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Roger Scruton is the author of a number of books, including works of criticism and fiction, as well as *Modern Philosophy* (available from Penguin), *A Short History of Philosophy,* and *The Aesthetics of Music.* Formerly Professor of Aesthetics at Birkbeck College, London University, and a visiting professor at Boston University, he is well known as a critic and television and radio personality. He lives in Wiltshire, England.

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PREFACE

This book tries to make philosophy interesting; I have therefore focused on ideas which make philosophy interesting to *me.* From the academic point of view the result is far from orthodox; but my hope is that the reader will leave this book with a sense of philosophy's relevance, not just to intellectual questions, but to life in the modem world.

I refer here and there to the great philosophers, and in particular to Kant and Wittgenstein, who have been the most important influences on my thinking. But I make no attempt to give either a history or a survey of the subject. This book offers itself as a guide to the reader who is prepared to venture into philosophy, and presupposes no knowledge other than that which an intelligent person is likely to possess already.

Such a person will want to know, nevertheless, how the book relates to other productions in the field, and whether it belongs to a school of thought that is larger than itself - to some 'ology' or 'ism' which would serve to file it away in the ever-growing archive of the great unread. Suffice it to say that I came to philosophy as an undergraduate, being dissatisfied with a scientific education, and suspecting that there might be deep and serious questions to which science has no answer. But I encountered, in the academic subject of philosophy, reams of pseudo-science against which my conscience rebelled. Consequently I set out in search of a literary philosophy - not an ism but a prism, through which intellectual light would shine in many colours.

Philosophy is not the only subject that has been 'scientized' by the modern university: literature has been shrunk to 'literary theory', music has been colonized by set theory, Schenkerian analysis, and generative linguistics, and architecture has been all but abolished by engineering. Pretended science has driven honest speculation from the intellectual economy, just as bad money drives out good. This Gresham's law of the intellect operates wherever university teachers in the humanities exchange knowledge and imagination for the chimera of scientific 'research'. A philosopher should certainly make room for scholarship: but scholarship has no 'results', no explanatory 'theories', no methods of

experimentation. It is, at best, a spiritual discipline, and what will emerge from scholarship depends intimately on the soul of the person who engages in it. When academic philosophers disguise their writings as scientific reports, and cultivate the fiction of step by step advances to a theory, we can be sure that something has gone wrong with their conception of the subject. The result is tedious to the student, partly because it is born of tedium - the tedium that comes when our world is surrendered to science. If this book has a message, it is that scientific truth has human illusion as its regular by-product, and that philosophy is our surest weapon in the attempt to rescue truth from this predicament.

We should not expect philosophy to be easy; nor can it be free from technicalities. For philosophical questions arise at the periphery of ordinary thinking, when words fail, and we address the unknown with an invented discourse. For this very reason the reader of philosophy must beware of frauds, who exploit the known difficulty of the subject in order to disguise unexamined premises as hard-won conclusions. One such fraud - Michel Foucault - features in what follows; but my intention is not to create a sottiserie for our times, however much this might be needed. It is to mount a philosophical argument, which will show philosophy to be a natural extension of our interest in truth, and a therapy for our modern confusions.

I am grateful to Robin Baird-Smith, who encouraged me to write this book, and to David Wiggins, whose painstaking attempt to dissuade me from errors of logic and style absolves him from all responsibility for the many that remain. I am also grateful to Fiona Ellis and Sophie Jeffreys, the two intelligent women upon whom the book was first tried out, and who suggested vital improvements.

Malmesbury, Spring 1996

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WHY?

Philosophy — the 'love of wisdom' — can be approached in two ways: by doing it, or by studying how it has been done. The second way is familiar to university students, who find themselves confronted by the largest body of literature that has ever been devoted to a single subject. This book follows a more ancient pattern. It attempts to teach philosophy by doing it. Although I refer to the great philosophers, I give no reliable guide to their ideas. To expound their arguments in full dress would be to frustrate my chief purpose, which is to bring philosophy to life.

Life as we know it is not much like the life from which our philosophical tradition arose. Plato and Socrates were citizens of a small and intimate city state, with publicly accepted standards of virtue and taste, in which the educated class derived its outlook from a single collection of incomparable poetry, but in which all other forms of knowledge were rare and precious. The intellectual realm had not yet been divided into sovereign territories, and thought was an adventure which ranged freely in all directions, pausing in wonder before those chasms of the mind which we now know as philosophy. Unlike the great Athenians, we live in a crowded world of strangers, from which standards of taste have all but disappeared, in which the educated class retains no common culture, and in which knowledge has been parcelled out into specialisms, each asserting its monopoly interest against the waves of migrant ideas. Nothing in this world is fixed: intellectual life is one vast commotion, in which a myriad voices strive to be heard above the din. But as the quantity of communication increases, so does its quality decline; and the most important sign of this is that it is no longer acceptable to say so. To criticize popular taste is to invite the charge of élitism, and to defend distinctions of value - between the virtuous and the vicious, the beautiful and the ugly, the sacred and the profane, the true and the false - is to offend against the only value-judgement that is widely accepted, the judgement that judgements are

wrong. In such circumstances the task of philosophy must change. Philosophy, for Plato, undermined the certainties of a common culture, and led, through doubt and wonder, to a realm of truth. Now there are no certainties, and no common culture worth the name. Doubt is the refrain of popular communication, scepticism extends in all directions, and philosophy has been deprived of its traditional starting point in the faith of a stable community. A philosophy that begins in doubt assails what no-one believes, and invites us to nothing believable. However important its achievement, in describing the nature and limits of rational thinking, such a philosophy now runs the risk of being disengaged from the life surrounding it, and of forswearing the ancient promise of philosophy, which is to help us, however indirectly, to live wisely and well.

In his justly celebrated book, *The Problems of Philosophy,* Bertrand Russell described philosophy in the terms implied in his title: as a series of problems. 'Philosophy is to be studied,' he wrote, 'not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves.' But what, we might ask, is the point of such a study? Why should we, who have so few answers, devote our energies to questions which have none? For Russell, the purpose is to become a 'free intellect, an intellect that will see as God might see, without a here and now, without hopes and fears, without the trammels of customary beliefs and traditional prejudices, calmly, dispassionately, in the sole and exclusive desire of knowledge - knowledge as impersonal, as purely contemplative, as it is possible for man to attain'. It is easy to be tempted by this vision of a purely abstract study, which is at the same time an exercise of the highest freedom, and a liberation from custom, prejudice and the here and now. But the mask of rhetoric is thin, and Russell's anxiety shines through it. He knows that we must live in the here and now, and that the difficulty of doing so arises precisely because the 'customary beliefs and traditional prejudices' have lost their credibility. We are hoping, fearing creatures, and without our hopes and fears we should be loveless and unlovable. To see calmly and dispassionately is right - but only sometimes, and only in respect of some subjects. Besides, Russell published those words in 1912, when scepticism was the luxury of a ruling class, and not the daily diet of humanity.

In emphasizing abstract questions, Russell is true to the history of philosophy. The virtue of such questions is in freeing us from self-interested illusions; they set

us at a distance from the world of emotion, and enable us to see it for a moment as though we ourselves were not involved. But philosophers, like other human beings, have a tendency to represent their own way of life as the best way - perhaps as the sole way to redemption. Freeing themselves from one set of illusions, they fall prey to others, every bit as self-interested, and with the added advantage of ennobling the person who promotes them. They extol the 'dispassionate' and 'contemplative' life, since it is the life that they have chosen. They tell us, like Plato, that this life leads to a vision of a higher world, or like Spinoza, that it shows our world in another light, 'under the aspect of eternity'. They reproach us for our sensuous ways, and gently remind us, in the words of Socrates, that 'the unexamined life is not a life for a human being'. It is tempting to agree with Nietzsche, that the philosopher is not interested in truth, but only in my truth, and that the thing which masquerades as truth for him, is no more than the residue of his own emotions.

The judgement is not fair: none of Nietzsche's are. But it has a point. Philosophy in our tradition has assumed the existence of a plain, common-sense approach to things, which is the property of ordinary people, and which it is the business of philosophy to question. The result might be to subvert the normal view, as in Nietzsche himself; or it might be to question the question, as in Wittgenstein, and return us to our shared 'form of life' as the only thing we have. Nevertheless, without the background assumption, there is no normality to subvert or reaffirm, and philosophy finds it hard to begin. The peculiarity of our condition is that the assumption can no longer be made. Faced with the ruin of folkways, traditions, conventions, customs and dogmas, we can only feel a helpless tenderness for these things which have proved, like everything human, so much easier to destroy than to create. But what has philosophy to say in the face of this momentous change - the change, as some have described it, from modern scepticism, to the postmodern condition, in which all beliefs are simultaneously both doubted and affirmed, though in inverted commas?

The Czech philosopher T.G. Masaryk (1850-1937) ascribed many of the ills of the modern world to 'half-education'. It was the prominence in public life of the semi-educated, he suggested, that stirred up the hopes and destroyed the certainties of mankind. All faith was cast in doubt, all morality relativized, and all simple contentment destroyed, by the sarcastic criticism of those who could see just so far as to question the foundations of social order, but not so far as to uphold them.

Masaryk's complaint, like Russell's declaration of faith in abstract thought, belongs to another world - a world that was shortly to disappear in the turmoil of the Great War, from which Masaryk emerged as President of the newly formed state of Czechoslovakia. Nevertheless, it has a deep relevance for us, whose world has been rotted by scepticism, and who wish to know how to proceed, when no one offers guidance save those who are mocked for doing so. If half-education undermines our certainties, is there a whole education that restores them? Or does nothing remain at the end of all our thinking, save a handful of dust?

In this book I try to show what philosophy has to offer in this new condition. Its task, as I envisage it, is thoughtfully to restore what has been thoughtlessly damaged. This damaged thing is not religion, morality or culture, but the ordinary human world: the world in its innocence, the world in spite of science. Russell is surely right in his assumption that philosophy begins from questions; he is right too that it seeks for answers in a realm of abstraction, where ordinary interests recede, and contemplation comes in place of them. But its task does not end in this endless seeking. There is a way back to the human world, through the very abstract thinking which corrodes it.

We are rational beings, and it is in our nature to ask questions. Dogs and cats live in 'a world of perception', to use Schopenhauer's phrase. For them the present experience is everything, and thought no more than a fragile bridge of anticipation, which leads from this experience to the next one. We, however, are beset by the need to explain. Faced with something unusual, our thought is not 'What next?' but Why?' By answering the second of those questions, we can answer the first. And this, in brief, is the scientific method. So where does the difference lie, between science and philosophy? Or is philosophy just a kind of generalised science, as it was for its first practitioners - those Titanic figures like Thales and Heraclitus, who emerge from the prehistoric darkness to tell us that 'All is water,' or 'There is only fire,' and whose enigmatic words resound down the centuries like mysterious primeval cries? This question is of the first importance, since nothing has changed the position of philosophy so much as the success of modern science.

Scientific explanations give the causes of what we observe. But scientific

knowledge would be far less useful than it is - no more useful than historical knowledge - if it could not be translated into predictions. The device whereby diagnosis becomes prediction is the 'causal law', the law which tells us not just that one event is the effect of another, but that events of the second kind make events of the first kind more likely. Feeling ill after drinking water from Alfred's tap, I may suspect that the water caused my illness. As yet this is only a hypothesis; it is confirmed when I discover that other people too, drinking from that tap, have contracted a similar illness. I venture the law that drinking from Alfred's tap makes illness likely. This statement is interesting for two reasons: first, it is open-ended: it does not refer only to cases so far observed, but universally. It has established its power as a diagnosis by becoming a prediction. Secondly, it is phrased in terms of probability: it does not say that everyone who drinks from Alfred's tap will become ill, but only that such an effect is likely. Likelihood, or probability, is measurable. If 60 per cent of observed cases have produced the given result, then we conclude that, on the evidence, there is a 60 per cent probability of the next case doing so as well.

That is a very rough piece of science. To the question 'Why was I ill?' it offers the answer 'Because I drank from Alfred's tap.' But this answer invites a further question: 'Why does drinking from Alfred's tap cause illness?' Such questions are pursued to the point where causal laws become 'laws of nature' — laws which do not merely record our observations, but which describe the underlying mechanism. We discover that an organism lives in Alfred's water tank, and that this organism can live also in the human digestive system, causing inflammation. It is a law of nature that organisms of this kind live in this way, and a law of nature that the human digestive system reacts as it does to their presence. This is not a statement of what we observe merely, but a statement of how things are. We can go deeper into the matter, discovering the precise chemical reaction which precipitates the inflammation, and so on. And the deeper we go, the firmer handle we acquire on the disease, the more likely we are to find a cure for it, and the more able are we to prevent it from spreading.

The nature and limits of scientific method are hotly debated among academic philosophers. But this much, at least, is suggested by my example. First, that the search for causes involves a search for laws; secondly, that laws are statements of probability; thirdly, that laws are themselves explained through wider and more general laws; fourthly, that however far we investigate the causes of something,


image
not
available

It seems, then, that the question 'Why?' is ambiguous. Sometimes it is answered by pointing to a cause, sometimes by pointing to a *reason.* The judge is asking what I was *aiming* at. If I reply that I had mistaken the bottle for that which contained the whisky, that I had intended to administer only a small dose of arsenic as a warning shot, or that I had intended to kill her since quite frankly enough was enough - then I have in each case offered a reason for my action, and the reply is pertinent. There are philosophers who say that reasons are causes, though causes of a special kind. For the three replies that I have sketched are valid explanations, and what is an explanation, if it does not mention a cause? But this does not get to the heart of the matter. The peculiarity of reasons is that you can argue with them; you can accept them or reject them; you can offer counter-reasons, and praise or condemn the agent on account of them. Even if reasons are causes, they have been lifted from the neutral realm of scientific theory, and endowed with a moral sense.

The ambiguity here can be phrased in another way. Sometimes we explain our actions; sometimes we justify them. And while explanations are either true or false, reasons can be good or bad. They belong to the endless moral dialogue whereby people relate to one another and to the world, and it is not surprising if they have an entirely different structure, and make use of entirely different concepts, from the explanations offered by the science of behaviour. My original answer to the judge was absurd not because it was false, but because it removed my action from the sphere of judgement, and described it in terms that make no reference to it as mine. Yet these are precisely the terms that we should expect the science of behaviour to employ: for they identify the *underlying mechanism* that explains what we observe.

We encounter here, and not for the first time in this work, an enduring paradox. It seems that we describe the world in two quite different ways - as the world which *contains* us, and as the world on which we act. We are part of nature, obedient to natural laws. But we also stand back from nature, and make choices which we believe to be free. Nature has a meaning for us - many meanings - and we classify it in ways which could find no place in scientific theory. When we see another's smile we see human flesh moving in obedience to impulses in the nerves. No law of nature is suspended in this process; we smile not in spite of, but because of, nature. Nevertheless, we understand a smile in quite another way: not as flesh, but as spirit, freely revealed. A smile is always more than flesh for us,

even if it is only flesh.

The question 'Why?', when asked of a smile, is seeking a meaning. Perhaps you are smiling for a reason; but even if you have no reason, there may be a why to your smile. I may understand it as a gesture of serene acceptance. And that answers the question why you smile, even though it names neither justification nor cause. The description *makes the smile intelligible.* So here is another 'Why?', and one that can be applied more widely than to human beings. The why of a note in music, or a line in a painting, is like this. We understand why the opening chord of *Tristan* resolves onto the dominant seventh of A minor, not by learning Wagner's reason for writing this, still less by looking for a cause, but by grasping the weight of these two chords as they balance against each other, by hearing the voice-leading which moves between them, and by pausing with the music, in the expectation of another resolution that never comes. Criticism describes the why of this music; but you do not need the description in order to understand what you hear, any more than you need a description to understand a smile. Understanding is *sui generis,* part of our way of relating to the world, when we relate to it as free beings.

And here we encounter another task for philosophy, and perhaps its most important task in our conditions. When we respond to the world as free beings, we look for meanings and reasons, and divide the world according to our interests, and not according to its inner nature, as this is revealed to science. Indeed, the meaning of the world is enshrined in conceptions which, while indispensable to the 'Why?' of freedom, find no place in the language of science: conceptions like beauty, goodness and spirit which grow in the thin topsoil of human discourse. This topsoil is quickly eroded when the flora are cleared from it, and there is a risk that nothing will ever grow thereafter. You can see the process at work in the matter of sex. Human sexuality has usually been understood through ideas of love and belonging. An enchanted grove of literary ideas and images protected those conceptions, and man and woman lived within it happily, or at any rate, with a manageable unhappiness. The sexologist clears all this tangled undergrowth away, to reveal the scientific truth of things: the animal organs, the unmoralized impulses, and the tingling sensations that figure in those grim reports on the behaviour of American humanoids. The meaning of the experience plays no part in the scientific description. Since science has, or at any rate assumes, absolute sovereignty over what is true, the meaning comes to be viewed as a fiction. People

concept of a mistake.

Truth is sovereign too in rational argument. From the beginning of history people have needed to distinguish valid from invalid arguments, and no word in the language is more smooth from the touch of human need than 'if' — the sign that discourse has shifted from statement to hypothesis, and that a deduction has begun. 'If *p* then *q*; not-*q* therefore not — *p*.' Such is our paradigm of valid inference, and only a lunatic would reject it. But what do we mean by 'valid'? Surely, an argument is valid when it is impossible that the premises should be true, and the conclusion false. Validity is defined in terms of truth.

It is an odd fact that logic, which ought to be the most scientific part of philosophy, is in many ways the most controversial, and also the slowest to change. Aristotle summarized and classified the valid 'syllogisms', and gave a subtle account of truth and inference. But nobody built on his achievement until modern times. Although Leibniz made some important advances, the knowledge of logic among philosophers actually *declined* during the nineteenth century. The greatest nineteenth-century philosopher - Hegel - wrote a book called Logic which contains only invalid arguments. It was not until the work of two philosophical mathematicians, George Boole (1815-1864) and Gottlob Frege (1848-1925), that the subject began to make progress. And it is testimony to the scientific nature of logic that there was progress to be made. (You don't make *progress* in art, literature or religion.)

The structure of language and rational argument can be understood, according to Frege, only if we make a distinction between the sense of our words, and their reference. 'The Morning Star' has a different sense from 'The Evening Star', but it refers to the same thing. The sense of a phrase is what we understand when we understand it. The reference is the object or concept 'picked out' — in this case the planet Venus, the star which appears first in the morning and last at night. The distinction between sense and reference runs through all language. Names and descriptions, predicates and relational terms, prepositions and connectives - all have both sense and reference, as do sentences themselves. We can apply the distinction to sentences, Frege argued, by recognizing the deep relation between language and truth. If we assign to each sentence a 'truth-value', according to whether it is true or false, then we find that, from the point of view of logic, the truth-value stands to the sentence as the object stands to its name. We understand a sentence when we know the difference that would be made to the world, were