nor flourish when it is imposed on us; but we rather delight in some amount of challenge, contention, and uncertainty. Thus it would seem that while some few might be able to be strong sceptics in this way, for most us neither nature nor feeling, still less custom or craft, incline us to become so; and strong scepticism, in so far as it is meant for general application, comes after all to be another form of the very thing it would renounce.

2     *The anti-intellectual error in Ludwig Wittgenstein.* Grammatical therapy is also liable to fall into another error of excess, which I call the error of anti-intellectualism. As with classical scepticism, this error is most likely to occur where grammatical therapy ceases to be regarded as a method of antimetaphysical critique and is taken up rather as a mode of life or a positive intellectual project. For the standard of everyday language to which it would hold metaphysical thinking then becomes, if not a metaphysical measure, at least a strong conservative force; so that it would seem that the grammatical therapist would cure

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<sup>41</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Ethicists*, 141.

us not only of the logic of classical metaphysics but also of the critical turn of mind on which it is based, which in Chapter 2 I called critical metaphysics—the turn which would have us push past the initial and ordinary, not so as to depart from them, but in the hope of seeing more of, and seeing more clearly, what is already before us.

Whether Wittgenstein indeed thought that philosophy should be reduced to a purely negative therapeutic of metaphysical thinking is not clear. This seems to be his position in his early work, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, in which he writes:

The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science—i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy—and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions.<sup>42</sup>

It also seems to be his considered view. For in his fragmented final work, the *Philosophical Investigations*, we also see the role of philosophy strictly limited:

Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it.

For it cannot give it any foundation either.

It leaves everything as it is.<sup>43</sup>

And again, in the manuscript published as *The Big Typescript*, he writes:

All my reflections could be expressed in a much more straightforward way than I did in the past. In philosophy there is no need to use new words; the old familiar words of the language are quite sufficient.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.53.

<sup>43</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, I.124.

<sup>44</sup> Cited in Anthony Kenny, *The Wittgenstein Reader*, 54.

But then again it is possible that Wittgenstein intended only that what we call philosophy should come to no more than this, and not that there was no place for thinking which, while not being scientific, nevertheless took up a critical relation to common sense.

Fortunately we need not decide. It is enough to observe that if we go astray in departing too far from ordinary understanding, we should surely be in error also to hold our 'old familiar words' to be in all respects 'quite sufficient'. For there is a certain value in talking past our habitual vision of things, and of upsetting our familiar descriptions, not only to the work of scientific inquiry and governmental deliberation, much less that we might arrive in this way at some metaphysical measure, but that we might come to think and to speak with greater sensitivity and skill, and perhaps also to see things more clearly. I cannot say that Wittgenstein would not agree with this; he also spoke, as we saw in the previous section, of bringing the metaphysical thinker to see what is nearest and most familiar, and so like a pair of glasses, often forgotten and almost entirely out of view. But his thinking nevertheless poses a danger, that in striving too mightily restrain the errors of thought we act as well to frustrate the hope I associate with the best philosophy, the hope which the metaphysician rightly has but wrongly pursues, that thinking might improve life in some way more substantial than curing us of its transgressions against the ordinary.

# 5

## After metaphysics

*Introduction.—The turn to science and government.—The conversational tradition in philosophy.—Περὶ πάντα διαλεκτικωτέρους.—An example from moral philosophy.*

### SECTION 5.1

#### *Introduction*

I think of philosophy as a cultural project and an ameliorative practice.<sup>1</sup> I think a modest exercise of thought and talk that systematically and imaginatively problematizes the topics that matter to us serves, as Samuel Johnson put it, to ‘clear the mind of cant’ and to nurture besides some skill in working around habitual simplicities to the sort of sensitive engagement with complexity which is the better part of discriminate judgement and the beginning of excellence in intellectual craft—of craft which owns its simplicities.

Thus enamoured I am with the Eleatic Stranger of Plato’s *Statesman* in thinking that so far as concerns the philosopher

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Cultural’ as I use the word here should be read in the Latin sense as pertaining to cultivating, caring for, tending, dwelling in, inhabiting, which can still be found in our word ‘agriculture’. I take this sense to include the common use of the word to name the cultivating and cultivated activity of a place or group, but it is not belonging to a place or group that I have in mind when I describe philosophy as cultural.

to find the solution to the problem proposed in the easiest and quickest way possible ought to be only a secondary preoccupation and not a primary goal, if we are to believe reason, which orders us to accord our esteem and the first rank to the method itself.<sup>2</sup>

I like the idea that we should identify the philosopher not, or at least not only, by his attention to a set of problems but primarily by the skill with which he plies the intellectual craft which in the previous paragraph I called ‘problematization’—by which I mean both the activity of thinking and talking about any subject in terms of more and more apt distinctions and, more generally, the process of making and breaking intellectual problems which accompanies changes in the distinctions we take most seriously.

There was a time when such an understanding of the philosopher was more common, and with it the idea that philosophy was primarily an ameliorative art, a τέχνη βίου or craft of life, and not a collection of problems or a body of knowledge—a rather long stretch of time from Plato through the Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup> I think attempting to make such a conception more accessible again, and to situate it among some of its more familiar alternatives, might be of some interest, not least as it serves to enlarge the present sphere of philosophical activity and to invite reflection on its practice and its critics. This concluding chapter is a modest contribution to that end.

In what follows, I first outline how the philosophical tradition has responded to the past century or two of antimetaphysical critique, by turning to science and government. Then I discuss how it might have returned to what I will call the conversational tradition in philosophy. I do not suggest that conversational philosophy is of greater value than scientific and governmental philosophy, much less that it should supplant them; I merely present it

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<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Statesman*, 286d. This is Pierre Hadot’s elegant translation in *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 74.

<sup>3</sup> Not all philosophers of that period conceived of their activities thus, but many if not most of them seem to have done so. See Martha Nussbaum’s discussion of the medical analogy in Hellenistic ethics, *The Therapy of Desire*, Pierre Hadot’s *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, Alexander Nehamas’s *The Art of Living*, and the later work of Michel Foucault for four different approaches to this topic.

as one possible project of philosophy, the project of which I am most fond.

## SECTION 5.2

### *The turn to science and government*

Since at least Nietzsche in Europe and Wittgenstein in the English-speaking world, the idea of metaphysical thinking and the sense that it is not worth pursuing have become common, and the antimetaphysical medicines of those and other therapeutic thinkers, once startling and potent, have been made insipid by success. Few philosophers have not now heard of ‘the end of philosophy’—and gone cheerfully on thinking out of the philosophical tradition, having the happy good sense to set ‘philosophy’ as another name for metaphysics apart from philosophy as a tradition the wealth of which stands above its passing projects, figures, fashions, et cetera.

Many such postmetaphysical philosophers have turned to science or government.<sup>4</sup> These thinkers may still write with insight and interest of the diverse metaphysical systems that populate philosophy’s past, and most draw the bulk of their images, ideas, and idioms from those systems. But their primary concern is no longer to further the metaphysical projects from which that inheritance derives but rather to turn that inheritance to the work of understanding things and steering people. In the English-speaking academy, for instance, projects of self- and social-fashioning drawing on the philosophical tradition now occupy large areas of the humanities and social sciences, often under the misnomer ‘continental philosophy’; and in the field of philosophy proper, the turn to science, although less complete, is increasingly evident in the dearth of historical scholarship and the growth of cognitive science, philosophy of mind, and what Patricia Churchland has called neurophilosophy.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> By ‘science’ and ‘government’ I mean disciplined inquiry into things and disciplined management of persons. Science, on my plain understanding, is simply the unusually careful and collaborative exercise of our usual means of looking into and describing what is firm and regular in things. It differs in rigour but not in kind from what we already do in everyday life. And ‘government’ I use in preference to the word ‘politics’, which elides its private dimension, to name the work of steering persons and groups, of self- and social-fashioning.

<sup>5</sup> Although I do not entirely share her enthusiasm, I believe that Churchland is correct when she writes that

About science and government themselves I have little to say other than that both have clearly shown themselves to be genuine and fruitful alternatives to metaphysical thinking. As for philosophy's turn to these projects, while I suspect that the remnants of the metaphysical tradition are now of little value to scientific inquiry and governmental deliberation, I do not doubt that the practice of taking a broad, unifying view which that tradition cultivated is sometimes fruitful when directed to them, and that this turn has largely been for the best. Like Jürgen Habermas I agree that a natural role for postmetaphysical philosophy should be to mediate or interpret between common sense and our various expert cultures. For like common sense,

philosophy moves within the vicinity of the lifeworld; its relation to the totality of this receding horizon of everyday knowledge is similar to that of common sense. And yet, through the subversive power of reflection and of illuminating, critical, and dissecting analysis, philosophy is completely opposed to common sense. By virtue of this intimate yet fractured relation to the lifeworld, philosophy is also well suited for the role of this side of the scientific system—for the role of an interpreter mediating between the expert cultures of science, technology, law, and morality on the one hand, and everyday communicative practices on the other hand, and indeed in a manner similar to that in which literary and art criticism mediate between art and life.<sup>6</sup>

I believe that Richard Rorty, another noted critic of metaphysics, also had this role in mind when he urged us to think of philosophy as ‘what is left over after one has bracketed both common sense and all the various expert cultures’<sup>7</sup> and suggested that, having set the metaphysical aspiration to out-think life aside, we might come to see the philosopher merely as

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students are increasingly ‘signing up and eagerly attacking philosophy’s Big Problems—such as the nature of consciousness, free will, and the self—in full recognition that neuroscientific data are indispensable to making progress’. See Patricia Churchland, *Brain-Wise*, vii.

<sup>6</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, 38–39.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 125.

someone who is good at ‘taking a view of a large stretch of territory from a considerable distance’.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, in any case, something like this understanding of philosophy characterizes the best contemporary work among philosophers who aim to help us understand where we are and to imagine who and where we might be, the sort of work exemplified by science-minded philosophers like Daniel Dennett and governmental philosophers like Charles Taylor and Martha Nussbaum—work in which it is not so much the remnants of metaphysics that are set to scientific and governmental problems, although each of these thinkers has addressed the influence of that tradition, as the skill for gathering much together and taking a broad view which metaphysical thinking also drew on and developed.

In another work, I should like to discuss how the philosophical tradition has been changed by its turn to science and government, so as to place its current aspirations and omissions in perspective. In this concluding chapter, however, I have a more modest goal. I want, having brought philosophy’s turn to science and government into view, to discuss instead a turn which it might also have made, a return to what in Chapter 2 I called critical metaphysics and identified as the uncomplicated origin of what later became the unworkable logic of classical metaphysical thinking—to the conversational tradition in philosophy.

### SECTION 5.3

#### *The conversational tradition in philosophy*

As I see it, the possibilities of the early philosophical tradition are not exhausted by metaphysics, science, and government; but alongside these projects runs another which has as its aim neither understanding of things nor management of persons, still less the ambition to bring all contention to an end, but to cultivate a general athleticism of the spirit.

This other project, which I would call conversational, seems to me most alive in the open-ended early dialogues of Plato. In those dialogues—and note the ordinariness and even

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, 96.

intimacy of their topics: piety, moderation, justice, beauty, lying, courage, friendship<sup>9</sup>—Socrates and his friends attempt to think past the pieties of their age and come in the result not to knowledge or a scheme of life but rather to an impasse (ἀπορία), which is to say, to an honest measure of confusion and a fuller appreciation of complexity. In this we, who do not like an impasse, may want to say that these are tentative or unsuccessful dialogues, and prefer Plato's later dialogues. But I would rather say that in coming to an impasse Socrates and his friends do succeed in thinking past their pieties, and indeed that they had made the attempt not after all to establish new deities, as the Athenians believed,<sup>10</sup> but simply that they might become better men thereby, through having more clearly seen the complexity of their lives.

This tradition of conversation, while no longer closely associated with philosophy, persists in the idea of liberal education. This is the idea which the literary critic Harold Bloom defends when he complains of the colonization of departments of literature by 'resentniks', his word for scholars more interested in self- and social-fashioning than in steeping themselves in books, and which the philosopher Richard Rorty advocates when he speaks against the rise of 'scientism' in departments of philosophy. It is the idea that scholarship should aim in the first place neither to understand things nor to manage persons but to free us from the accidents of character, custom, and circumstance by enriching the range and delicacy of our thought and talk. And indeed Richard Rorty is not far from the early Socratic dialogues as I understand them when he writes of philosophy in this liberal tradition, as a practice of freedom, that its point

is not to find what anything is 'really' like [in the ambitious sense of 'really' presumed by metaphysical thinking], but to help us grow up—to make us happier, freer, and more flexible. The maturation of our concepts, and the increasing

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<sup>9</sup> See respectively the *Euthyphro*, *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Hippias Major*, *Hippias Minor*, *Laches*, and *Lysis*.

<sup>10</sup> In Plato's *Apology*, the account of Socrates' trial and death, the philosopher was accused of corrupting the youth, refusing obedience to the gods, and creating new deities.

richness of our conceptual repertoire, constitute cultural progress.<sup>11</sup>

As I read the philosophical tradition, classical metaphysics, which can be seen already in the later dialogues of Plato and came eventually to lay its hand over much of what came afterwards, both builds on and obscures this earlier conversational tradition. I have already suggested, in Chapter 2, that classical metaphysics has as its origin the relatively uncomplicated intellectual practice of thinking and talking past the initial and the ordinary, or what I called critical metaphysics. My claim, in that chapter, was that classical metaphysics arose from adding to bare critical thinking, which had as its aim simply to see more and other things, and so perhaps to see things more clearly, the further presumption that beyond things—as φυσικά or things which show up and change—is a fixed and incontestable measure by which their proper unity and order might be definitively revealed. Perhaps this claim would not bear up against a greater knowledge of philosophical history than my own, and I must admit that I am given more to using history to illuminate the relationships among ideas than to fidelity; but even so I believe that the three-stage trajectory implicit to my reading of philosophical history in this essay roughly describes its actual course: that classical metaphysics displaced the conversational tradition and was in turn displaced by scientific inquiry and governmental deliberation.

This trajectory, on my reading, not only saw the conversational tradition displaced by classical metaphysics but also accomplished the expulsion of that tradition from contemporary philosophy. On the simplest account, the conversational tradition was dismissed along with classical metaphysics when philosophy turned to science and government. Both its association with classical metaphysics, which had long made of impiety a handmaiden to the higher piety of the metaphysical thinker, and its open-ended and speculative nature led to it being caught up in the later nineteenth and twentieth century retreat from classical metaphysics. Where it was not dismissed as belonging to classical metaphysics, it suffered

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 124.

the loss of that tradition, which at least had the actual if not the intended consequence of preserving a good measure of the aporetic speculation from which it had begun; whereas science and government, although also animated by critical thought, by their nature place certain limits on its impiety, holding thinking more closely to what Martin Heidegger once called the ‘practical and ideological questions demanded by the day’.<sup>12</sup>

But the expulsion was perhaps more forceful still. For the turn to science and government was, although a turn away from the logic of classical metaphysics, also in a certain sense a continuation of its conception of the nature, aims, and authority of intellectual activity. When classical metaphysics added to critical conversation the presumption that it should not come, as it usually does, to an ameliorative impasse but lead rather to an authority which cannot rightly be regarded with impiety, it also cast out the idea that the philosopher should attempt to fit herself and her friends to face the complexity underlying the many various and contestable ‘gods’ of everyday life. In place of that idea of the philosopher, as a carrier of culture, the metaphysical tradition taught that the philosopher should aspire rather to step beyond culture and impose on himself and his neighbours therefrom a peace under which such fitness would no longer have a useful place, would indeed be mere sophistry. In this way philosophy ceased in the main to understand itself as a practice of cultivation in the sense Richard Rorty still celebrates and became instead a discipline by which knowledge was acquired and our characters and conduct might be legislated and secured; which discipline, in a form both more modest and more fruitful, but also therefore more pervasive, remains in scientific and governmental thinking.

Perhaps the idea of liberal education will again take hold of philosophers, and the conversational tradition come to prominence. I would like to see this happen. But it seems to me more likely that, as with historical scholarship, the alliance with science and government by which the philosophical tradition was able to break from the logic of classical metaphysics will continue for some time yet to cast a shadow over any project of thinking

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<sup>12</sup> This phrase occurs in Heidegger’s 1966 interview with *Der Spiegel*, ‘Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten’.

which does not aspire to expert knowledge or social control; and merely critical conversation on the pieties and possibilities of human life will continue to be seen as a matter more suited to the coffeeshop than the seminar. In truth this is not altogether to be regretted, each thing having its place; and yet I wish to give encourage to those philosophers who feel that in social and spiritual matters muddling along with honesty, kindness, and courage is about the best we can manage—that it is almost always possible and almost always good enough and worth defending against its alternatives—and so would rather not pretend to the sanction of scientific inquiry on matters which admit only searching and unsettled intelligence or aspire to the gravity of such expert cultures as politics, morality, and law where uncomplicated muddling seems the best manner of government to hoped for. For I have liked their work best. What remains of this chapter has this encouragement as its aim.

#### SECTION 5.4

##### Περὶ πάντα διαλεκτικωτέροις

We may better understand what is meant by a conversational method in philosophy by returning to the passage from Plato's *Statesman* with which the chapter opened. In that passage, the Eleatic Stranger advises the philosopher to take as her foremost concern the cultivation of philosophical method, giving only secondary regard to the resolution of her questions. As it turns out, the immediate point of this passage—it continues:

and indeed, concerning inquiry, we should rather be eager to accept a long discourse than irritated, should it make him who hears it more skilled at inquiry (τὸν ἀκούσαντα εὐρετικώτερον ἀπεργάζηται), and likewise again for one which is short<sup>13</sup>

—is not so sweeping. It is to ward off accusation of tediousness that the Stranger admits his methodological digression, and his point is plainly that the philosopher ought to respect

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<sup>13</sup> Plato, *Statesman*, 286e.\*

the dictates of his method of inquiry as to the length of his discourse over desire for brevity or fitness according to some other standard.<sup>14</sup>

Despite his immediate concern for brevity, however, I think we are right to read the Stranger as urging the would-be philosopher not only to place method over expediency in matters of length but also to esteem the cultivation of method over the resolution of problems generally. For whatever the Stranger's immediate motive, the upshot of his methodological digression at 285c–287b is to identify cultivation as the central concern of philosophical conversation. We see this adumbrated in the passage just quoted, where the Stranger identifies methodical inquiry as a desirable measure of discourse not, contrary to what one might expect, in terms of superior treatment of its subjects but instead as it makes us 'more skilled at inquiry'. More clearly still it appears from the analogy to pupils learning their letters with which the digression begins.

**Stranger:** Suppose we were asked the following question about a group of pupils learning their letters: 'When a pupil is asked of what letters some word or other [is] composed, is the question asked for the sake of the one particular word before him or rather to make him more learned about all words in the lesson?'

**Younger Socrates:** Clearly to make him more learned about them all.

**Str.:** And how about our investigation of the statesman? Has it been undertaken for the sake of this particular subject or rather to make us more conversant on all subjects (περὶ πάντα διαλεκτικωτέροις)?

**Soc.:** Clearly this also is done with a view to them all.<sup>15</sup>

For Plato's Eleatic Stranger, the great aim of philosophical conversation seems to be the

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<sup>14</sup> Plato, *Statesman*, 286b–c.\*

<sup>15</sup> Plato, *Statesman*, 285c–d. Revised from H.N. Fowler et al., trans., *Plato in Twelve Volumes*.

cultivation of skill at philosophical conversation—that we be made by it ‘περὶ πάντα διαλεκτικωτέροις’.<sup>16</sup> My own notion of philosophical method begins from this understanding.

Two questions arise from this beginning: ‘How should we understand the Stranger’s methodological point, that the practice of philosophical conversation is its own end?’ and ‘What might it mean to become περὶ πάντα διαλεκτικωτέροις?’ I address each in turn.

I take the *Statesman*’s emphasis on the cultivation of method to mean in the first place that, were one to choose between the most fit and expedient thoughts on the subjects of the moment and skill at thinking sufficient to come up with such thoughts as each moment required, the latter should be preferred. (No intellectual fish exposed to the light of reason looks better than the net for long.) But more than that, and primarily, I understand the priority which the Stranger gives to method to indicate that the skilful relation to thought and talk concomitant with its long-standing exercise is itself to be desired, not only as it proves useful in arriving at fit and expedient thoughts but as a cultural attainment in its own right. What I have in mind in saying that philosophical conversability might be understood as a cultural good is not the Aristotelian point, although true, that contemplation is an activity without some measure of which a life might be said to be lacking. The point I take from the *Statesman* is rather that a knack for philosophical conversation might be desirable not only as excellence in thinking is of more lasting value than currently excellent thoughts, nor simply that philosophical inquiry is delightful or deeply human, but also and most of all that philosophical inquiry, like athletic activity, is broadly ameliorative—that it constitutes and conduces to overall human fitness. This answers the question of what I make of the Stranger’s methodological point. Philosophy is a form of fitness.

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<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that, when the Eleatic Stranger says that his foremost concern is not the particular subject of his inquiry but the method of thought and talk by which it is carried out, he is speaking not only of his discussion on this particular occasion but of such discussion in general. The Stranger says as much in the passage immediately preceding this analogy, at 285c, namely, that his discussion ‘concerns the actual objects of our inquiry and the conduct of such discussions in general’ (περὶ αὐτῶν τε τῶν ζητουμένων καὶ περὶ πάσης τῆς ἐν τοῖς τοιοῖσδε λόγοις διατριβῆς).

As for what it might be to realise the ameliorative promise of conversational philosophy, to be *περὶ πάντα διαλεκτικωτέροις*, I think an analogy is best. As the shipwright of a race of sailors is more at ease than others in most any craft into which he sets foot, so the philosopher steps lightly and surely through what intellectual vessels pass his way. For he sees them more clearly than others do, that is, in more of their relations and complexities; is better able to appreciate their deficiencies in advance, and to judge what is excellent in the way of handling them; and benefits besides from the confidence of knowing himself equal to repairing them should the need arise, and doubly so, as that confidence permits him also the grace of not insisting on improvements where what serves for customary usage might pass as well—the easy restfulness, in short, that long-tested capacity for action brings.

This, then, is my general idea; and as to the specific way in which conversational philosophy proceeds I should say that it has three elements: a basis, a method, and an accomplishment. The basis of conversational philosophy, as with classical metaphysics, is that critical habit of mind which in Chapter 2 I called critical metaphysics; which is to say that it begins from a will to push past what things initially and ordinarily show up, not to arrive elsewhere, but so as to see more and other of them, and so perhaps to see more clearly. Its method is what the Eleatic Stranger calls in the passage discussed above an ‘ability to divide by classes’ (*κατ’ εἶδη δυνατὸν [...] διαιεῖν*); and excellence in it, as Plato tells us in the *Phaedrus*—where he also tells us that division is one of two modes of the philosophical method, the other being to bring together particular things under a general idea<sup>17</sup>—consists in being ‘able to divide things into classes where the natural joints are, and not to try, hacking like a bad butcher, to break even one part’.<sup>18</sup> To what Plato has said I would add only, what the method in any cases implies, that the conversational tradition, resting on a critical base, applies this method in the manner which I previously called problematization, which is to say, so as to take issue with our habitual classifications, and

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<sup>17</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 265d.

<sup>18</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 265e.\*

thus to come to a many-sided view of them and a surer sense of how best, in each case and for whatever ends, to pick out the most appropriate joints.

As for the accomplishment at which the conversational tradition in philosophy is directed, that we become by it *περὶ πάντα διαλεκτικωτέροις*, I should like to say that it is wisdom, that is, *σοφία*, which for the Greeks meant also and originally skillfulness, and that its accomplishment has three stages. In its first stage conversational philosophy opens to us something of a free relation to the confines of character, custom, and circumstance, by which we should otherwise be more tightly bound. It does this not in any direct manner but simply in the course of problematizing the initial and the ordinary, which is to say, by the persistent and wide-flung impiety of its basis and its method. The second stage of conversational philosophy, which again is not achieved through any one act or idea but by the continual practice of the method, is intellectual sensitivity, that the conversationalist comes in time to have, in addition to freedom of mind, a richer stock of distinctions with which to attend to and discuss whatever matters catch his interest. Finally, in its maturity, conversational philosophy brings us not only sensitivity but also skillfulness in thought and talk, by which I mean above all that quality of mind by which ones hits most often upon what distinctions in each case and for whatever purpose are sensible and important—the quality which Aristotle praised at the outset of his *Nicomachean Ethics* when he wrote that:

precision is not to be sought alike in all discussions, no more than in the practice of all crafts [...] but it is proper to one having been educated to seek just such a measure of precision in each sort as its nature admits.<sup>19</sup>

## SECTION 5.5

### *An example from moral philosophy.*

I would like to conclude with an example of the conversational method in respect of moral philosophy. To begin with, consider that each person stands in three relations: to the world,

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<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b.\*

to others, and to herself. I call these her natural, social, and spiritual relations; and how she gets along in the world, with others, and with herself I call her culture. From these relations arise four distinct ethical discourses: the ethic of autonomy, which thinks in terms of the rights and duties of the individual; the ethic of utility, which thinks in terms of the welfare of the social order; the ethic of divinity, which thinks in terms of values given or revealed by the human situation in the cosmos, ecosystem, or whatever; and the ethic of virtue, which thinks in terms of excellence with respect to the balance a person habitually achieves among her natural, social, and spiritual relations, that is, to her personal culture or character.

Each of these ethical discourses can be taken up as presuming or providing the fundamental measure of a system of classical metaphysics. Take the ethic of virtue, for instance. The moral thinker might become also a metaphysical thinker by making the sage, the ideal human, the saviour, the god, or whatever a fixed and incontestable ideal against which to measure his own and others' beliefs, values, and practices. When asked what is known or knowable, for instance, what is worth attending to and cherishing, and what sort of person to be and life to lead, he might answer according to the logic of classical metaphysics, asking in each case who the sage or whatever is, how her identity and character might be discovered, and in what manner we might reliably come to take after her model. And so it goes for the other discourses as well.

But each of these discourses could also be understood simply as poles within an open and unsettled space of moral deliberation, in the manner of the conversational tradition. Then the benefit of learning each discourse would have little to do with the logic of classical metaphysics, which proposes to legislate and to secure, but rather be only that doing so wins us an idiom for each of the major interests that are at stake in human life—our relation to things, others, ourselves, and how we balance the competing claims each makes on us—and so facilitates greater clarity in thinking and talking about moral life, and greatly likelihood that we shall see each claim in proportion to the rest.

Notice that in this conversational approach is nothing that might be called science or government. The student of moral conversation does not acquire expert knowledge as to what we do or ought to do; we are not here in the realm of moral psychology, much less of approbation and reproach. Rather she acquires a vocabulary by which what was already half-seen and mostly unspoken comes to be seen and expressed clearly. Nor, in learning these discourses, does she engage thereby in governmental deliberation. She might exercise her vocabulary in discussing hypothetical situations or social or personal issues of interest, but the aim of her conversations, if she remains within the tradition as I understand it, is not in the first place to determine a mode of life but simply that she should achieve clarity and conversability with respect to the complexities that bear on all our relations—that she should acquire a sense of proportions.

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