From the popular NEW YORK TIMES philosophy series

THE STONE READER

MODERN PHILOSOPHY in 133 ARGUMENTS

Edited and introduced by

PETER CATAPANO AND SIMON CRITCHLEY

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Acknowledgments

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INTRODUCTION

I.

What is a philosopher? And more important, who cares?

These two questions, and our attempt to answer them, are central to explaining this book, a collection of more than 130 essays and arguments from *The New York Times*' philosophy series, The Stone.

The questions are not arbitrary; they arose as we began this project in 2010, guided us as we developed it over the next five years, and like all the best questions, presented themselves again and again, and forced us to rethink our answers as we went along.

As might be expected, the answer to the first—What is a philosopher?—is somewhat elusive. At least one of the contributors to this book has taken a stab at it—Simon Critchley, my coeditor and coconspirator in this project, devotes the opening essay to it. Many others over the last few centuries have, too, and their conclusions vary: Truth seeker. Rationalist. Logician. Metaphysician. Troublemaker. Tenured professor. Scholar. Visionary. Madperson. Gadfly. Seer.

Underlying at least some of these definitions is a common perception—that a philosopher is a marginal, perhaps useless, creature, typically unemployable, poorly wired for worldly pursuits and ill suited for normal life. In other words, a philosopher is a person whose habitual introspection renders him or her of little practical use to those in the "real world." Remarkably, that perception hasn't changed much over time. When was the last time you heard a proud parent mention "my son, the philosopher," or "my daughter, the metaphysician"? Philosopher—as opposed to, say, firefighter, web developer or regional risk-assessment manager—isn't quite a *job*, is it? In polite or expensively educated company, wherever that might be found, identifying oneself as a philosopher might only raise a few eyebrows; in certain other precincts, that is to say practically

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everywhere, the admission would more likely be met with laughter, puzzlement, scorn or worse.

Implicit here is the view that philosophy itself is somehow deficient, an impractical, even indulgent intellectual pursuit. This strain of anti-intellectualism is thought to be especially virulent in the United States, with its can-do, colonialist DNA and a bloodthirsty manifest destiny at its historical core—a view Richard Hofstadter laid out famously in his book *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963). We may even go as far as to say that in America, where the evangelical overlords of material productivity still hover, "navel-gazing" of the sort philosophers engage in might be considered a punishable offense, or worst yet, a sin. It might follow, then, that the United States is a nation in which any sort of intense thoughtfulness has no real place.

All this leads us to the second question—Who cares?—because if the answer is "no one," why waste any time answering the first or even thinking about any of this?

Let's be guileless for a moment, put aside the question's implied dismissal, and take it literally. The answer in that case is actually simple and surprising: A lot of people care. Despite a robust global appetite for cat videos, pop music and porn, and the alleged collapse of "the humanities" in American life, millions care deeply about, study, consume and practice philosophy. It is not confined to its traditional place in the university system. In fact, more people than ever have access to philosophical works and schools of thought, and they use them. As you no doubt know, the works of any philosopher under the sun—from Plato to Avicenna to Heidegger to the seventeen-year-old Spinoza devotee with a blog—are available electronically in most of the developed world. That was not the case a few decades ago.

Given all this, we find the often heard argument that philosophy, along with the rest of the humanities, is rapidly becoming obsolete to be a tired one. With all due respect, we reject that claim. We maintain that the reports of the death of American intellectual life (and such life elsewhere) have been greatly exaggerated, and that philosophy both inside and out of the academy is more vital than ever. And we offer this collection, as well as the popular success of The Stone, as a small bit of evidence.

II.

To those new to this particular philosophical project, here are a few basic facts: The Stone is an ongoing series, launched in 2010 as a part of the online Opinion report of *The New York Times*. Each week we publish at least one philosophic essay, often dealing with a current social, political or cultural issue. As the short description on the *Times* website says, the series "features the writing of contemporary

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philosophers and other thinkers on issues both timely and timeless." In other words, we aim to examine the world we find ourselves in by putting forward new ideas without discarding—or forgetting—the established wisdom of the past.

As series moderator, Simon often serves as a liaison between the world of professional or academic philosophers and our journalistic work at The Stone. He is part ambassador and part talent scout, inviting philosophers and other original thinkers to write pieces for us, and writing them himself at least a few times a year. Back in the Times Building on Eighth Avenue, I do some of the same; I assign and solicit pieces based on current events or the attractiveness of certain topics and review submissions from writers. Since this is ultimately a product of *The New York Times*, we conduct the fact-checking, editing and publishing of each essay in-house and take full editorial responsibility for the final product.

The book, as you find it here, is a selection from The Stone's first four years of essays, organized into four sections, not chronologically but by way of broad subject areas: Philosophy, Science, Religion and Morals, and Society, each beginning with a short preface written by Simon. Within each of these sections are subsections that offer a sharper focus on the essays. The aim of this structure is to make it easy for readers to navigate the large body of work here. As with any anthology, readers may either work through the material from beginning to end or move back and forth between sections at will. It is neither a "text book" designed to provide some form of tutelage nor a mere collection of "newspaper columns" but an anthology of contemporary essays and arguments that we hope will engage readers and reward many readings, and make clear the continued relevance of philosophy.

The seed for The Stone was planted in a much larger initiative at the *Times*. In late 2005 I was hired as an editor in Opinion by the editorial page editor at the time, Gail Collins, to help with the effort to develop material that would take full advantage of the possibilities in the digital space. What could we do here that we could not do on the printed page? While I can't speak for the intent or vision of my superiors or the great institution for which I work, I can say that as an editor with deep interests in not just world events, as a job like mine normally requires, but in artistic, intellectual and cultural life as well, I was excited by the possibilities. There was the sense, rare at a big newspaper—or an organization of any kind, really—of being given space to create new forms, to pursue themes, ideas and writers both within and outside the typical realm of opinion journalism, and venture into areas that were socially or culturally relevant, whether they responded directly to the news, danced around it or just shed a broader light on it. New ideas and approaches were encouraged, green-lighted and supported. The field was open.

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One of the approaches we hit upon to broaden the scope of our report was the online opinion series. This involved curating a series of pieces based on a larger single theme over the course of one month or more. The idea was not primarily to stake out positions on particular issues—the traditional role of the op-ed—but to offer readers a greater variety of voices, perspectives and insights into a topic that mattered.

Over the next few years, I was given opportunities to develop and edit a number of these series, most featuring the writing of nonjournalists. Early on we published a collection of real-time dispatches written by Iraqi citizens during the war (Day to Day in Iraq), then one by soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan (Frontlines), and later, by veterans as they returned home (Home Fires). As the form proved successful, we broadened our scope. We heard from insomniacs (All-Nighters), migraine sufferers (Migraine), American composers (The Score), songwriters (Measure for Measure), school teachers (Lesson Plans), drinkers and teetotalers (Proof), and soon after the economic crash of 2008, ordinary people in search of contentment in hard times.

That last series, called Happy Days, is where we got an inkling of what eventually became The Stone. We didn't follow the news as reported. We let people tell their own stories and share their thoughts about their place in the economically transformed world around them, even as it continued to shift under their feet. We didn't ask very much except that the writing be true, sound, compelling and that it give some sense of an actual human experience.

One of the Happy Days writers was a philosopher I'd recently read, Simon Critchley, who wrote two pieces for the series—one on the relationship between water, contemplation and happiness, and one on money. These were, in journalistic terms, "think pieces" or even meditations that, in the tradition of Montaigne or Rousseau, combined present-day commentary within a historical framework of philosophy. I found this mix of elements to be both immediately engaging and meaningful, not only in Simon's work but in the others' as well. Still, I had no idea whether *Times* readers—a famously well-informed, opinionated and exacting group—would agree.

On the whole, they did, and appeared, judging by their comments, not to find the writing "too intellectual" or abstract. Some were surprised to discover something in *The New York Times* that addressed not just external events like politics or health-care policy but aspects of their inner lives—their ethics, faith or lack thereof, their desires, anxieties and imaginations. It seemed that these issues were just as important to them as what had happened in the West Bank, Iraq or Washington and could often inform their views of these events.

At the end of that project, Simon and I began discussing a series that would focus more distinctly on philosophy—why not? We met one day in 2010 at Ceol, a now defunct Irish bar on Smith Street in

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Brooklyn, to see if we could hatch a plan. He pointed out how many great writers and thinkers in the field were not being read in mainstream publications, and I quickly saw how right he was. Over a number of pints we talked it through. It seemed viable. We made a list of philosophers we wanted to work with and subjects we hoped to cover. Then we bandied about series titles for a while, none very good, until The Stone—a clipped reference to that legendarily transformative *prima materia*, the philosopher's stone—dropped into our laps.

Within a few weeks, I proposed the project, got a go-ahead from our editorial page editor, Andy Rosenthal, and our Op-Ed editor at the time, David Shipley, and we went to work.

Simon wrote the first piece: "What Is a Philosopher?"

And when it appeared online on May 16, 2010, we received a shock. By our humble expectations, it was wildly popular. It became the most e-mailed article on the *Times* site within a day—840 people replied, an almost staggering amount. Also notably, everyone had a different answer to the question posed in the title.

The intense reader engagement was a revelation to us: we saw that essays like this could offer more than just an unquestioned voice of authority; it could be a public platform for large numbers of people to argue and discuss questions of political, social, cultural and humanistic importance—a massive, bustling, sprawling electronic version of the ancient Agora.

Perhaps most exciting, we saw that by reaching readers in all walks of life (we had the foundation of the *Times'* enviably large readership to thank for that, of course), most of them outside the academic and professional precincts of philosophy, we had the opportunity to engage the person "on the street"—or what I like to call "the naturally occurring philosopher"—in an activity typically confined to universities.

Here is one reader's response to "What Is a Philosopher?" that illustrates this point beautifully:

> *Before we talk about philosophy and its role in the advancement of human understanding, we first have to know what a philosopher is. Try this on for size, folks: a philosopher is anyone who thinks about existence and takes a whack at trying to explain it. Just ask the guy seated next to you on the subway what he thinks—then duck, just in case he's had it up to here with those who think one has to turn philosophy into sticky treacle with Socratic anecdotes before a spark of interest can be coaxed from the masses.*
>
> *Next question. Why are we here?*
>
> *That's an excellent philosophical point of departure, considering where this column left us! Having myself sat in a*

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be—whether in the mold of rationalist, poet, gadfly or seeker—fascinating people. As a result, readers of this book will hopefully gain a deeper appreciation of the insightful (sometimes even wise) writers and doers living among them, and a sense of where they fit in the scheme of things, in both public and private life.

IV.

Readers who come upon The Stone for the first time are often puzzled by the mixing of philosophy and old-fashioned media commentary. They can't be blamed, of course. A typical newspaper reader generally won't flinch at an article by a doctor, economist, politician or policy expert of some sort, but they might be surprised to see one by a philosopher. How often do we find any brand of philosophical thinking in newspaper and magazines, or in mainstream media of any kind?

But in a broad sense, philosophy and journalism are a natural fit. Both possess a license to tackle any subject. If it occurs in the course of human experience, it is fair game. And in many cases, their methods are similar. A reporter will gather facts objectively, analyze them, break them down and present what he or she sees as the truth of a situation. With some variations, that's essentially how a philosopher works.

Philosophy and journalism also complement each other. Each gives the other a quality it may be missing. Journalism has an urgency driven by events that philosophy tends to lack, while philosophy relies on analysis or contemplation that journalists often don't have time for because of the demands of the profession.

Finally, there is the idea of philosopher as a "gadfly," as Socrates described himself, an agitator of conventional wisdom, an annoyance to state power and the status quo, which is very much in keeping with the role of the media as a watchdog—the fourth estate. In this volume you'll find that philosophy did indeed respond to crucial events as they occurred: an urgent series of pieces on guns and violence in the wake of the Newtown school massacre, and essays coming to terms with the Occupy Wall Street movement, radical Islam, the crisis of privacy, hacker culture and the racial anger simmering and sometimes exploding in the United States.

Despite all this, philosophy seems to retain that bad rap out in the "real world." People like Stephen Hawking and Neil deGrasse Tyson have called it essentially useless when compared to science and other more "practical" subjects. Those who persist in this folly will tell you that the problem with philosophy is that it is too insular, that it does not "solve" real problems and makes no effort to be useful or even understood to the majority of the human race it is supposed to inform.

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But that is a too simple assessment of the situation. The intense interest in The Stone, and these writers' deep engagement with the world in which we live, belies that narrow-minded take.

This, like all truly interesting questions, will be debated for as long as we have the capacity to argue with each other. But I'd like to close with a few passages from an assessment Simon wrote after the series' first year, one that offers a more generous and expansive definition of the meaning and use of philosophy. The Stone, he wrote, offered some proof "that philosophy still matters. That it is not some otherworldly activity conducted by a handful of remote individuals safely incarcerated away in institutions of higher learning." He continued:

> *Philosophy assesses and presses public opinion by asking essential questions: "What is knowledge?" "What is justice?" "What is love?"*
>
> *The hope that drives this activity is that the considerations to which such universal questions give rise can, through inquiry and argumentation, have an educative or even emancipatory effect. Philosophy, as the great American philosopher Stanley Cavell puts it, is the education of grown-ups.*
>
> *It is my view that philosophy must form part of the life of a culture. It must engage the public and influence how a culture converses with itself, understands itself, talks to other cultures and seeks to understand them.*

That's what we try to do each week in The Stone. And that's how, and why, this book was born.

So, who cares?

—Peter Catapano,
New York,
2015

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SECTION I

PHILOSOPHY

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PHILOSOPHY IS A NOTORIOUSLY SELF-REFLEXIVE DISCIPLINE. OFTEN, a lifetime devoted to it begins and ends with the question, what is philosophy? This leads to the common accusation of navel-gazing or armchair-pondering. But such accusations are shortsighted.

Philosophy in its recognizable form begins in ancient Greece with the person of Socrates. Before his eventual trial and execution by the city of Athens on the charges of impiety toward the gods and the corruption of the young, he spent his days talking to people and engaging them in dialogue. Often these dialogues would be with people sometimes called "Sophists" because they claimed to provide wisdom (s*ophia*). Socrates would simply ask them questions that revealed that they didn't really know what they were talking about and that the wisdom they sought to retail was bogus in its claims.

Philosophy begins by asking difficult questions of a very general form (What is knowledge? What is truth?) and by using critical techniques of argumentation in order to show that those who "know" are often advancing questionable claims. But this doesn't imply that the philosopher him-or herself possesses knowledge or wisdom. Socrates was pronounced by the Oracle at Delphi to be the wisest man in Greece, but he constantly professed to know nothing. Philosophy, then, commences as a movement into perplexity about the most general and fundamental issues that concern human affairs.

This perplexity is directed most fiercely toward philosophy itself. It is therefore appropriate that *The Stone Reader* opens with a series of questions about the nature, scope, history and identity of the discipline. Good philosophy should never be hidebound by tradition or stuck in its past.

In the first two parts of Section 1, "New Impressions of an Old Profession" and "The Geography of Philosophy," the reader will find various attempts to define and redefine the nature of the philosophical task. Does the fact that philosophy began in ancient Greece with Socrates entail a bias toward men over women? Does the entire history and study of philosophy betray a geographical prejudice toward the West, particularly Europe over the rest of the world? Such questions are engaged pressingly here, and this is in line with the mission of The Stone, which is not only to show what philosophy can do, but also to try and expand the domain of its inclusiveness. It is our modest contention, very simply, that philosophy is for everyone.

The study of philosophy will often be focused on the reading of canonical texts, such as those of Plato, Spinoza and Hume. But once again, this activity is not pursued out of some antiquarian interest. It is a question of constantly rereading those texts in order to both question the way in which they had previously been interpreted and offer new interpretations that speak to our contemporary condition. In

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"Rethinking Thinkers," a number of our authors take on this task.

Philosophy at its best is simultaneously old and new, both showing the persistence and the difficulty of basic themes and questions and the need to adapt those questions to the pressing demands of the surrounding world. In the fourth part of this section, "Old Problems, New Spins," the reader will find investigations of absolutely classical philosophical themes, such as the nature of time, free will, truth and logic. But there are also reflections on life in the digital world and how philosophy might adapt to the experimental techniques of cognitive psychology.

Often people speak, sometimes with good reason, of philosophy as an activity that is distinct from literature and fiction. On this view, philosophy is seen as a good example of bad writing. Some of the essays in the final part of this section, "Philosophy, Literature and Life," show the inadequacy of that view. Philosophy has many of the same virtues as literature and can even be a form of literature itself. And if literature does indeed tell us something profound about our existence, then this is also true of philosophy, which is not simply a professional or narrowly buttoned-down academic pursuit, but a way of life that can permit us to raise again the question of our significance and the possible pursuits of happiness.

—Simon Critchley

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NEW IMPRESSIONS OF AN OLD PROFESSION

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What Is a Philosopher?

—Simon Critchley

THERE ARE AS MANY DEFINITIONS OF PHILOSOPHY AS THERE ARE philosophers—perhaps there are even more. After three millennia of philosophical activity and disagreement, it is unlikely that we'll reach a consensus, and I certainly don't want to add more hot air to the volcanic cloud of unknowing. What I'd like to do in the opening column in this new venture—The Stone—is to kick things off by asking a slightly different question: What is a philosopher?

As Alfred North Whitehead said, philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato. Let me risk adding a footnote by looking at Plato's provocative definition of the philosopher that appears in the middle of his dialogue, *Theaetetus*, in a passage that some scholars consider a "digression." But far from being a footnote to a digression, I think this moment in Plato tells us something hugely important about what a philosopher is and what philosophy does.

Socrates tells the story of Thales, who was by some accounts the first philosopher. He was looking so intently at the stars that he fell into a well. Some witty Thracian servant girl is said to have made a joke at Thales's expense—that in his eagerness to know what went on in the sky he was unaware of the things in front of him and at his feet. Socrates adds, in Seth Benardete's translation, "The same jest suffices for all those who engage in philosophy."

What is a philosopher, then? The answer is clear: a laughing stock, an absentminded buffoon, the butt of countless jokes from Aristophanes's *The Clouds* to Mel Brooks's *History of the World, Part I*. Whenever the philosopher is compelled to talk about the things at his feet, he gives not only the Thracian girl but the rest of the crowd a belly laugh. The philosopher's clumsiness in worldly affairs makes him appear stupid or "gives the impression of plain silliness." We are left with a rather Monty Pythonesque definition of the philosopher: the one who is silly.

But as always with Plato, things are not necessarily as they first appear, and Socrates is the greatest of ironists. First, we should recall that Thales believed that water was the universal substance out of which all things were composed. Water was Thales's philosopher's stone, as it were. Therefore, by falling into a well, he inadvertently pressed his basic philosophical claim.

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But there is a deeper and more troubling layer of irony here that I would like to peel off more slowly. Socrates introduces the "digression" by making a distinction between the philosopher and the lawyer, or what Benardete nicely renders as the "pettifogger." The lawyer is compelled to present a case in court and time is of the essence. In Greek legal proceedings, a strictly limited amount of time was allotted for the presentation of cases. Time was measured with a water clock, or *clepsydra*, which literally steals time, as in the Greek *kleptes*, a thief or embezzler. The pettifogger, the jury, and by implication the whole society live with the constant pressure of time. The water of time's flow is constantly threatening to drown them.

By contrast, we might say, the philosopher is the person who has time or who takes time. Theodorus, Socrates's interlocutor, introduces the "digression" with the words, "Aren't we at leisure, Socrates?" The latter's response is interesting. He says, "It appears we are." As we know, in philosophy appearances can be deceptive. But the basic contrast here is between the lawyer, who has no time, or for whom time is money, and the philosopher, who takes time. The freedom of the philosopher consists in either moving freely from topic to topic or simply spending years returning to the same topic out of perplexity, fascination and curiosity.

Pushing this a little further, we might say that to philosophize is to take your time, even when you have no time, when time is constantly pressing at your back. The busy readers of *The New York Times* will doubtless understand this sentiment. It is our hope that some of them will make the time to read The Stone. As Wittgenstein says, "This is how philosophers should salute each other: 'Take your time.'" Indeed, it might tell you something about the nature of philosophical dialogue to confess that my attention was recently drawn to this passage from *Theaetetus* in leisurely discussions with a doctoral student at the New School, Charles Snyder.

Socrates says that those in the constant press of business, like lawyers, policy makers, mortgage brokers and hedge fund managers, become "bent and stunted" and they are compelled "to do crooked things." The pettifogger is undoubtedly successful, wealthy and extraordinarily honey tongued but, Socrates adds, "small in his soul and shrewd and a shyster." The philosopher, by contrast, is *free* by virtue of his or her otherworldliness, by their capacity to fall into wells and appear silly.

Socrates adds that the philosopher neither sees nor hears the so-called unwritten laws of the city—that is, the mores and conventions that govern public life. The philosopher shows no respect for rank and inherited privilege and is unaware of anyone's high or low birth. It also does not occur to the philosopher to join a political club or a private party. As Socrates concludes, the philosopher's body alone dwells within the city's walls. In thought, they are elsewhere.

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This all sounds dreamy, but it isn't. Philosophy should come with the kind of health warning one finds on packs of European cigarettes: PHILOSOPHY KILLS. Here we approach the deep irony of Plato's words. Plato's dialogues were written after Socrates's death. Socrates was charged with impiety toward the gods of the city and with corrupting the youth of Athens. He was obliged to speak in court in defense of these charges, to speak against the water clock, that thief of time. He ran out of time and suffered the consequences: he was condemned to death and forced to take his own life.

A couple of generations later, during the uprisings against Macedonian rule that followed the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE, Alexander's former tutor, Aristotle, escaped Athens saying, "I will not allow the Athenians to sin twice against philosophy." From the ancient Greeks to Giordano Bruno, Spinoza, Hume and right up to the shameful lawsuit that prevented Bertrand Russell from teaching at the City College of New York in 1940 on the charge of sexual immorality and atheism, philosophy has repeatedly and persistently been identified with blasphemy against the gods, whichever gods they might be. Nothing is more common in the history of philosophy than the accusation of impiety. Because of their laughable otherworldliness and lack of respect for social convention, rank and privilege, philosophers refuse to honor the old gods, and this makes them politically suspicious, even dangerous. Might such dismal things still happen in our happily enlightened age? That depends where one casts one's eyes and how closely one looks.

Perhaps the last laugh is with the philosopher. Although the philosopher will always look ridiculous in the eyes of pettifoggers and those obsessed with maintaining the status quo, the opposite happens when the nonphilosopher is obliged to give an account of justice in itself or happiness and misery in general. Far from eloquent, Socrates insists, the pettifogger is "perplexed and stutters."

Of course, one might object that ridiculing someone's stammer isn't a very nice thing to do. Benardete rightly points out that Socrates assigns every kind of virtue to the philosopher apart from moderation. Nurtured in freedom and taking their time, there is something dreadfully uncanny about philosophers, something either monstrous or godlike or indeed both at once. This is why many sensible people continue to think the Athenians had a point in condemning Socrates to death. I leave it for you to decide. I couldn't possibly judge.

MAY 16, 2010

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The Flight of Curiosity

—Justin E. H. Smith

MUST ONE BE ENDOWED WITH CURIOSITY IN ORDER TO BECOME a philosopher?

Today, in the academic realm at least, the answer is surely and regrettably no. When a newly minted philosopher goes on the job market, her primary task is to show her prospective colleagues how perfectly focused she has been in graduate school, and to conceal her knowledge of any topic (Shakespeare's sonnets, classical Chinese astronomy, the history of pigeon breeding) that does not fall within the current boundaries of the discipline.

But how were these boundaries formed in the first place? Did they spring from the very essence of philosophy, a set of core attributes present at inception, forever fixed and eternal? The answer to that latter question is also no. What appears to us today to be a core is only what is leftover after a centuries-long process by which the virtue of curiosity—once nearly synonymous with philosophy—migrated into other disciplines, both scientific and humanistic. As this migration was occurring, many curiosity-driven activities—such as insect collecting and stargazing, long considered at least tributaries of philosophy—were downgraded to the status of mere hobbies. This loss of curiosity has played an important but little-noticed role in the widespread perception that professional philosophy has become out of touch with the interests of the broader society.

Let me rush to qualify what no doubt sounds like a harsh assessment of the state of my own discipline. I am certainly not saying that, as individuals, philosophers will not often be "curious people," in the very best sense of that phrase, but only that they are habituated by their discipline to make a sharp distinction between their sundry interests and what they do professionally, as philosophers. The distinction is as clear as that between Richard Feynman's contribution to theoretical physics and his enjoyment of Tuvan throat singing.

Today's natural scientist easily distinguishes his own work not only from his hobbies, but also from the activity of his pseudoscientific counterpart. When we look back in history, however, it becomes difficult to keep this distinction in view, for it has often happened that false beliefs have produced significant experimental results and have led to real discoveries. It is no less difficult to separate the history

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either of science or of pseudoscience from what I will dare to call the "real" history of philosophy, for until very recently, what we now call science was not merely of interest to philosophers, but was in fact constitutive of philosophy. In fact, it was not called science at all, but rather natural philosophy.

Thus, tellingly, among the articles in the *Philosophical Transactions* of 1666, the second year of the journal's publication, we find titles such as "Of a Considerable Load-Stone Digged Out of the Ground in Devonshire" and "Observations Concerning Emmets or Ants, Their Eggs, Production, Progress, Coming to Maturity, Use, &c." Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, researchers studying the properties of magnetism continued to refer to their area of interest as "the magnetical philosophy," and as late as 1808, John Dalton published *A New System of Chemical Philosophy*. A year later Jean-Baptiste Lamarck brought out his *Philosophie zoologique*. Yet by the early twentieth century, this usage of the word *philosophy* had entirely vanished. What happened?

One of the charges brought against Socrates in Plato's great dialogue, *The Apology*, is that he "speculated about the heavens above, and searched into the earth beneath." Today philosophers are more likely to pick out the other charges—sophism, corrupting the youth, atheism—as most relevant to our understanding of the Socratic-Platonic revolution in the history of Western thought. But what are we to make of this charge of curiosity? It may be that in restyling themselves as "scientists," natural philosophers, or *curiosi*, have succeeded in the past few hundred years in overcoming their bad reputation. Little awareness lingers at this point (excepting, say, the occasional nuclear meltdown, when we start to feel we've gone too far too fast) of what might have made the activity of looking into the earth and the heavens a crime.

This restyling occurred over the course of the early modern period, at just the same time as questions that were once purely speculative—concerning, for instance, the nature of life, or the causes of planetary orbits—came to be much more tractable than before, thanks to the increasing mathematization of the sciences, and to newly emerging standards for scientific observation and experimentation. Their new tractability by scientists left the philosophers to establish themselves on their own. But what exactly is left over for philosophy to do once the earth, the heavens, the animals and plants are turned over to this new breed of scientists to explain?

There will certainly always be a place for epistemology, or the theory of knowledge. But in order for a theory of knowledge to tell us much, it needs to draw on examples of knowledge of something or other. And so philosophy agrees to a partial reconciliation with the "sciences" some years after its divorce from "natural philosophy." Philosophy comes back to physics with the philosophy of physics, and

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to biology with the philosophy of biology, even though physics and biology are no longer part of philosophy itself.

Now surely it is a good thing that today there are, say, helminthologists, who can devote all their time to the study of worms without having to worry about how these creatures fit into the cosmic order, or into God's design, as you wish. But if helminthology has cleared away the cosmological dross that weighed it down back when it was part of natural philosophy, philosophy meanwhile may have lost something that once helped to fuel it: a curiosity about the world in all its detail, a desire to know everything encyclopedically, rather than to bound its pure activity off from the impure world of worms and so on, a world philosophy might approach through that succinct preposition, *of*—as in "philosophy of physics," "philosophy of law"—which permits philosophy to stand apart, and implicitly above, the mundane objects of its attention.

So long as contemporary philosophy conceives itself in this way, it is rather a difficult task to pursue the sort of research on the history of philosophy that is adequate to the material it studies, that respects actors' categories, and that takes seriously theories and entities that have long since been rejected by reasonable people. Consider Kenelm Digby's 1658 account of the weapon salve, or the treatment of wounds at a distance by manipulation of the weapon that caused them. Digby, in fact, offered a fascinating, sophisticated application of early modern corpuscularianism, yet many philosophers today suppose that to take an interest in a false theory from the past such as this one, to research it and to write about it, implies a rejection of the idea of truth itself. I myself was once dismissed as a "postmodernist" by a referee for a journal to which I submitted an article on the weapon salve.

There is no basis for such an accusation. For among the great many truths in the world is this one: a man named Digby once believed something false. To take an interest in that false belief is not to reject the truth, but only to wish to fill out our picture of the truth with as much detail as possible, and not because of some aesthetic inclination to the baroque, but rather because false theories are an important part of the puzzle that we as philosophers should be trying to complete: that of determining the range of ways people conceptualize the world around them.

This is a project, I believe, that philosophers ought to recognize themselves as having in common with the other human sciences, and most of all with anthropology, as well as with newer disciplines such as cognitive science, which takes the substantial interconnection between philosophy and the study of the natural world as seriously as it was taken in the seventeenth century. The new "experimental philosophy" movement is also returning to an earlier conception of the inseparability of philosophical reflection and scientific inquiry, though curiously "x-phi" advocates describe themselves as breaking with

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“traditional” philosophy, rather than as returning to it, which is what in fact they are doing.

But for the most part philosophers prefer to keep their distance from the world, to do philosophy of this or that, and to disavow any interest in reckoning up the actual range of ways in which people, past or present, have explained the world. For some historians of philosophy, this makes things difficult, since we find we cannot live up to the expectation of our colleagues to show the immediate “philosophical” payoff of our research, by which of course is meant the relevance to the set of issues that happen to interest them.

I BELIEVE IT IS IMPERATIVE, indeed that it amounts to nothing short of respect paid to the dead, that historians of philosophy resist this demand for relevance. Scholarship in the history of philosophy must not aim to contribute to the resolution of problems on the current philosophical agenda. What it must do instead is reveal the variety of problems that have in different times and places been deemed philosophical, thereby providing a broader context within which current philosophers can understand the contingency, and future transformability, of their own problems. In this way, historians of philosophy contribute to the vitality of current philosophy, but on their own terms, and not on the terms dictated by their nonhistorian colleagues.

Recently I have noticed, when holding forth on, say, G. W. Leibniz’s interest in the pharmaceutical properties of the Brazilian ipecacuanha root, the way in which the term *erudite* now serves in some philosophical circles as a sort of backhanded compliment. What it really says is that the compliment’s recipient cannot quite cut it as a real philosopher, which is to say as a producer of rigorous arguments, and so instead compensates by filling her head with so much historical trivia. Rigor has decidedly won out over erudition as the reigning philosophical virtue, yet it is with a curious lack of rigor that philosophers assume, without argument, that there is a zero-sum competition for space in our heads between rigor and erudition. As Laurence Sterne said in a related context, this is like assuming that you cannot hiccup and flatulate at the same time.

It is noteworthy in this connection that in 1682 a journal was founded in Leipzig, as the German response to the *Philosophical Transactions*, with the title *Acta eruditorum* (Acts of the erudite). This journal, too, contained much on the generation of maggots and other such matters. Now the figure of the eruditus was in the seventeenth century very close to the curiosus, and it is around the same time that we also witness the foundation of societies of natural philosophers with names such as the Societas Leopoldina naturae curiosorum (the Leopoldine Society for Those Who Are Curious about Nature).

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It was before the members of this very society that Leibniz, in 1695, at the very peak of his innovation as a metaphysical thinker of the first order, presented what he described as his most important contribution to learning so far: a treatise entitled “On the New American Antidysenteric”—namely, ipecacuanha, better known today through its derivative product, “syrup of ipecac.” It had already been known that this root, first described in Willem Piso’s *Natural History of Brazil* of 1648, could be used to stop diarrhea, and indeed its usefulness in saving Louis XIV from a bad case of dysentery was legendary around Paris when Leibniz lived there in the 1670s. But in front of the audience of German curiosi twenty years later, Leibniz could claim for himself the credit for discovering the emetic properties of the root, and again, he would, evidently without hyperbole, compare this discovery favorably to everything else he had yet accomplished, and for which he remains so widely know today.

This is, to put it mildly, very curious. It shows at the very least that Leibniz conceived of his life’s work, as a learned man, as a curiosus, and as a philosopher, very differently than we conceive of it today, and very differently than philosophers today conceive of their own work. And this different conception matters to the historian of philosophy, since to take an interest in Leibniz’s pharmaceutical endeavors (or his mine-engineering endeavors, or his paleontological endeavors . . .) might, just might, reveal to us something we would not have noticed about what matters to us had we limited ourselves to the canonical “philosophical” treatises. And it might, finally, force us to reconsider the adequacy of our current list of philosophical problems. And even if it doesn’t, something else from philosophy’s past that has fallen off the list eventually surely will.

As a historian of philosophy, I believe it is a terrible thing to attempt to fit figures from the history of philosophy into the narrow confines of a conception of philosophy that has really only emerged over the most recent centuries. Such confinement fails to do justice to the scope and richness of their thought. Perhaps more importantly, it deprives us of the possibility of rediscovering that spirit of curiosity that fueled the development of philosophy during its first few millennia.

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Philosophy as an Art of Dying

—Costica Bradatan

IT HAPPENS RARELY, BUT WHEN IT DOES, IT CAUSES A COMMOTION of great proportions; it attracts the attention of all, becomes a popular topic for discussion and debate in marketplaces and taverns. It drives people to take sides, quarrel and fight, which for things philosophical is quite remarkable. It happened to Socrates, Hypatia, Thomas More, Giordano Bruno, Jan Patočka, and a few others. Due to an irrevocable death sentence, imminent mob execution or torture to death, these philosophers found themselves in the most paradoxical of situations: lovers of logic and rational argumentation, silenced by brute force; professional makers of discourses, banned from using the word; masters of debate and contradiction, able to argue no more. What was left of these philosophers then? Just their silence, their sheer physical presence. The only means of expression left to them, their own bodies—and dying bodies at that.

The situation has its irony. It is an old custom among philosophers of various stripes and persuasions to display a certain contempt toward the body. Traditionally, in Western philosophy at least, the body has been with few exceptions seen as inferior to the mind, spirit or soul—the realm of "the flesh," the domain of the incomprehensible, of blind instincts and unclean impulses. And so here are the condemned philosophers: speechless, with only their dying bodies to express themselves. One may quip that the body has finally got its chance to take its revenge on the philosophers.

But how have they arrived there in the first place? It so happens that some philosophers entertain and profess certain ideas that compel them to lead a certain way of life. Sometimes, however, their way of life leads them to a situation where they have to choose between remaining faithful to their ideas or renouncing them altogether. The former translates into "dying for idea," whereas the latter usually involves not only a denunciation of that philosopher's lifestyle, but also, implicitly, an invalidation of the philosophical views that inspired that way of life. This seems to be the toughest of choices. In simpler terms, it boils down to the following dilemma: if you decide to remain faithful to your views, you will be no more. Your own death will be your last opportunity to put your ideas into practice. On the other hand, if you choose to "betray" your ideas (and perhaps yourself

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as well), you remain alive, but with no beliefs to live by.

The situation of the philosopher facing such a choice is what is commonly called a "limit situation." Yet this limit does not concern only the philosopher involved; in an important sense, this is the limit of philosophy itself, a threshold where philosophy encounters its other (whatever philosophy *is not*) and, in the process, is put to the test.

Long before he was faced with such a choice through the good offices of the Czechoslovakian political police in 1977, Jan Patočka may have intuited this limit when he said that "philosophy reaches a point where it no longer suffices to pose questions and answer them, both with extreme energy; where the philosopher will progress no further unless he manages to make a decision." Whatever that decision may mean in other contexts, the implication of Patočka's notion for this discussion is unambiguous. There is a point beyond which philosophy, if it is not to lose face, must turn into something else: *performance*. It has to pass a test in a foreign land, a territory that's not its own. For the ultimate testing of our philosophy takes place not in the sphere of strictly rational procedures (writing, teaching, lecturing) but elsewhere: in the fierce confrontation with death of the animal that we are. The worthiness of one's philosophy reveals itself, if anywhere, in the live performance of one's encounter with one's own death; that's how we find out whether it is of some substance or it is all futility. Tell me how you deal with your fear of annihilation, and I will tell you about your philosophy.

Furthermore, death is such a terrifying event, and the fear of it so universal, that *to invite* it by way of faithfulness to one's ideas is something that fascinates and disturbs at the same time. Those who do so take on an aura of uncanny election, of almost unhuman distinction; all stand in awe before them. With it also comes a certain form of power. This is why, for example, one's self-immolation (meant as political protest) can have devastating social and political effects, as we saw recently in Tunisia, when twenty-six-year-old Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire. This is also why the death of those philosophers who choose to die for an idea comes soon to be seen as an essential part of their work. In fact their deaths often become far more important than their lives. Why is Socrates such an important and influential figure? Mostly because of the manner and circumstances of his death. He may have never written a book, but he crafted one of the most famous endings of all time: his own. Any philosophical text would pale in comparison. Nor have Hypatia's writings survived; yet, the exquisite, if passive, performance of her death in the early fifth century has not ceased to fascinate us. A modern scholar, Maria Dzielska, recounts how, at the instigation of the patriarch Cyril (later sanctified by the Church), some of the zealous Christians of Alexandria helped her to join the Socratic tradition of dying:

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[A] mob executed the deed on a day in March 415, in the tenth consulship of Honorius and the sixth consulship of Theodosius II, during Lent. Hypatia was returning home . . . from her customary ride in the city. She was pulled out of the chariot and dragged to the church Caesarion . . . There they tore off her clothes and killed her with "broken pits of pottery" . . . Then they hauled her body outside the city to a place called Kinaron, to burn it on a pyre of sticks.

One of the accounts of Giordano Bruno's death is particularly eloquent. A chronicle of the time (*Avviso di Roma*, February 19, 1600) reads, "On Friday they burned alive in Campo de' Fiore that Dominican brother of Nola, a persistent heretic; his tongue was immobilized [con la lingua in giova] because of the terrible things he was saying, unwilling to listen either to his comforters or to anybody else."

Con la lingua in giova! There is hardly a better illustration of what "silencing an opponent" can mean. I don't really have anything against the Holy Office, except maybe that sometimes they have a tendency to take things a bit too literally.

"Dying for an idea" in this fashion is, admittedly, a rare occurrence. Thank goodness philosophers are not put to death on a regular basis. I hasten to add, however, as rare as it may be, the situation is *not* hypothetical. These things have happened and will happen again. In a certain sense, the possibility of one's dying *in relation to* one's thinking lies at the heart of the Western definition of philosophy. When Plato's Socrates states in the *Phaedo* that philosophy is *meletē thanatou*—that is to say, an intense practice of death—he may mean not just that the object of philosophy should be to help us better cope with our mortality, but also that the one who practices philosophy should understand the risks that come with the job. After all, this definition of philosophy comes from someone condemned to death for the ideas he expressed, only a few hours away from his execution. The lesson? Perhaps that to be a philosopher means more than just being ready to "suffer" death, to accept it passively at some indefinite point in time; it may also require one to *provoke his own death*, to meet it somehow midway. That's mastering death. Philosophy has sometimes been understood as "an art of living," and rightly so. But there are good reasons to believe that philosophy can be an "art of dying" as well.

"DYING FOR AN IDEA" is the stuff of martyrdom—"philosophic martyrdom." For martyrdom to be possible, however, one's death, spectacular as it may be, is not enough. Dying is just half of the job;

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the other half is weaving a good narrative of martyrdom and finding an audience for it. A philosopher’s death would be in vain without the right narrator, as well as the guilty conscience of a receptive audience. A sense of collective guilt can do wonders for a narrative of martyrdom about to emerge. I have written elsewhere about the importance of storytelling and collective memory for the construction of political martyrdom. Much of the same goes for philosopher-martyrs. In a certain sense, they cease to be people in flesh and blood and are recast into literary characters of sorts; their stories, if they are to be effective, have to follow certain rules, fit into a certain genre, respond to certain needs. Certainly, there are the historians who always seek to establish “the facts.” Yet—leaving aside that history writing, as Hayden White showed a long time ago, is itself a form of literature—inconvenient “facts” rarely manage to challenge the narratives that dominate popular consciousness.

Enlightenment writers, and then the feminist scholarship of the twentieth century, have played a major role in the “making” of Hypatia the philosopher-martyr. Countless anticlerical writers and public intellectuals have done the same for Bruno, as has Václav Havel for Patočka. Yet the most influential martyr maker is by far Plato. Not only did he make Socrates into the archetypal philosopher-martyr, he practically invented the genre. In Plato’s rendering of Socrates’s case, we have almost all the ingredients of any good narrative of martyrdom: a protagonist who, because of his commitment to a life of virtue and wisdom seeking, antagonizes his community; his readiness to die for his philosophy rather than accept the dictates of a misguided crowd; a hostile political environment marked by intolerance and narrow-mindedness; a situation of crisis escalating into a chain of dramatic events; the climax in the form of a public trial and the confrontation with the frenzied crowd; and finally the heroic, if unjust, death of the hero, followed by his apotheosis.

Beyond this, Plato’s writings have apparently shaped the actual behavior of people facing a choice similar to Socrates’s. When Thomas More, for example, shortly before losing his head, said, “I die the King’s good servant, but God’s first,” he was making an obvious reference to Socrates’s words during his trial, as rendered in this passage from the *Apology*: “Gentlemen, I am your very grateful and devoted servant, but I owe a greater obedience to God than to you.”

These philosophers—they cannot even die without giving proper scholarly references! Just as he was saying this, More must have had a sudden glimpse that what he was about to do was not as real as he would have liked it to be, as though something “unreal”—the world of fiction, the books he had read—had now crept into his own act of dying. Certainly, dying itself is a brutally real experience, maybe the most brutal of all. And yet, I am afraid More was right: dying for an idea never comes in pure form. It is always part reality, part fiction (in

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an undisclosed proportion). Like most things in life.

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Philosophy—What's the Use?

—Gary Gutting

There is an important conception of philosophy that falls to this criticism. Associated especially with earlier modern philosophers, particularly René Descartes, this conception sees philosophy as the essential *foundation* of the beliefs that guide our everyday life. For example, I act as though there is a material world and other people who experience it as I do. But how do I know that any of this is true? Couldn't I just be dreaming of a world outside my thoughts? And since (at best) I see only other human bodies, what reason do I have to think that there are any minds connected to those bodies? To answer these questions, it would seem that I need rigorous philosophical arguments for my existence and the existence of other thinking humans.

Of course, I don't actually need any such arguments, if only because I have no practical alternative to believing that I and other people exist. As soon as we stop thinking weird philosophical thoughts, we immediately go back to believing what skeptical arguments seem to call into question. And rightly so, since, as David Hume pointed out, we are human beings before we are philosophers.

But what Hume and, by our day, virtually all philosophers are rejecting is only what I'm calling the *foundationalist* conception of philosophy. Rejecting foundationalism means accepting that we have every right to hold basic beliefs that are not legitimated by philosophical reflection. More recently, philosophers as different as Richard Rorty and Alvin Plantinga have cogently argued that such basic beliefs include not only the "Humean" beliefs that no one can do without, but also substantive beliefs on controversial questions of ethics, politics and religion. Rorty, for example, maintained that the basic principles of liberal democracy require no philosophical grounding ("the priority of democracy over philosophy").

If you think that the only possible "use" of philosophy would be to provide a foundation for beliefs that need no foundation, then the conclusion that philosophy is of little importance for everyday life follows immediately. But there are other ways that philosophy can be of practical significance.

Even though basic beliefs on ethics, politics and religion do not require prior philosophical justification, they do need what we might

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call "intellectual maintenance," which itself typically involves philosophical thinking. Religious believers, for example, are frequently troubled by the existence of horrendous evils in a world they hold was created by an all-good God. Some of their trouble may be emotional, requiring pastoral guidance. But religious commitment need not exclude a commitment to coherent thought. For instance, often enough believers want to know if their belief in God makes sense given the reality of evil. The philosophy of religion is full of discussions relevant to this question. Similarly, you may be an atheist because you think all arguments for God's existence are obviously fallacious. But if you encounter, say, a sophisticated version of the cosmological argument, or the design argument from fine-tuning, you may well need a clever philosopher to see if there's anything wrong with it.

In addition to defending our basic beliefs against objections, we frequently need to clarify what our basic beliefs mean or logically entail. So, if I say I would never kill an innocent person, does that mean that I wouldn't order the bombing of an enemy position if it might kill some civilians? Does a commitment to democratic elections require one to accept a fair election that puts an antidemocratic party into power? Answering such questions requires careful conceptual distinctions, for example, between direct and indirect results of actions, or between a morality of intrinsically wrong actions and a morality of consequences. Such distinctions are major philosophical topics, of course, and most nonphilosophers won't be in a position to enter into high-level philosophical discussions. But there are both nonphilosophers who are quite capable of following such discussions and philosophers who enter public debates about relevant topics.

The perennial objection to any appeal to philosophy is that philosophers disagree among themselves about everything, so that there is no body of philosophical knowledge on which nonphilosophers can rely. It's true that philosophers do not agree on answers to the "big questions" like God's existence, free will, the nature of moral obligation, and so on. But they do agree about many logical interconnections and conceptual distinctions that are essential for thinking clearly about the big questions. Some examples: thinking about God and evil requires the key distinction between evil that is gratuitous (not necessary for some greater good) and evil that is not gratuitous; thinking about free will requires the distinction between a choice's being caused and its being compelled; and thinking about morality requires the distinction between an action that is intrinsically wrong (regardless of its consequences) and one that is wrong simply because of its consequences. Such distinctions arise from philosophical thinking, and philosophers know a great deal about how to understand and employ them. In this important sense, there is a body of philosophical knowledge on which nonphilosophers can and

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should rely.

JANUARY 25, 2012

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In the Cave: Philosophy and Addiction

—Peg O'Connor

I INTRODUCE THE NOTION OF ADDICTION AS A SUBJECT OF PHILOSOPHICAL inquiry here for a reason. I am a philosopher, yes, but I am also an alcoholic who has been sober for more than twenty-four years—only the last four of them as part of a recovery program. I am often asked how I got and stayed sober for those first nineteen years; it was because of philosophy, which engendered in me a commitment to living an examined life and gave me the tools and concepts to do so. My training in moral philosophy made it natural for me to wrestle with issues of character, responsibility, freedom, care and compassion in both work and life.

Philosophy has always been about the pursuit of knowledge, but one that included the higher aim of living a good and just life. This pursuit has involved examining the nature of just about everything. Socrates's guiding question was, "What is it?" The "it" in question could be justice, piety, beauty, courage, temperance, or knowledge. For Socrates, these are the crucial virtues around which life should turn. Socrates's agenda was to draw the line between what appears to be just or pious and what justice or piety really is. In the person of Socrates, Plato provides the powerful tools of conceptual analysis and allegory that can be fruitfully applied to the questions about addiction.

In his pursuit of knowledge about the nature of virtues, Socrates first had to debunk popular opinions about them. The debunking took the form of a dialogue but in reality more closely resembled a cross examination. Socrates looked for the essence, necessary property or ineliminable trait that made particular acts pious or just. Socrates interrogated every definition offered to him by asking for examples, pushing and pulling against those definitions, turning them inside out and upside down, stretching that definition to see if weird things followed, exploring what follows when a particular definition is put into practice and excavating hidden assumptions behind those definitions.

This isn't exactly glamorous work, but it is vital in the pursuit of knowledge of any sort. This kind of work prompted the seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke to describe himself as an underlaborer, clearing away the rubbish that gets in the way of acquiring knowledge. We now call this work conceptual analysis, one

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of the most powerful tools a philosopher has to wield.

How might philosophy approach or provide us with a better understanding of addiction? Socrates would ask, "What is it?" He would not be alone. Psychiatrists, psychologists, chemical dependency counselors and people in recovery programs the world over are constantly asking this question. Neuroscientists have now entered the fray, searching for both the cause and effective management of addiction. Yet there is no consensus. Defining addiction remains an area of heated debate.

Yet despite differences of opinion, most of us can recognize—and through recognition, perhaps better understand—certain behaviors and situations in which "normal" use of alcohol or other drugs turns to destructive dependency.

A sort of recognition may be found in examining allegory—in this case, a very familiar one from Plato. Allegory—a story that functions as an extended metaphor and has both literal and figurative meanings—is clearly not science. But it does offer the potential for a sort of insight that conceptual analysis cannot. An allegory allows us to unpack many of those dimensions that escape more scientific description. With the cave allegory that Plato offers in *The Republic* to draw the line between appearance and reality, we have a potentially powerful tool for understanding the crisis of the addicted person. Briefly, Plato's allegory is this:

There is a cave in which prisoners are chained facing a wall. They cannot move their heads and therefore cannot look sideways or behind; they only can look forward. Behind them are a burning fire and a half wall where puppeteers hold up puppets that cast shadows. To the chained men, the shadows are real; they have no conception of the objects that cause shadows. Appearance is mistaken for reality, and thus there is no real knowledge.

Now imagine that the prisoners are released from their chains. They look behind them and see the objects that caused the shadows. Most likely they will be confused and horrified and unwilling to accept that these objects caused the shadows. Imagine now that the prisoners start to leave the cave. They will be painfully blinded as soon as they encounter light. Once their eyes begin to adjust, they will be confronted by a harsh bright world with a whole host of horrifying objects. Some of the men will flee back to the safety of the darkness and shadows, valuing the familiar more highly than the unfamiliar. Anyone who returns and tells his friends who are still enchained what he has seen will be regarded as a nut lacking any credibility. Other men, once their eyes have more fully adjusted to the light, will want to stay above ground. Such people come to realize that world of light is the real one where genuine knowledge is possible. One further point to consider: some of the people who have seen the light of truth and reality need to go into the cave to help those who are still enchained to

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leave the cave. This is the philosopher's burden, according to Plato.

This allegory is richly wonderful for understanding addiction, relapse and recovery. Most people who become addicted become enchained to their drug of choice. The word *addiction* comes from the Latin verb *addicere*, which means to give over, dedicate, or surrender. In the case of many alcoholics, for instance, including my own, this is just what happens. What had perhaps started as fun and harmless use begins to grow troubling, painful and difficult to stop. The alcoholic becomes chained to alcohol in a way different from others who "drink normally."

In various scenarios of addiction, the addicted person's fixation on a shadow reality—one that does not conform to the world outside his or her use—is apparent to others. When the personal cost of drinking or drug use becomes noticeable, it can still be written off or excused as merely atypical. Addicts tend to orient their activities around their addictive behavior; they may forego friends and activities where drinking or drug use is not featured. Some may isolate themselves; others may change their circle of friends in order to be with people who drink or use in the same way they do. They engage in faulty yet persuasive alcoholic reasoning, willing to take anything as evidence that they do not have a problem; no amount of reasoning will persuade them otherwise. Each time the addict makes a promise to cut down or stop but does not, the chains get more constricting.

Yet for many reasons, some people begin to wriggle against the chains of addiction. Whether it is because they have experiences that scare them to death (not uncommon) or lose something that really matters (also not uncommon), some people begin to work themselves out of the chains. People whose descent into addiction came later in life have more memories of what life can be like sober. Some will be able to turn and see the fire and the half wall and recognize the puppets causing the shadows. Those whose use started so young that it is all they really know will often experience the fear and confusion that Plato described. But as sometimes happens in recovery, they can start to come out of the cave, too.

The brightness of the light can be painful, as many alcoholic-or drug-dependent people realize once their use stops. Those who drank or used drugs to numb feelings or avoid painful memories may feel defenseless. This is why they will retreat back to the familiar darkness of the cave. Back with their drinking friends, they will find comfort. This is one way to understand relapse.

Others will make it farther out of the cave and have their eyes adjust. They will struggle to stay sober and balanced. So many of their old coping behaviors will not work, and they are faced with a seemingly endless task of learning how to rebuild their emotional lives. Some will stay clean and sober for a good while and later relapse. People relapse for all sorts of reasons, and often these have to

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do with old patterned ways of thinking and behaving that make a roaring comeback. When people who have had some sobriety relapse and go back to the darkness of the cave, they may be met with derision—an “I told you so” attitude.

Those who do make it out of the cave and manage never to relapse again are few and far between. They know just how precarious their sobriety is and what they need to do to maintain it. People with long-term sobriety are often the ones who need to go back down into the cave, not as saviors, but for their own survival. People with years of sobriety often say that newcomers help them to stay sober because their pain, loss, and confusion are so fresh. Their stories remind old timers of enchained life in the cave. Old-timers can share their stories, too, and in the process show them different ways to be in the world.

Of course, our stories are real and deeply personal, but like allegories they can wield a transformative power. Transformation can come from many sources, including some of the earliest and most profound investigations in philosophy. Plato’s cave, Montaigne’s cat, Kierkegaard’s leap of faith, Nietzsche’s myth of eternal recurrence, Wittgenstein’s fly in the fly bottle, and feminist conceptions of self-identity—to name but a few—are ready companions in the pursuit to understand the complexities of addiction, relapse and recovery.

JANUARY 8, 2012

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Women in Philosophy? Do the Math

—Sally Haslanger

MANY OF US HAVE HAD THE EXPERIENCE OF SITTING ON AN AIRplane and being asked by the person in the next seat, “What do you do?”

It is a moment of uncertainty: What to say? There are risks if you reply, “I’m a philosopher,” for you may then have the neighbor expounding “their philosophy” at length, or recounting how awful their experience was when taking Philosophy 101. (“We read some crazy article about being kidnapped and hooked up to a famous violinist to keep him alive!”) One time, a male friend of mine got the enthusiastic response, “Oh, you’re a philosopher? Tell me some of your sayings!” However, when I’ve tried the “I’m a philosopher” reply, it has prompted laughter. Once when I queried why the laughter, the response was, “I think of philosophers as old men with beards, and you’re definitely not that! You’re too young and attractive to be a philosopher.” I’m sure he intended this as a compliment. But I stopped giving the answer “I’m a philosopher.”

Although most philosophers these days are not old men with beards, most professional philosophers are men; in fact, white men. It is a surprise to almost everyone that the percentage of women earning philosophy doctorates is less than in most of the physical sciences. As recently as 2010, philosophy had a lower percentage of women doctorates than math, chemistry, and economics. Note, however, that of these fields, philosophy has made the most progress on this count in the past five years.

The percentage of women philosophers in the faculty ranks is much more difficult to determine. Although for decades the American Philosophical Association’s Committee on the Status of Women lobbied the association to collect demographic data, it failed to do so. We have mostly relied on the efforts of individuals to do head counts. The best data we have suggests that in 2011, the tenured/tenure-track faculty in the fifty-one graduate programs ranked by the Leiter Report —the most widely used status ranking of Anglophone philosophy departments—included only 21.9 percent women.

This is potentially quite misleading, however, for the Digest of Education Statistics reports that in 2003 (the most recent data compiled for philosophy), the percentage of women in full-time instructional postsecondary positions was a mere 16.6 percent of the

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total thirteen thousand philosophers, a year when 27.1 percent of the doctorates went to women. Soon we will know more, however, for the APA has thankfully started to collect demographic data.

The numbers of philosophers of color, especially women of color, is even more appalling. The 2003 number of 16.6 percent full-time women philosophy instructors includes *zero* women of color. Apparently there was insufficient data for any racial group of women other than white women to report. The APA Committee on the Status of Black Philosophers and the Society of Young Black Philosophers report that currently in the United States there are 156 blacks in philosophy, including doctoral students and philosophy PhDs in academic positions; this includes a total of 55 black women, 31 of whom hold tenured or tenure-track positions. Assuming that there are still 13,000 full-time philosophy instructors in the United States, the representation of scholars of color is plausibly worse than in *any other field in the academy*, including not only physics, but also engineering. Inexcusable.

With these numbers, you don't need sexual harassment or racial harassment to prevent women and minorities from succeeding, for alienation, loneliness, implicit bias, stereotype threat, microaggression, and outright discrimination will do the job. But in a world of such small numbers, harassment and bullying is easy.

"Bad actors" are a problem, but the deeper problem is the context that gives "bad actors" power. Change needs to happen on multiple fronts for us to make progress. Philosophy lacks the infrastructure that other disciplines have to bring about systematic change. We don't have the funding or the clout of anything like the National Science Foundation.

We do have a small community of feminist and antiracist activists and some important recent changes in the governance of the APA—like the appointment of a new executive director, Amy Ferrer, who not only has a strong background in nonprofit administration, but also a degree in women's studies. The McGinn case is a tipping point, not because it has taken down someone with great power and influence, but because his case and the response to it demonstrates that the persistent activism of the past twenty years is becoming institutionalized. We are the winning side now. We will not relent, so it is only a matter of time.

SEPTEMBER 2, 2013

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What's Wrong With Philosophy?

—Linda Martín Alcoff

WHAT IS WRONG WITH PHILOSOPHY?

This is the question posed to me by journalists last year while I served as president of the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division. Why is philosophy so far behind every other humanities department in the diversity of its faculty? Why are its percentages of women and people of color (an intersecting set) so out of tune with the country, even with higher education? What *is* wrong with philosophy?

And now our field has another newsworthy event: the claims of sexual harassment against the influential philosopher Colin McGinn and his subsequent resignation, a story that made the front page of *The New York Times*. Here is a leading philosopher of language unable to discern how sexual banter becomes sexual pressure when it is repetitively parlayed from a powerful professor to his young female assistant. It might lead one to wonder, what is wrong with the field of philosophy of language?

McGinn defended himself by deflecting blame. The student, he argued, simply did not understand enough philosophy of language to get the harmlessness of his jokes. He did not intend harm, nor did his statements logically entail harm; therefore, her sense of harm is on her.

Alas, McGinn's self-defense echoes a common narrative in the discipline concerning its demographic challenges. As the *Times* article reports, and the philosophy blogosphere will confirm, the paucity in philosophy of women and people of color is often blamed on us. Some suggest it is philosophy's "rough and tumble" style of debate that has turned us women and nonwhite males away. Logical implication: we may just not be cut out for such a demanding field.

ONCE IN GRADUATE SCHOOL, I ventured to raise a series of skeptical questions to one of the most world-renowned philosophers, Roderick Chisholm, in his seminar on the theory of knowledge. I leaned toward American pragmatism and Wittgenstein—he was a famous foundationalist. He wiped the floor with me, turning my questions to mush and getting a good laugh from the class. This did not surprise me, but what did was that, the next day, Chisholm approached me in

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the student lounge and asked me gently if I was OK. I answered, “Yes, of course,” which was the truth.

I had observed Chisholm’s pedagogical style for two years, and I knew his capacity to turn a student’s dissenting opinion into a Jell-O mold of quivering meaninglessness, to the class’s mirth. I admired his abilities. But I still wanted to see how he would respond to my specific questions. Despite his jokes, one could garner from his response to my questions a substantive philosophical rejoinder. It was a perfectly legitimate philosophical exchange, livened up a bit to keep his students awake.

Chisholm was typical of the best philosophers of his day and ours in his combination of philosophical acumen and rhetorical skill. Yet he was atypical at that time in his sensitivity to the practical contexts of the argumentative arena. He had enough respect for me to treat me like all other disputants, but also to want me to stay in the game. As one of two women in the class, he was aware I might be experiencing an alienation-induced anxiety about my public performance.

The issue is not debate, simpliciter, but how it is done. Too many philosophers accept the idea that truth is best achieved by a marketplace of ideas conducted in the fashion of ultimate fighting. But aggressive styles that seek easy victories by harping on arcane counterexamples do not maximize truth. Nor does making use of the social advantages one might have by virtue of one’s gender, ethnicity or seniority. Nor does stubbornly refusing to acknowledge the real world contexts, rife with implicit bias and power distortions, in which even philosophical debates always occur.

Sometimes, interestingly, the aim of truth is enhanced less by adversarial argument than by a receptivity that holds back on disagreement long enough to try out the new ideas on offer, push them further, see where they might go. Sometimes pedagogy works best not by challenging but by getting on board a student’s own agenda. Sometimes understanding is best reached when we expend our skeptical faculties, as Montaigne did, on our own beliefs, our own opinions. If debate is meant to be a means to truth—an idea we philosophers like to believe—the best forms turn out to be a variegated rather than uniform set.

The demographic challenges of philosophy cannot be blamed on the supposed deficiencies of the minority. Unlike Professor Chisholm, McGinn did not check in with his student but continued to lace his e-mails with sexual innuendo, if not propositions. Women who have had this experience in the discipline (me and nearly everyone I know) can be discomfited by the thought that their professor’s intellectual praise is strategically motivated, designed with an intent other than the truth. It can throw their confidence and certainly disable debate. Which may, of course, be quite intentional.

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SEPTEMBER 3, 2013

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The Disappearing Women

—Rae Langton

"HOW MANY PHILOSOPHERS DOES IT TAKE TO CHANGE A LIGHT bulb?"

"It depends what you mean by 'change' . . ."

That joke pokes gentle fun at a popular caricature: the chin-stroking graybeard, with his fetish for word meanings, his practical irrelevance and his philosophy that "leaves everything as it is," as Wittgenstein said. The caricature is misleading, for philosophy also prides itself on its capacity to ask hard questions and challenge prejudice. Socrates was executed for stirring up trouble. Descartes began his *Meditations* with a rousing call to "demolish completely" a long-standing edifice of falsehoods—to uproot our "habit of holding on to old opinions" and look at the world with fresh, unbiased eyes.

That radical power has inspired many women in philosophy, and much political work. The English philosopher Mary Astell wrote irreverently, in 1700, that an opinion's age is no guide to its truth, that "a rational mind" is not made for servitude, and that a woman's obligation to a man "is only a Business by the Bye"—"just as it may be any Man's Business and Duty to keep Hogs." From Descartes's idea that we are *essentially thinking beings* she deduced a conclusion too daring for her peers: *colleges for women*. Husband-keeping is like hog-keeping: a contingent duty, not what a woman is made for.

Many women have, like Astell, found in philosophy a source of joyful challenge and liberation, fascinating in its own terms, with illuminating consequences for life and the social world. Given philosophy's ambitions, we might fondly expect a profession especially free from bias and welcoming to those targeted by prejudice. That hope is somewhat hard to square with its dearth of women.

There are many possible explanations. Bias is harder to notice than Descartes expected, being unconscious, near-universal and more readily revealed in the psychologist's lab than by the "natural light of reason."

There is the effort of juggling work and family life (but why philosophy, more than other disciplines?) There are startling reports of sexual harassment, at the website What Is It Like to Be a Woman in Philosophy (Worse than other fields? Who knows, but it should be *better*!). Some have looked to gender norms for an explanation,

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supposing that if “men are from Mars,” they thrive better in our martial debating culture (but why philosophy, more than economics?). Some have, more plausibly, invoked a “perfect storm” of diverse factors (see Louise Antony’s article) “Different Voices or Perfect Storm: Why Are There So Few Women in Philosophy?”).

That caricature of Philosophy must be partly to blame: the “man of reason” pictured as a serious, high-minded Dumbledore (for some nice correctives, see the site Looks Philosophical). When a field is group stereotyped, outsiders often feel less welcome. They often perform less well when something triggers group awareness. Stereotype threat can make anyone, from white athletes to black students, underperform, when appropriately primed. Philosophy itself may be a source of priming influence, with its mostly male lineup for reading lists, conferences and teachers (see Jennifer Saul’s work on the psychological biases affecting philosophy).

Philosophy is often introduced through its history, beginning with Socrates, who banished the weeping women, as prelude to the real business of philosophizing. Other banishments followed, so it can be tempting to see an unbroken all-male succession, as course lists (including my own) still testify. That part, too, is misleading. Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, in her notable correspondence with Descartes, offered the most enduring objection to Descartes’s dualism: How can immaterial mind and material body interact? She is puzzlingly absent from standard editions that include his contemporary critics. Maria von Herbert provoked a deep question for Kant: Is moral perfection compatible with utter apathy? She is puzzlingly absent from the latest Kant biography, and her letters survive elsewhere for their gossip value (sex! suicide!). With omissions like these we let down philosophers of past, present and future. We feed the stereotype and the biases Descartes despised.

One more joke, then: “How many feminists does it take to change a light bulb?”

“It’s not the light bulb that needs changing.”

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The Difficulty of Philosophy

—Alexander George

ONE OFTEN HEARS THE LAMENT, WHY HAS PHILOSOPHY BECOME SO remote? Why has it lost contact with people?

The complaint must be as old as philosophy itself. In Aristophanes's *Clouds*, we meet Socrates as he is being lowered to the stage in a basket. His first words are impatient and distant: "Why do you summon me, O creature of a day?" He goes on to explain pompously what he was doing before he was interrupted: "I tread the air and scrutinize the sun." Already in ancient Greece, philosophy had a reputation for being troublesomely distant from the concerns that launch it.

Is the complaint justified, however? On the face of it, it would seem not to be. I run AskPhilosophers.org, a website that features questions from the general public and responses by a panel of professional philosophers. The questions are sent by people at all stages of life: from the elderly wondering when to forgo medical intervention to successful professionals asking why they should care about life at all, from teenagers inquiring whether it is irrational to fear aging to ten-year-olds wanting to know what the opposite of a lion is. The responses from philosophers have been humorous, kind, clear, and at the same time sophisticated, penetrating, and informed by the riches of the philosophical traditions in which they were trained. The site has evidently struck a chord as we have by now posted thousands of entries, and the questions continue to arrive daily from around the world. Clearly, philosophers can—and do—respond to philosophical questions in intelligible and helpful ways.

But admittedly, this is casual stuff. And at the source of the lament is the perception that philosophers, when left to their own devices, produce writings and teach classes that are either unhappily narrow or impenetrably abstruse. Full-throttle philosophical thought often appears far removed from, and so much more difficult than, the questions that provoke it.

It certainly doesn't help that philosophy is rarely taught or read in schools. Despite the fact that children have an intense interest in philosophical issues, and that a training in philosophy sharpens one's analytical abilities, with few exceptions our schools are de-philosophized zones. This has as a knock-on effect that students

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entering college shy away from philosophy courses. Bookstores—those that remain—boast philosophy sections cluttered with self-help guides. It is no wonder that the educated public shows no interest in, or perhaps even finds alien, the fully ripened fruits of philosophy.

While all this surely contributes to the felt remoteness of philosophy, it is also a product of it: for one reason why philosophy is not taught in schools is that it is judged irrelevant. And so we return to the questions of why philosophy appears so removed and whether this is something to lament.

This situation seems particular to philosophy. We do not find physicists reproached in the same fashion. People are not typically frustrated when their questions about the trajectory of soccer balls get answered by appeal to Newton's laws and differential calculus.

The difference persists in part because to wonder about philosophical issues is an occupational hazard of being human in a way in which wondering about falling balls is not. Philosophical questions can present themselves to us with an immediacy, even an urgency, that can seem to demand a correspondingly accessible answer. High philosophy usually fails to deliver such accessibility—and so the dismay that borders on a sense of betrayal.

Must it be so? To some degree, yes. Philosophy may begin in wonder, as Plato suggested in the *Theaetetus*, but it doesn't end there. Philosophers will never be content merely to catalog wonders, but will want to illuminate them—and whatever kind of work that involves will surely strike some as air treading.

But how high into the air must one travel? How theoretical, or difficult, need philosophy be? Philosophers disagree about this, and the history of philosophy has thrown up many competing conceptions of what philosophy should be. The dominant conception today, at least in the United States, looks to the sciences for a model of rigor and explanation. Many philosophers now conceive of themselves as more like discovery-seeking scientists than anything else, and they view the great figures in the history of philosophy as likewise "scientists in search of an organized conception of reality," as W. V. Quine, the leading American philosopher of the twentieth century, once put it. For many, science not only provides us with information that might be pertinent to answering philosophical questions, but also with exemplars of what successful answers look like.

Because philosophers today are often trained to think of philosophy as continuous with science, they are inclined to be impatient with expectations of greater accessibility. Yes, philosophy does begin in wonder, such philosophers will agree. But if one is not content to be a wonder-monger, if one seeks illumination, then one must uncover abstract, general principles through the development of a theoretical framework.

This search for underlying, unifying principles may lead into

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unfamiliar, even alien, landscapes. But such philosophers will be undaunted, convinced that the correct philosophical account will often depend on an unobvious discovery visible only from a certain level of abstraction. This view is actually akin to the conception advanced by Aristophanes's Socrates when he defends his airborne inquiries: "If I had been on the ground and from down there contemplated what's up here, I would have made no discoveries at all." The resounding success of modern science has strengthened the attraction of an approach to explanation that has always had a deep hold on philosophers.

But the history of philosophy offers other conceptions of illumination. Some philosophers will not accept that insight demands the discovery of unsuspected general principles. They are instead sympathetic to David Hume's dismissal, over 250 years ago, of remote speculations in ethics: "New discoveries are not to be expected in these matters," he said. Ludwig Wittgenstein took this approach across the board when he urged that "the problems [in philosophy] are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known." He was interested in philosophy as an inquiry into "what is possible *before* all new discoveries and inventions," and insisted that "if one tried to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them." Insight is to be achieved not by digging below the surface, but rather by organizing what is before us in an illuminatingly perspicuous manner.

The approach that involves the search for "new discoveries" of a theoretical nature is now ascendant. Since the fruits of this kind of work, even when conveyed in the clearest of terms, can well be remote and difficult, we have here another ingredient of the sense that philosophy spends too much time scrutinizing the sun.

Which is the correct conception of philosophical inquiry? Philosophy is the only activity such that to pursue questions about the nature of that activity is to engage in it. We can certainly ask what we are about when doing mathematics or biology or history—but to ask those questions is no longer to do mathematics or biology or history. One cannot, however, reflect on the nature of philosophy without doing philosophy. Indeed, the question of what we ought to be doing when engaged in this strange activity is one that has been wrestled with by many great philosophers throughout philosophy's long history.

Questions, therefore, about philosophy's remove cannot really be addressed without doing philosophy. In particular, the question of how difficult philosophy ought to be, or the kind of difficulty it ought to have, is itself a philosophical question. In order to answer it, we need to philosophize—even though the nature of that activity is precisely what puzzles us.

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And that, of course, is another way in which philosophy can be difficult.

JUNE 27, 2010

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The Philosophical Dinner Party

—Frieda Klotz

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LIFE? IS THERE A GOD? DOES THE human race have a future? The standard perception of philosophy is that it poses questions that are often esoteric and almost always daunting. So another pertinent question, and one implicitly raised by Alexander George's essay "The Difficulty of Philosophy," is, Can philosophy ever be fun?

Philosophy was a way of life for ancient philosophers, as much as a theoretical study—from Diogenes the Cynic masturbating in public ("I wish I could cure my hunger as easily" he replied, when challenged) to Marcus Aurelius obsessively transcribing and annotating his thoughts—and its practitioners didn't mind amusing people or causing public outrage to bring attention to their message. Divisions between academic and practical philosophy have long existed, for sure, but even Plato, who was prolific on theoretical matters, may have tried to translate philosophy into action: ancient rumor has it that he traveled to Sicily to tutor first Dionysios I, king of Syracuse, and later his son (each ruler fell out with Plato and unceremoniously sent him home).

For at least one ancient philosopher, the love of wisdom was not only meant to be practical, but also to combine "fun with serious effort." This is the definition of Plutarch, a Greek who lived in the post-Classical age of the second century AD, a time when philosophy tended to focus on ethics and morals. Plutarch is better known as a biographer than a philosopher. A priest, politician, and Middle Platonist who lived in Greece under Roman rule, he wrote parallel lives of Greeks and Romans, from which Shakespeare borrowed liberally and Emerson rapturously described as "a bible for heroes." At the start and end of each "life" he composed a brief moral essay, comparing the faults and virtues of his subjects. Although artfully written, the *Lives* is really little more than brilliant realizations of Plutarch's own very practical take on philosophy, aimed at teaching readers how to live.

Plutarch thought philosophy should be taught at dinner parties. It should be taught through literature, or written in letters giving advice to friends. Good philosophy does not occur in isolation; it is about friendship, inherently social and shared. The philosopher should engage in politics, and he should be busy, for he knows, as Plutarch

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sternly puts it, that idleness is no remedy for distress.

Many of Plutarch's works are concerned with showing readers how to deal better with their day-to-day circumstances. In Plutarch's eyes, the philosopher is a man who sprinkles seriousness into a silly conversation; he gives advice and offers counsel but prefers a discussion to a conversation-hogging monologue. He likes to exchange ideas but does not enjoy aggressive arguments. And if someone at his dinner table seems timid or reserved, he's more than happy to add some extra wine to the shy guest's cup.

He outlined this benign doctrine over the course of more than eighty moral essays (far less often read than the *Lives*). Several of his texts offer two interpretive tiers—advice on philosophical behavior for less educated readers, and a call to further learning for those who would want more. It's intriguing to see that the guidance he came up with has much in common with what we now call cognitive behavioral therapy. Writing on the subject of contentment, he tells his public: Change your attitudes! Think positive nongloomy thoughts! If you don't get a raise or a promotion, remember that means you'll have less work to do. He points out that "there are storm winds that vex both the rich and the poor, both married and single."

In one treatise, aptly called "Table Talks," Plutarch gives an account of the dinner parties he attended with his friends during his lifetime. Over innumerable jugs of wine they grapple with ninety-five topics, covering science, medicine, social etiquette, women, alcohol, food and literature: When is the best time to have sex? Did Alexander the Great really drink too much? Should a host seat his guests or allow them to seat themselves? Why are old men very fond of strong wine? And, rather obscurely, why do women not eat the heart of lettuce? (This last, sadly, is fragmentary and thus unanswered.) Some of the questions point to broader issues, but there is plenty of gossip and philosophical loose talk.

Plutarch begins "Table Talks" by asking his own philosophical question: Is philosophy a suitable topic of conversation at a dinner party? The answer is yes, not just because Plato's "Symposium" is a central philosophic text (*symposium* being Greek for "drinking party"); it's because philosophy is about conducting oneself in a certain way—the philosopher knows that men "practice philosophy when they are silent, when they jest, even, by Zeus! when they are the butt of jokes and when they make fun of others."

Precisely because of its eclecticism and the practical nature of his treatises, Plutarch's work is often looked down on in the academic world, and even Emerson said he was "without any supreme intellectual gifts," adding, "He is not a profound mind . . . not a metaphysician like Parmenides, Plato or Aristotle." When we think of the lives of ancient philosophers, we're far more likely to think of Socrates, condemned to death by the Athenians and drinking hemlock,

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than of Plutarch, a Greek living happily with Roman rule, quaffing wine with his friends.

Yet in our own time-poor age, with anxieties shifting from economic meltdowns to oil spills to daily stress, it's now more than ever that we need philosophy of the everyday sort. In the Plutarchan sense, friendship, parties and even wine are not trivial; and while philosophy may indeed be difficult, we shouldn't forget that it should be fun.

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When Socrates Met Phaedrus: Eros in Philosophy

—Simon Critchley

CRAZY HOT

LET ME SET THE SCENE. IT'S HOT. IT'S REALLY HOT. IT'S THE middle of the Greek summer. Socrates is in Athens where he bumps into an acquaintance called Phaedrus. They say hi. They begin to talk.

Phaedrus is a little excited. He has just heard what he thinks is an amazing speech on love—eros—by the orator Lysias. For the ancient Greeks, eros denoted both sexual pleasure and the name of a god—that is, love has both physical and metaphysical aspects.

Socrates persuades Phaedrus to read him the speech (he has a copy hidden under his cloak). After a long morning listening to speeches, Phaedrus is eager to stretch his legs, and Socrates agrees to accompany him on a stroll out of the city. What is remarkable is that this is the only time in all the Platonic dialogues that Socrates leaves the city of Athens. He is no nature boy. Trees have nothing to teach him.

Indeed, the climate influences this dialogue more than any other text by Plato that I know. Such is the heat of eros described by Sappho,

> *Sweat pours down me, I shake*
> *all over, I go pale as green*
> *grass. I'm that close to being dead.*

Like I said, it's hot.

The two men walk some distance along the Ilissos River. They are both barefoot and walk in the water. Sweat pours down their faces. They decide to sit down by the banks of the river in the shade of a broad-leaved plane tree—in Greek, a *platanos*. A Plato-tree. It is hardly mere accident that the shade that provides the shelter for the dialogue is broad-shouldered Plato—from *platus,* meaning broad—the tree in which cicadas sing.

Socrates tells a story about the cicadas. Because they were so enthused by the Muses, cicadas sing constantly, stopping for neither food nor drink until they die. If cicadas are inspired by the Muses, Socrates suggests, then philosophers should be inspired by cicadas. The difference between philosophers and cicadas is that the former

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don't sing so beautifully or so constantly . . . although they do get to live a little longer.

Lounging under a tree by the river, Phaedrus remarks that Socrates appears "to be totally out of place." In leaving the city, Socrates seems to leave himself behind, to become beside himself, to become ecstatic, indeed a little manic. Love, or what the Greeks call *eros*, as Socrates insists, is "manike," a madness. It's crazy hot.

EROS IS A FORCE

What is eros? More specifically, what is the eros of philosophy and the philosopher? We commonly understand it to be a force that compels physical love, but we might also speculate as to whether eros is a force that compels philosophy, a force that is somehow outside the self, but toward which the soul can incline itself, what Socrates calls a god, a force that perhaps even compels the philosopher to leave the cave in Plato's *Republic*. Of course, it is not at all clear how the first prisoner in the cave emancipates himself. He frees the others, but who frees him? It is unexplained in the text. Perhaps eros is the animating and primal force that shapes philosophy and moves the philosopher to break free from the cave and move toward the light.

It is peculiar indeed that the enabling condition for freedom is a force that compels: a compulsion, a necessity. Unconditional freedom appears to be conditioned by what contradicts it. Eros, in making philosophy possible, somehow turns the freedom of the philosopher inside out, back to front. It is a nice, if totally incidental, peculiarity that the numerals of this year, 2013, looked at backwards and with a slight squint spell *eros*. Perhaps we can only see eros back to front, in the form of indirect communication, like a dialogue.

PHILOSOPHY'S PRIMAL SCENE

But how are we to understand the nature of eros as it appears in Plato's *Phaedrus*? And here we approach the central enigma of the dialogue. For it appears to deal with two distinct topics: eros and rhetoric. My thought is very simple: I will try and show that these twin themes of eros and rhetoric are really one and they help explain that peculiar form of discourse that Socrates calls philosophy.

For the ancient Greeks, there was obviously a close connection between the passions or emotions, like eros, and rhetoric. We need only recall that Aristotle's discussion of the emotions is in the *Rhetoric*. Emotion was linked to rhetoric, for Aristotle, because it could influence judgment, in the legal, moral or political senses of the word.

Of course, in the Athens of Socrates's time, the two groups of

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people capable of stirring up powerful emotions were the tragic poets and the Sophists. Let's just say that Socrates had issues with both groups. Tragedy, again in Aristotle's sense, stirs up the emotions of pity and fear in a way that leads to their katharsis, understood as purgation or, better, purification. The Sophists exploited the link between emotion and rhetoric in order to teach the art of persuasive speech that was central to the practice of law and litigation. Classical Athens was a very litigious place but mercifully did not have lawyers. Therefore, men (and it was just men) had to defend themselves, and Sophists taught those who could pay a fee how to do it.

Socrates's inability to defend himself in the law court and how such an inability is the defining criterion of the philosopher recurs in dialogue after dialogue in the *Apology*, obviously, but with particular power in the *Theatetus*, as I tried to suggest in the very first column of The Stone in 2010. The philosopher is presented as a kind of madman or fool, like Thales, who falls into ditches because he is contemplating the stars. This is why the Thracian maid laughs. The philosopher is continually contrasted with the pettifogging citizen who speaks in the law court. Where the latter is skilled in speaking in court against the clock—the clepsydra, or water clock, that quite literally steals time—the philosopher has no sense of time and consequently takes his time, but uses it badly. The philosopher's inability to defend himself persuasively in the law court leads directly to being found guilty and sentenced to execution. Socrates's inability to defend himself leads to his death.

Such is the primal scene of philosophy. Socrates is the tragic hero whose death moves the drama off the stage of the Theater of Dionysus on the south slope of the Acropolis into the heart of the city of Athens. To understate matters somewhat, there is no obvious historical alliance between philosophy and democracy. In killing Socrates (and it is highly arguable that this was justified), Athenian democracy stands indicted.

WHO IS PHAEDRUS?

Philosophy's main question, then and now, is how might there be a true speech that refuses the corrosive effects of bad rhetoric and sophistry? This brings us back to the *Phaedrus*. The purpose of the dialogue is to arouse an emotion, specifically a philosophical eros, in the rather unphilosophical Phaedrus.

We have to be honest about Phaedrus. Who is this guy? He is not the kind of feisty, angry, and highly intelligent opponent that Socrates finds in Callicles from the *Gorgias* or even Thrasymachus from the *Republic*, let alone the superior intellect of the Stranger from the *Sophist* whose stunning dialectical ability reduces Socrates to silence.

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Phaedrus is a more simple soul. We might define him as a being who lives in order to receive pleasure from listening to speeches. He is like someone nowadays who compulsively watches TED talks. So Socrates gives him that pleasure in order both to please and persuade him. Not just once, but twice. Indeed, the sheer length of Socrates's second speech on eros might arouse our suspicion, for we know from elsewhere that Socrates hates long speeches, even delivered by the most eloquent of speakers. Why is Socrates doing what he hates?

Now, I am not suggesting that Phaedrus is stupid, but he's perhaps not the brightest spark in Athens (admittedly a city with many bright sparks). There appear to be many facts of which he is unaware, and he also keeps forgetting Socrates's argument and needs constant reminders. "So it seemed," he says at one point, "but remind me again how we did it." And this occurs during a discussion of recollection versus reminding. Phaedrus forgets the argument during a discussion of memory. You get the point.

Much of Socrates's rather obvious and extended passages of irony in the dialogue also seem to pass him by completely. Occasionally, Phaedrus will burst out with something like, "Socrates, you're very good at making up stories from Egypt or wherever else you want." Phaedrus is very nice but a little bit dim.

DIRECTING THE SOUL: BAD RHETORIC AND GOOD

Rhetoric is defined by the Sophist Gorgias as inducing persuasion in the soul of the listener. But Socrates goes further and defines rhetoric as what he calls a techne psychagogia, an art of leading or directing the soul, a kind of bewitchment that holds the listener's soul spellbound. Of course, the irony here is that it is precisely in these terms that Socrates criticizes the effects of tragic poetry in the *Republic*, which is why the poets cannot be admitted into a philosophically well-ordered city.

However, Socrates's speeches in the *Phaedrus* are precisely this kind of bewitching psychagogy. Phaedrus, who loves speeches, is completely entranced. His soul is conjured by Socrates with complete success. The dialogue brings Phaedrus to love philosophy by loving philosophically.

Now, it might appear on a superficial reading that the question of eros disappears in the second half of the *Phaedrus*. But this is deceptive, for the forensic discussion of Lysias's speech on eros leads to a definition of artful or true speech. The dialogue culminates in a definition of the philosopher as the true lover or lover of truth, by which point Phaedrus is completely persuaded by Socrates.

The intention of the *Phaedrus* is thus to persuade Phaedrus. Nothing more. The purpose of the dialogue, as Alexander Nehamas has

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convincingly suggested, is to inflame philosophical eros in Phaedrus that gives him the ability to distinguish bad rhetoric, of the kinds found in Lysias's speech and in Socrates's first speech, from true rhetoric, of the kind found in the second speech and then analyzed in the second half of the dialogue.

What does this suggest about philosophical dialogue? I think it leads us to the view that each dialogue is radically singular, as singular as a proper name of its title. This is why the dialogue is called in Greek *Phaidros*. The dialogue is addressed to a specific and named interlocutor. It meets Phaedrus on his ground (it even walks out with him barefoot into the countryside) and brings him to philosophical eros. It meets him in his own terms—namely, in terms of his questionable estimation of the high importance of speeches. It meets him by accepting his preferences, his prejudices, his sense of what matters and then slowly turning his sophistical delight in speeches into a commitment to philosophy.

THE PURPOSE OF PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUE

Philosophy is addressed to a particular and existent other, not the empty personification of some particular virtue or vice (which is arguably the error of the dialogues of later philosophers like Berkeley and Hume, which can appear oddly contrived and wooden). Dialogue is the attempt to persuade that other in terms that they will understand and accept, whatever it is that they believe. Otherwise, philosophy is building castles in the air with its concepts, its systems, and its bizarre jargon, which go right over the head of someone as unphilosophical as Phaedrus.

In philosophy, we have to meet the other on their ground and in their own terms and try and bring them around, slowly, cautiously and with good humor. Socrates does not say how awful he finds Lysias's speech, and he shouldn't. It would mean that the dialogue had failed, and we should note that Platonic dialogues do sometimes fail. For example, Callicles simply refuses to play Socrates's question-and-answer game and the *Gorgias* ends up as a crazed monologue of Socrates talking to himself. Socrates doesn't always get his way.

But the *Phaedrus* is a success in that Socrates completely persuades his interlocutor. We might want to say that a philosophical dialogue is more like a case study in psychotherapy, which also sometimes fails. Such case studies might be exemplary and thereby exert a general claim, as the *Phaedrus* unquestionably does, but each dialogue is a singular and highly specific case.

PHILOSOPHY AS PERFORMANCE

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Socrates specifies the conditions that any rhetoric must meet in order to be a philosophical rhetoric capable of engendering eros. If rhetoric is a kind of psychagogia, or soul leading, then a philosophical rhetoric must be based on knowledge of the nature of various kinds of soul and which sorts of speeches would appeal to which sorts of souls.

Socrates then goes on, and listen closely to his words:

> *On meeting someone he will be able to discern what he is like and make clear to himself that the person actually standing in front of him is of just this particular sort of character . . . that he must now apply speeches of such-and-such a kind in this particular way in order to secure conviction about such-and-such an issue. When he has learned all this . . . then, and only then, will he have finally mastered the art well and completely.*

Of course, this is an exquisite commentary on the very situation in which Socrates finds himself during the *Phaedrus*. He has to make his speech address “the person actually standing in front of him”—namely, Socrates has to speak to Phaedrus in terms that he will accept “in order to secure conviction.” He will have to say the right thing in the right way at the right time to the person right in front of him.

The sheer reflexivity of the *Phaedrus* is astonishing. It is not only a piece of the most beautiful writing that, in its final scene, denounces writing. It is also an enactment of the very conditions of true philosophical rhetoric theorized in the dialogue. It is the enactment of philosophical theory as a practice of dialogue. The opposite of a self-contradiction, the *Phaedrus* is a performative self-enactment of philosophy.

If eros is a force that shapes the philosopher, then rhetoric is the art by which the philosopher persuades the nonphilosopher to assume philosophical eros, to incline his or her soul toward truth. But to do this does not entail abandoning the art of rhetoric or indeed sophistry, which teaches that art, although it does so falsely. Philosophy uses true rhetoric against false rhetoric.

The subject matter of the *Phaedrus* is rhetoric, true rhetoric. Its intention is to show that veritable eros, as opposed to the kind of vulgar pederasty that Socrates criticizes and which was the Athenian specialty of the time, is both subject *to* true rhetoric and the subject *of* true rhetoric. Philosophical eros is the effect of rhetoric, of language used persuasively. To state the obvious, sometimes it succeeds, and sometimes it fails.

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THE GEOGRAPHY OF PHILOSOPHY

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