Philosophical Provocations

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PREFACE

The essays in this volume have benefited from and sometimes been inspired by conversations with J. Philip Miller, David Cowing, Donald Cowing, and Karren Cowing.

Chapter One engages the general issues of what constitutes philosophy, what philosophy has been, and what it should be. I challenge many of the basic assumptions about what is characteristically viewed as the Western tradition of philosophy and how it has been conceived. In the course of the following chapters, I offer an alternative account of the enterprise of philosophical inquiry and its cognitive and practical relationship to other human practices. Chapter Two is a brief journey through what is often considered the history of philosophy. The chapter is designed to provide a picture of some of the most significant transformations in this literature and of how it relates to contemporary philosophical endeavors. Chapter Three was prompted by a book given to me by a friend who had found the book personally meaningful. I approached it with a more critical eye and concluded that it was both confused and confusing, even if it raised some important perennial issues, such as how to reconcile claims in areas such as natural science and religion. The chapter also begins to confront the problems involved when scientists attempt to philosophize and reflect on their own activity and relate it to other practices. They may be highly skilled in *doing* science, but they seldom know a great deal *about* science, that is, the history and philosophy of science. Chapter Four examines what became the source of the predominate twentieth century American understanding of the nature of science among scientists, philosophers, historians, and society in general. This image, however, was less an indigenous American formulation than the product of émigré scholars who fled Europe after the advent of Hitler and settled in the United States. Although to some extent the scientific self-image is based on university education and research experience, it is also the residue of philosophical arguments, and particularly ones to which scientists have often only been derivatively exposed. Chapter Five was initiated by a series of conversations about the

concept of time, which has been an enigma in philosophy, science, and everyday life. Temporality is a subject I have been engaged with at various points from the beginning of my career (e.g. *Political Philosophy and Time* (1968). Many scientists, subsequent to Isaac Newton, who claimed that time was an essential element of the universe, have declared, particularly after the advent of Einstein's work, that time is an illusion. However, in our commonsense view of the world, the reality and passing of time often seems quite evident. This chapter is an attempt to sort out this perennial dilemma. Chapter Six broaches the current debate about artificial intelligence and also raises the question of whether there is something that can be conceived as natural human intelligence. My basic argument is that all human intelligence is artificial, invented, and rooted in our linguistic capacities, which are themselves something that is learned. This leads to Chapter Seven, which is an extended argument about the relationship between language and thought. This is probably, for most readers, the most difficult chapter. It is, however, simply an argument against what tends to be the common assumption that human thinking precedes the acquisition of language and the various philosophical claims that seek to validate that assumption. My basic argument is that thought is essentially the internalization of language, that is, the learned capacity for silent speech. Chapter Eight turns away from the problem of the cognitive relationship between what I refer to as meta-practices, such as philosophy and social science, and instead considers what the practical relationship has been, could be, and should be. This is explored through the perennial question of the relationship in the United States between social science and society with a primary focus on political science and politics. Chapter Nine seeks to further illuminate this issue through an historical account of the theory of American government as it has been variously conceived from the point of the Constitutional Convention to the latter part of the twentieth century. Part of what I attempt to do in this essay is also demonstrate a certain approach to intellectual history, which I refer to as "internal historiography." This involves tracing the evolution of a discourse from its beginnings rather than starting from some present perspective and selecting elements from the past that sustain that perspective.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

It is often quipped that while academicians may publish successive books, these are, on examination, actually often different versions of the same book. I cannot lightly exempt myself from this charge, because my work has focused on certain consistent themes, which I have attempted to refine. This book is part of a continuous search for a satisfactory articulation of my arguments, but my intended audience is not primarily other philosophers. It was my attempt to explain my philosophical position to acquaintances outside academia that primarily prompted me to undertake this volume. My purpose is to provide an accurate account of philosophical issues but one that makes the material accessible to any educated reader. I distil some complex philosophical arguments and address a general audience in a manner unencumbered by footnotes, bibliographies, and interpretations of philosophers with whom most readers would not be familiar. The claims that I make in this introductory chapter will be repeated and more expansively discussed in the later chapters.

The volume reflects my long involvement, beginning in the 1960s, with the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, which in important respects was a challenge to much of past philosophy as well as to its echoes in the twentieth century academic field and cognate disciplines such as social science. His work has often been characterized as especially difficult to understand, and the consequence has been diverse and contested interpretations. My position, however, is that the work has been subjected to overinterpretation and that the difficulty has not so much been his aphoristic form of writing and its complexity, but instead that it was a challenge to much of both past and current philosophy. Although I often drew upon elements of Wittgenstein's work in my arguments about the nature of social, historical, and political inquiry, it was not until the 1990s that I began to approach this

material and its implications more comprehensively and systematically (for example, *The Orders of Discourse: Philosophy, Social Science, and Politics* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1998); *Imagining the American Polity: Political Science and the Discourse of Democracy* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004); *Political Theory and Social Science: Cutting Against the Grain* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). I attempted to bring it all together in *Social Inquiry After Wittgenstein and Kuhn: Leaving Everything As It Is* (Columbia University Press, 2014), and *Conventional Realism and Political Inquiry: Channeling Wittgenstein* (University of Chicago Press, 2020). These two books offer a detailed interpretation of his work ranging from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922) to the posthumous *Philosophical Investigations* (1951) and *On Certainty* (1969). Although I want to acknowledge my debt to Wittgenstein, I also want to make clear that, for the most part, this is not a book *about* Wittgenstein. It is about what I believe I have gained from his work, and I do not attempt to challenge other interpretations.

When I am sometimes asked what I teach and I reply "philosophy," and particularly in my case "political theory" or "political philosophy," there is usually a response such as "oh, how interesting," "I love philosophy," "well, that is too deep for me," when it is clear that the respondents have only the vaguest notion of what is involved. The image of philosophy that the average person might hold would, at best, likely be gained from a college survey course or a book such as Will Durant's *The Story of Philosophy* (1926). There are also many textbooks and websites that offer some version of the history of philosophy in the West as well as in other civilizations. But I believe that much of what I have to say about Western philosophy applies in many respects to philosophy more broadly conceived.

Today, philosophy often seems mystifying to many, but I believe this is in part because much of it, both past and present, if we look at it out of context, can be characterized as similar to what Wittgenstein called "nonsense." What I will count as nonsense are such things as philosophical claims about the universal foundations of human knowledge, what constitutes reality and truth, how the mind can access the world, and how philosophy can achieve these goals in a manner that both exceeds and underlies the particular criteria advanced at any point by science and other human practices. My use of the term "nonsense" should not be construed as

extremely pejorative, even though some might suggest it may bear some relationship to what the philosopher Henry Frankfurt discussed in *On Bullshit* (2005). He defined "bullshit" as language designed to have rhetorical effect without regard for what is true. I will stress the rhetorical character of past philosophy, but I do not claim that it had disregard for truth.

In 2002, G.A. Cohen, in "Deeper into Bullshit," suggested that Frankfurt had not allowed for academic work that falls into this category, such as postmodernism and poststructuralism, which claimed that meaning is a function of interpretation and, like Nietzsche, that meaning resides in the perspective of the reader and that consequentially everything, in the end, is really already interpretation. This position was, for example, dramatically exemplified in Jacques Derrida's 1980 application of successive, and in principle, infinite, interpretations of a postcard from the Bodleian Library that replicated an etching showing Plato leaning over the shoulder of Socrates who was writing. I do not agree with Cohen's claim that such work should be classified as bullshit in the sense that Frankfurt defined the term. The problem with an argument such as that of Derrida is that it ignores the question of the meaning of the object that is interpreted, in this case the etching and the context in which it was written. Derrida's approach is an example of what I have dubbed as various forms of "interpretism," that is, the claim that all meaning is lodged in the interpreter. This is just as erroneous as what I will refer to as "mentalism," or the claim that meaning is based on the mental intention of a speaker or actor and lodged in a mysterious place called the "mind." Even if someone believes that what has often been referred to as the mind is actually the brain, that would not solve the basic problem but only shift the location. Interpretation and puzzles about what someone may be thinking may lead us to investigate meaning, but they are not the site of meaning. Meaning is only manifest in particular instances of human speech and action rather than in the mental intention of an author or the perspective of an interpreter.

Many of the issues in contemporary philosophy, which are the heritage of past philosophy, have lost meaning, because they have become detached from their original, and, I wish to stress, *practical*, purpose. They were rhetorical, but they did not disregard the issue of truth but instead sought to establish alternative accounts of what in some set of circumstances was

assumed to be true. We cannot abstract past philosophy from what it sought to achieve in the period in which it was written and when it addressed matters such as reality and truth. From the beginning, philosophers typically tended to lack any substantial social and political authority and consequently could only attempt to achieve practical goals by seeking some form of epistemic privilege. This was seldom successful, but it was persistent, and at least a faint echo is still evident in the contemporary literature even though much of philosophy has lost sight of its practical origins.

When an academic philosopher attempts to instruct us on some issue such as how the "mind" can know the "world" and what I consider to be other unanswerable or pseudo-questions, this is what I believe Wittgenstein meant when he talked about nonsense. The difficulty is that something that is meaningless can often be mistaken for what is profound or advertised as such. I am not suggesting that we should abandon the study of the work of those who have been elevated to the philosophical pantheon. There are many reasons for not doing so, both historical and analytical. And, as Wittgenstein noted, we should not want simply to dismiss what we might today regard as nonsense, because recognizing nonsense forces us to come to grips with the issue of why something is nonsensical, which is the path to *clarity*, and the pursuit of clarity is the role that Wittgenstein believed philosophy should serve and what I suggest philosophy can best achieve, which includes clarity not only about the enterprise of philosophy itself but especially clarity about other human practices.

One of themes that will be prominent in the following essays is that philosophy should be properly categorized as what I will refer to as a *meta-practice*, which means that its task is first to understand and interpret its own endeavors but also those of other practices such as science, religion, myth, and various dimensions of the commonsense world as construed by the dominate discourse at particular times in particular societies. As Wittgenstein once said, philosophy is not ethnology (or anthropology and social science as a whole), but its basic perspective is the same. It is the interpretation of social and linguistic forms of life. It is not what I refer to as a first-order practice such as science or religion, despite the fact that it has often claimed that it is foundational with respect explaining and grounding other practices. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) would be a paradigm case.

Kant claimed that he had been awoken from a period of intellectual slumber after reading the work of David Hume who seemed to claim that there was no fundamental and universal moral principle. Kant wished to do for morality what he deemed Newton had done for science. He claimed to have found unalterable criteria of moral judgment based on logic and human reason. This is what he termed the "categorical Imperative." He believed that this would rescue morality from the "wretched anthropology" to which Hume had seemed to relegate it. What Kant, a religious Christian, did, however, was to formulate what amounted to a philosophical version of the Golden Rule. There are still philosophers devoted to establishing a fundamental principle of moral judgment, but such an endeavor is nonsense.

There is a great deal of discussion today about the value of teaching what is often referred to as the Western canon of literature, which often includes what we typically identify as the tradition of philosophy. There are a considerable number of individuals who decry what they believe, often correctly, is the retreat from teaching the "great books" and, instead, wish to put more emphasis on science and vocational preparation. This is often an argument from the ideological right, but even the liberal social activist Cornel West has challenged Howard University's decision to drop teaching the Western tradition. The elimination of philosophy from college curricula is at present not uncommon, but it is important to recognize that this "tradition" is largely in many respects a fiction. It is, in fact, a "story," and one written from the perspective of the present and which can be told in many ways for many different purposes.

I have long criticized what I have called the "myth of the tradition" of political philosophy, but the problem extends far beyond that particular field. There are certainly many examples of philosophers who have addressed the work of other philosophers, such as Aristotle's references to Plato; the Christian fathers turning to the Greeks; St. Thomas Aquinas drawing on Aristotle's work as transmitted through Islamic texts in order to justify his arguments for the compatibility of faith and reason; what might be considered John Locke's rejection of Thomas Hobbes; and Marx's critique of Hegel. But what we think of as the Western tradition in philosophy is largely a retrospective construction from the standpoint of the present. The prevailing image is not very different from what we find in Monty Python's account of the philosophers' football match. This kind of

tradition is quite different from what might be designated as an "indigenous" and "integral" tradition in which the participants are not chosen in terms of what someone might consider significant today. What is often billed as the philosophical "tradition" changes according to academic folklore and various contemporary concerns, and purveyors of this kind of tradition continue to differ widely in their philosophical and ideological orientation.

In the field of political theory and political philosophy as it developed in the United States, the dominant nineteenth century image of the tradition was informed by a German idealist account of the evolution of popular government that, it was claimed, had emanated from Teutonic roots, was enhanced by an English vision of liberty, and culminated in the formation of the American republic. This basic story reached its apotheosis in the 1930s in text books such as George Sabine's *History of Political Theory*, which was primarily an attempt to trace the roots of liberal democracy. By the post-World War Two period, a more critical view of modern politics began to set in and in which the history of political theory was cast as a quite different story. Prominent in this trend was the work of Hannah Arendt, who, following her former mentor, Martin Heidegger, told a story of the devolution of Western thought subsequent to its beginnings with the early Greeks. The political theorists Leo Strauss and Sheldon Wolin were also committed to explaining contemporary politics by attempting to demonstrate how it was the emanation of a long process of political and philosophical declination. Strauss, a conservative and authoritarian, told a very different story from the democratically inclined Wolin, but the basic form of the story was much the same.

There is certainly nothing inherently illegitimate about constructing rhetorical retrospective traditions, but we must be careful not to confuse them with indigenous traditions and with serious attempts to trace the internal development of a discursive practice. One striking example was manifest in the response of historians and social scientists to Louis Hartz's 1955 account of the *Liberal Tradition in America*. There were some who claimed that he was mistaken in his particular account of that tradition, still others argued that it was not as an important a tradition as he implied, and some suggested that there were actually several basic American traditions. But all of these critics somehow failed to note that what Hartz called the "liberal tradition" was more a metaphor than an actual historical claim.

Although he did not devote a great deal of attention to the point, he explicitly said that although what he referred to as a tradition was a retrospective construction, it was based on what he believed were many elements that had been associated with European liberal philosophy. But he claimed that the historical indigenous liberal tradition in Europe had been a response to a conservative tradition and that there could not be a genuine liberal tradition in the United States, because there had been no prior conservative tradition against which it rebelled.

We should interrogate both past and current philosophy in order to find out in what manner it can be a source of clarity rather than obfuscation. Much of what I have to say revolves around criticizing two mythologies that not only permeate and pervade our everyday folk life but are, and have been, shared and abetted by many past and present philosophers. These mythologies have, as I have already emphasized, led philosophers to ask questions such as what is reality and truth, what are justice and human rights, and how can the mind apprehend the world. This is reflected in the study of what philosophers designate as ontology and epistemology, that is, the study of reality and how it is conceived. "Truth" and "reality," however, are words that can be applied meaningfully in many contexts, but they do not designate any particular generic object. To say that a person is searching for the truth is not at all like looking for a needle in a haystack. To genuinely search for truth is to search for what is the case with respect to some particular state of affairs. What often prompts one to search for truth and reality, as if they were in themselves things, has been based in part on the assumption that there is a transcendent reality, a world, universe, or state of being that both sustains and limits our claims about what is real and true. But this is a vacuous belief, because we can never specify the nature of such an undefinable postulated reality. It amounts to little more than believing in believing and mirrors much of the character of theology. Words such as "reality" and "truth" do not have any substantive meaning that exceeds the criteria governing their particular application in specific contexts. Einstein once said, "reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one" and "it appears to me that the 'real' is an intrinsically empty, meaningless category." I would suggest that Einstein was basically correct, but maybe a little misleading. There is no meaning that is intrinsic to a word, but that does not entail that the word is meaningless or, as Humpty-Dumpty said to Alice in

Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass,* that it simply means what I want it to mean. The problem is not lack of meaning but the superfluity of meanings or applications that are, have been, and continue to be attached to a word.

My basic philosophical stance is what I refer to as "*conventional realism*." This is the claim that the criteria for specifying reality, certainty, and truth can be found only in the beliefs and agreements that underlie our various specific social practices such as science, religion, and commonsense. There are no foundations that are external to such practices and for which there are philosophical answers. There can be no general theory of truth except possibly in the sense that a logician such as Alfred Tarski might posit certain formal characteristics that are common to the articulation of particular truth claims. It is only in various substantive realms of discourse that there are meaningful criteria for the application of these terms. To believe, for example, that philosophy can provide science with deeper grounds of truth and reality than what is available in the practice of science itself is without merit. And it is also the case that science cannot provide answers to philosophical questions. Philosophy is not the answer to science, and science is not the answer to philosophy.

Both scientists and philosophers often speak of how they are exploring the universe, but the universe is not simply "there" as an object in some neutral form. It is useful to refer to what the philosopher and historian Thomas Kuhn (1958) had to say about the history of science as in effect a history of different "worlds." He made an important distinction between what he referred to as "revolutionary" and "normal" science. The former presented a conception of some dimension of the "world," while the latter was basically an exploration and elaboration of the facts entailed by such a theoretically specified world. Scientific theories are incommensurable, and as much so as the claims of religion and science. Science cannot falsify religion or vice versa, but they can, circumstantially, come into conflict. The mistake that some make, such as Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion* (2006), is to assume that the "facts" of science disprove religious beliefs, but the concept of fact is not the property of any particular practice. The choice that some may wish to make between science and religion cannot be sustained by simply claiming one is true and the other is not. We may decide to choose one over the other, but we cannot do so on the basis of some

common overriding criteria of truth and reality. Many scientists and philosophers rejected Kuhn's claim that the history of science was not progress in the sense of moving to a particular destination, but his point was that science progressed in the sense that it presented new theories and new visions of a world.

When scientists, for example, claim that they are exploring the universe, it simply means that they are studying something that is presupposed in their current theories and empirical practices. To speak of a universe that is ultimately unknowable and beyond designation, but with respect to which current scientific practices are progressive exploratory steps, is actually not unlike the belief that the history of religion is a history of the revelation of God when in fact the history of God is to be found nowhere except in the history of religion, just as the history of the earth amounts to what is accepted at some point as the history of geology conceived in terms of the latest dominant geological theory.

I began my undergraduate career as a geology major, and in the introductory lecture in Geology One, the professor informed us that the whole field of geology was premised on the principle that the continents were fixed on the earth's crust, despite the fact that it might appear to the naïve observer that Africa and South America had once fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle. In less than two decades this "principle" would be fundamentally different with the advent of the theory of tectonic plates, and the history of the earth and the practice of geology would consequently be reconstructed accordingly.

An important distinction that will surface in the following chapters is between what I will refer to as *presenting* and *representing*. Scientific theories, and comparable constructs in other fields, are not, strictly speaking, representations of anything, because the concept of "re-presentation" presupposes the capability of specifying the existence and character of what is represented. This problem was illustrated by René Magritte's painting of a pipe, which he titled "This is not a Pipe." This was not really a paradox but simply an example of the difference between a representation and the object represented. We can call this mistake "reification," that is, confusing our means of representation with the thing that is represented. But it is equally important not to confuse particular things with *kinds* of things. Often a word is used to refer to a kind or category of things, which in some way

can be considered to resemble each other, such as "power," "justice," but these words have no necessary pre-determined criteria of application. We may often assume that the meaning of a word is what it refers to, but even a proper name, like John Smith, may apply to any number of people. The meaning of a word is a matter of how someone is using the word and for what purpose. So, for example, what do so many scientists mean when they claim that time is an illusion? Certainly, they are not rejecting the use of the word "time" to represent how we organize experience in everyday life and, for example, distinguish past, present, and future, note appointments on a calendar, etc. The same word is simply being used in different ways.

We make a huge mistake if, for example, we view the history of science and philosophy on the model of Lewis and Clark exploring the Northwest Territory or even scientists studying what they at some point assume to be the character of a dimension of what they take to be the "world." Often revolutionary scientists do not, however, at least initially, recognize their work as anything more than a step in the empirical study of the same universe. Max Planck, who many consider as the founder of quantum mechanics, viewed his work in this way, and Einstein initially conceived his theory of relativity in the same manner before recognizing that he had in effect not built on Newton's work but replaced important aspects of it. Kuhn's analysis of scientific revolutions and what Wittgenstein said about the relativity of "certainty" provide us with clarity by challenging the assumption that the history of science is the progressive revelation of knowledge about a given pre-existing world.

The myth that partners with the reality myth is the myth of the mind. We have many reasonable uses for the word "mind," but it is a mistake to believe that it refers to some particular part of the human constitution where intentions, beliefs, ideas, and various other mental entities are stored and from which they are deployed. Dictionaries typically still define "mind" in some manner such as "in a human or other conscious being, the element, part, substance, or process that reasons, thinks, feels, wills, perceives, judges, etc." It is difficult to specify some thing or place that we can designate as the mind. Surely, as most people today would acknowledge, the brain and neurological system are essential for all this, just as the heart and other elements of a human being are also necessary, but the traditional image of the mind is a mythical object that was first conjured up in ancient

Greece as the *psyche* or breath of life but is still the subject of scientific and philosophical speculation. We speak of psychology as the science of the mind, but any definite conception of, and agreement about, what constitutes the mind continues to elude us. Freud tried his best to provide substance to the concept, but it is clear that it was an invention rather than a discovery.

The philosopher John Searle, among others, has devoted a great deal of effort to what he referred to as "rediscovering" the mind," especially after all the recent arguments by cognitive science intent on reducing it to the brain. Although Searle recognized that the mind cannot be separated from the brain, he claims that it is an emergent non-material organ that is the seat of thought, intentionality, and other mental concepts. I would simply ask if anyone can visualize such an entity. Everything that we tend to associate with the human mind and consciousness can be reduced to our linguistic capacity and abilities. The brain is what we might think of as the hardware, but it is complemented by the software of language.

There are many who claim to have had thoughts as an infant or child that preceded what they can now express in language and that, as Aristotle once claimed, people may speak different languages but all have the same basic thoughts. Thoughts, however, are language dependent. It makes no sense, for example, to say that in some instance a person may know what they want to say but cannot find adequate words to express it or that what they say is different than what they mean. Despite the claims of individuals such as Searle and, linguists such as Noam Chomsky, there is simply no universal language of human thought that is prior to a person learning their native language. Could anyone imagine what a thought, disembodied from language, is or provide an example of such a thing? The only answer is a word.

Today, much of philosophy still remains devoted to attempting to solve the problem of how the mind can know reality, which is not at all like asking something specific such as how a microscope allows us to see what to normal sight would be invisible. Philosophers write entire books about the relationship between "mind" and the "world," but these are books about abstractions that are masquerading as specific intelligible things. Much of philosophy and science have been premised on this fallacy. There is no need to depreciate the scientific self-image, any more than we need to question the self-image of any other human practice. But claims of philosophy to be some kind of super-science that can specify the standards of reality and truth

and the foundations of all human knowledge is what must be critically examined.

We might ask if these myths been accepted by philosophers because they are so deeply embedded in our everyday life or because philosophy has transmitted this belief to us. I suggest that the answer is that these have been mutually reinforcing. The principal question before us is that of the nature of philosophy and what it involves, but I will be questioning much of what has been considered the task and possibilities of philosophical endeavor. A typical response to my arguments might be that it amounts to relativism and implies that there is no such thing as truth and certainty. I am happy to accept that basic charge, because there are no such "things" as truth and certainty that exceed the criteria that constitute the basic judgments that define our forms of life at particular times and places. Our practices change and sometimes come into conflict with one another, but we cannot use our practices to seek a reality that surpasses them, whether that reality is considered to be something in the world, which is the claim of empiricist philosophy, or in the mind, which is the claim of the philosophical idealist. Relativism, however, is not actually a philosophical position but only a response to what the philosopher Wilfrid Sellars referred to as the "myth of the given," that is, the belief in some universal foundation of knowledge. So, again, what can we expect from philosophy?

In a recent television advertisement, a young girl observes that her mother always washes the dishes before putting them in the dishwasher, so the girl asks, "what does the dishwasher do?" In a similar vein, we might ask, after looking at the various practices that compose our society, "what does philosophy do," that is, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, the philosophy of science, the philosophy of religion, the philosophy of language, the philosophy of mind, and so forth. Before people had mechanical dishwashers, they did quite well by washing their dishes in the sink and drying them with hand towels. Just as the girl asks what the dishwasher does to enhance handwashing, we might ask if, and how, philosophy can enhance its subject matter. The answer, I will continue to press, is that it may help to reflect on and gain clarity about our practices, but it is not the foundation of those practices. There is no foundation of our practices that lies outside the practices themselves. As Wittgenstein once pointed out, the foundation of a house cannot be separated from the whole house.

Chapter Two

A Very Short and Selective History of Philosophy

At this point it may be useful to skip around a bit in the past of what is typically viewed as the history of philosophy and attempt to tell my own "story" of what it has been about, both in general and in some particular cases. Much of contemporary philosophy is academic and disciplined. It is also highly self-referential and devoted to talking about what other philosophers say and what they take to be what past philosophers have said. Interpreting philosophers such, for example, as Kant and Hegel, has become a cottage industry. But many philosophers today also, at least implicitly, understand themselves as, in some respect, carrying on the commitments of classic figures who have gone before.

What is typically considered part of the philosophical canon, as the term *philosophos* implies, has advertised itself from the Greek pre-Socratics, such as Heraclitus, onward, as "lovers of wisdom." Some people may assume that many of these past philosophers were, like contemporary academic philosophers, reclusive ivory tower scholars pondering the fundamental nature of reality and truth, how the "mind" relates to the "world," what is a just society, and so on. If considered retrospectively, there might appear to be basic similarities between those who compose that venerable canon and contemporary academicians, but if examined more closely we can discern a significant disjuncture, which became increasingly obvious by the beginning of the twentieth century. Who exactly belongs to the canon and where they should be ranked is always a matter of debate and fashion, even though there has been little change in the basic pool of usual suspects. Despite latent thematic and motivational continuity among those we classify as philosophers, there was a fundamental sea-change that began to emerge in the late nineteenth century with the professionalization and academization of philosophy. As I have already stressed, the basic goal of

much of earlier "philosophy" evolved as special claims to knowledge for the purpose of establishing the intellectual authority that would have an effect in some dimension of public life. And many fields such as social science have continued to turn to philosophy for grounds of validation.

Those usually categorized as the pre-Socratic philosophers such as Anaximander, Empedocles, Heraclitus, Anaxagoras, and Democritus were concerned with the reality question, but they were in many ways similar to what we today might think of as scientists asking questions about the stuff that constituted the basic nature of the universe. This was, however, at least implicitly, a critical tradition in that it was a challenge to the poetic mythologies and the work of individuals such as Homer and Hesiod, which dominated Greek society. They attempted to specify the basic underlying nature of the universe, whether it was earth, air, fire, water, atoms, a state of flux, etc. But in attempting to discern what philosophy has all been about, it may be useful to turn to whom many consider to be philosophy's philosopher – Socrates.

Although many people have written books about Socrates, we do not actually know a great deal about him apart from the comic depiction in Aristophanes' play *The Clouds*, the favorable account of his life in dialogues written by his student and follower Xenophon, his role as a public gadfly in Plato's *Apology*, and a character in Plato's other dialogues. It seems, however, that like the Pre-Socratics, he questioned many of the mores of society and politics and particularly the myths and the images of the gods, which continued to dominate Greek life and were passed on largely by poetic oral tradition. It was in part Socrates' alleged impiety that was the impetus for bringing him to trial and condemning him to death by imbibing hemlock. This image of the wise and heroic Socrates is, however, to a great extent a later construction.

From the perspective of most of ancient Greek society, Socrates was simply one of a group of intellectuals known as the Sophists, who were skilled at, as charged in his trial, making the worst argument appear the better and who, for money, would aid politicians in honing their rhetoric. Although both Socrates and Plato wished to distinguish between philosophy and sophistry, the figure of Socrates portrayed in Plato's dialogues often did defeat his opponents by linguistic trickery in the course of these verbal jousts. Plato's dialogues were not only structured as philosophical plays, but

many of them were performed publicly, at least before a limited, and probably secretive, audience. In this respect, they were political and social opposition dramas and often somewhat comedic.

There is a common belief, however, that things changed with the advent of Plato who, many maintain, believed in a transcendental world of forms, , universals, or archetypes of which the visible empirical world was only a derivative shadow. He, or more accurately Socrates, his protagonist in the dialogues, did not, however, claim that this higher level of reality was unknowable but rather that it was only accessible to true philosophers who could attain that level of knowledge. Benjamin Jowett, a famous nineteenth century cleric and translator of Plato's works, used the phrase "through a glass darkly" in translating an argument by Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo*. Plato, presumably, was offering an early version of his account of the "forms." In his translation, however, Jowett actually employed a version of the phrasing of the apostle Paul as presented in the King James edition of the Christian bible (1Corinthians 13:12): "*He who contemplates existence through the medium of ideas sees them only 'through a glass darkly.'"* This could be confusing, in part because Plato's conception of the highest level of reality is sometimes translated as "ideas," but also because what Paul actually said is more accurately translated as "for now we see through a mirror indirectly." And more fully, "Now all we can see of God is like a cloudy picture in a mirror. Later we will see him face to face. We don't know everything, but then we will, just as God completely understands us." What is important to note is that a mirror in biblical times was not what we today take to be a mirror, which presents a basically isomorphic image of what is reflected. A mirror, in the ancient world was usually something such as a piece of polished metal, which produced a cloudy and distorted image.

We must be very careful in interpreting Plato's work. In the *Republic*, which, again, is presented as a dialogue or play, the protagonist, Socrates, did posit a hierarchy of realities, ranging from the shadows in his allegory of the cave, to the empirical world, to the mathematical underpinnings of that world, to the transcendental forms. I would suggest, however, that Plato's underlying purpose was to draw attention to the representative power of mathematical and conceptual thought as a challenge to a culture which was largely illiterate and in which reality was basically conceived in terms of particulars, and often mythical, exemplars. Aristotle interpreted

Plato as confusing generalizations with universal realities, but although Aristotle was a student of Plato, it is not clear how much Aristotle actually knew about Plato's work, and Plato did not choose Aristotle to be his successor as the head of his Academy. I suggest that Plato's concern was with the limitations of non-conceptual thought, that is, the failure to recognize that we can, for example, view reality in terms of *kinds* of things.

Although Plato admired Socrates and deemed him the most just man of his time, it is a mistake to assume that in the dialogues Plato is either a mouthpiece for Socrates, who did not leave behind any writings, or that the character of Socrates in the dialogues was the alter ego of Plato. By now it is probably safe to conclude that there will never be a definitively convincing interpretation of Plato's work and that it will always be open to radically diverse accounts. But what is clear is that this work was not merely some mystical intellectual venture. It was informed by a definite practical political concern, and this would be the case with most of subsequent philosophy.

Although the authenticity of what is reputed to be Plato's letters remains in question, it seems that in his early life he had assumed that, coming from a prominent family, he would play a significant role in the public life of Athens. But after the passing of the last vestiges of the Periclean era and the highpoint of Athenian democracy, and during the course of the twenty-seven years of conflict with Sparta (which was dramatically documented by Thucydides in his account of the *Peloponnesian War*), Plato found that he had been denied a public vocation. Sparta had, in a Pyrrhic sense, won the war, but Athens was not destroyed, even though the culture declined during the rule of a series of regimes that were far removed from the Periclean age and the ideals that had originally characterized Athenian life. Characterizations of the *Republic*, even by professional philosophers, let alone the popular image, might leave one wondering about how closely they have read it – or for what purpose. It might not be too fanciful to suggest, following Gilbert Ryle's speculations in *Plato's Progress* (1966), that the *Apology*, a dramatization of the life and death of Socrates, was somewhat autobiographical and symbolized the life and death of Plato as an Athenian citizen and explains his self-exile from the city as not only his contempt for contemporary politics but as an escape from the fate of Socrates for

challenging many of the beliefs and actions of the populace and its corrupt leaders.

Plato described three trips to Sicily, supposedly to tutor the son of the tyrant Dionysus in philosophy and convince him to rule accordingly, maybe in a manner reflected in Plato's *Statesman*. The term "tyrant" referred to total power held by one person and did not necessarily imply the modern and more pejorative use of the word. Plato finally concluded, however, in the *Laws,* which was probably his last work, that the idea of philosophers ruling, as explored in the *Republic*, was too improbable but that maybe the wisdom of a philosopher, cast in that book as the "Athenian stranger" (who it is difficult to avoid construing as Plato) might conceivably inform a political founding that would embody principles of justice and be institutionally designed to be self-correcting and self-perpetuating. This is an image that would reverberate from Machiavelli's *Discourses* and his image of the Roman republic to the founding of the American Constitution.

It might be worthwhile mentioning that Aristotle did not fare much better than Plato with respect to transcending the context of politics. His work is a compilation of what was accepted knowledge about a wide number of subjects such as metaphysics, epistemology, natural science, politics, poetry, and so forth, and in this respect might be characterized as the work of a polymath. He had been selected by Philip of Macedonia to be the tutor to his son Alexander, but after Alexander the Great had become the most important political actor of the age, he worried about Aristotle's loyalty, and Aristotle beat it out of town and took refuge on the isle of Lesbos, and claimed that his defection was to prevent society from the mistake of causing the demise of another philosopher.

Without trying to trace in detail the history of natural philosophy up through the beginning of the seventeenth century, it seems that for the most part philosophers, from the pre-Socratics to the Renaissance, still assumed that it was possible to say what constituted the real "world," much as modern science has done. Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716), philosopher and mathematician, was one of the last of the traditional metaphysicians. He claimed to have discovered monads, which he conceived as simple substances that lay behind all phenomena. But beginning, most distinctly with René Descartes, things changed, and epistemology became the primary concern. Although it is difficult to trace accurately how this transformation

took place, it is likely that it was at least in part a transfer of the theological perspective to philosophy and may have initially been a rhetorical bow to the church and its rejection of heretical assumptions claiming that science could supplant the mystery of God. The life of Galileo is a case in point.

When he was attacked by the church for accepting the heliocentric view of the universe that had been set forth by Copernicus' account of the heavens and Kepler's advances in astronomy, he reverted to a claim much like that originally advanced by some of the early Christian fathers who were concerned about how to interpret the bible. Galileo argued that God had actually authored two books. One was the Scriptures, and the other was what he referred to as the book of "nature." The latter, he claimed, had been written in the language of mathematics and was accessible to anyone who understood that language. Therefore, God was known in two different but complementary interpretive ways. There was the religious hermeneutic and the scientific hermeneutic. The church did not, however, accede to this ploy and kept Galileo under constraint and fear of death the rest of his life. For other philosophers who were also scientists, such as Descartes, this danger of persecution still loomed, and they did not dare to claim too much for science. This was even the case with Newton who maintained that he only dealt with facts rather than indulging in speculation, and this strategy was still evident in the work of Charles Darwin.

Behind the claim of individuals such as Descartes and John Locke that knowledge ultimately comes from exposure to the external world, this empiricist philosophy carried with it a skepticism about the capacity to know the "world." And it involved a strange form of idealism and the claim that what we know is in the end only the mental images in our minds generated by sense perceptions and that this is what in effect constitutes what we mean by "reality." It was only a short logical step to the idealism of Bishop George Berkeley and the claim that the material world was in fact ideational. The idealism of Kant reverted even more explicitly to the claim that reality is not in itself accessible but "noumenal" and thus only known indirectly through our limited phenomenal perceptions.

The work of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) has continued to fascinate contemporary philosophers and prompted diverse interpretations, but he characterized his own extensive work as amounting to "rational theology." Much of it was devoted to tracing what he referred to as the world

"spirit" and its historical progress toward freedom, which he believed was fully manifest in the nineteenth century German state. Much of what we may consider as traditional philosophy saw itself as a super-practice that attempted to reach beyond the assumptions and judgments of everyday life and even areas such as science and ethics. It was, for example, the business of metaphysics to talk about reality in a manner that transcended the criteria integral to other human practices. And this is still a latent assumption, which informs subfields such as the philosophy of science. When these philosophers talk about the nature of scientific explanation, they often claim to specify a standard that the practices of science may neither recognize nor achieve but on which such derivative activity tacitly rests. The philosophy of science, however, is not, in fact, a tutor for scientists any more than our moral life is significantly informed by philosophical ethics. And fields such as the philosophy of religion, of mind, and of language, have little effect on, respectively, what we believe, how we think, or the way in which we speak.

There were certainly instances in which philosophy directly influenced public life, such as the case of Hegel, not only in Germany but in countries such as the United States, but however much early philosophy may have been, or hoped to be, involved in practical matters, it is today, more distinctly than ever, what we can call a form of beta-thinking that is contingently and problematically related to, but predicated on, the prior existence of, the areas of life about which it speaks. In the mid-twentieth century, Wittgenstein nicely summed up what was the actual condition of modern philosophy when he cryptically claimed that it "leaves everything as it is." He probably did not mean that it had, or should have, no effect on its subject matter but that any such effect was highly contingent and secondary to the primary task of understanding and representing that subject matter. His stance was not the quietist position that some have attributed to him. He made it clear that at the very least he wanted to change the minds of his students, and it seems equally clear that he wanted to change the character and direction of philosophy. I suggest that what he meant was that, maybe unlike revolutionary science, the mere act of philosophizing did not change anything. It was a practical question of how, in general, it was received.

Some meta-practices may have a great practical impact – such as in the case of literary, theater, and culinary critics. But academic philosophers,

especially in the United States, are typically more estranged and rarely become objects of fear and loathing, let alone count as what today we speak of as "influencers." Although many academic practices, and particularly the social sciences, have often turned to philosophy for epistemic support, it is an open question of whether this should, or can, be effective. They, like philosophers, are meta-practitioners who have a problematical cognitive and practical relationship to their object of inquiry and consequently are forever seeking grounds for intellectual authority. This is still, to some degree, evident in the relationship between natural science and philosophy.

Some, such as Stephen Hawking, have attempted to explain their approach and conception of science in terms of some philosophical argument. This, however, often leads to significant difficulties. In Hawking's final lecture before he died, he said that his approach to science was that of a "positivist," and he cited the philosopher Karl Popper as his model and said that Popper believed that science began and ended with facts in terms of which theories could be tested. Positivism, as I will discuss later, became the dominant school in the philosophy of science during the twentieth century, and it argued that theories were just mental constructs that helped us to devise empirical generalizations that could be tested by observed facts. Popper, however, was actually a severe critic of positivism and a proponent of theoretical realism. He argued that all scientific facts were theoretically informed and that the progress of science was not a function of verifying the truth of factual claims but instead continually attempting to falsify the theories on which they were based and moving on to new and better theories. Hawking's understanding of Popper would seem totally out of step with Hawking's actual career. His contribution to the theory of black holes did not gain him a Nobel prize, because there was no experimental confirmation of his work. A composite body of telescopes has now taken pictures of black holes, but if the theory of black holes had not already been formulated, no picture would have been identifiable as that of a black hole.

Basic scientific theories are reality claims about what exists and how it behaves, and they are neither derived from prior autonomous facts nor rejected on the basis of such facts. Everyday science is practiced and taught in terms of the assumption of such theories, and it only changes when the theories change. And the facts change with them. What I mean by "fact"

however is not, for example, something such as the statement "there are mountains" but an answer to the question "what kind of thing is it that we refer to as a mountain." As natural science became increasingly socially authoritative and internally consolidated, the auxiliary "philosophical" rhetoric that had accompanied it, often justifying it as based on facts and not on theories and speculation, began to float free of scientific practice and became part of the academic field of the philosophy of science. But this left the question of the relationship between philosophy and science undecided, and the history of that subsequent relationship is significant for understanding the contemporary character of each.

The case of the social sciences is quite different. They have continued to seek philosophical support. This, however, has been a function of their practical origins. From the point of their disciplinary beginnings during the late nineteenth century, they were devoted to social reform. Individuals, such as John Stuart Mill, consistently enlisted emerging philosophical accounts of science to validate their claim to scientific authenticity. Mill's account of the logic of science, however, reflected little in the way of any deep familiarity with the actual practice of science. Social scientists embraced positivism as a rhetoric of inquiry, and historians have sought to achieve what the historian Charles Beard referred to as the "noble dream" of emulating what was believed to be the objectivity of science.

Meta-practices, speak not only *about* but, at least implicitly, *to* their subject matter, and they chase after philosophy in search of grounds of cognitive privilege that would support their practical hopes. But whatever the ultimate purposes of philosophy and meta-practices as a whole may be, they are primarily in the business of understanding, interpreting, and representing a subject matter that is autonomous and, in principle, possesses an identity independent of how it is meta-practically represented. We might tend to speak of a practice such as natural science as representational, that is, as devoted to representing the natural world, but this requires considerable qualification. It is important to recognize that the "world" as conceived by science, is an artifact of its own conception. I am not suggesting that physical reality is a product of science, but I am insisting that what we believe constitutes that reality appears only in the conventions of science, which often undergo fundamental change.

It may again seem that I am skating very close to what might seem to be the thin ice of linguistic idealism, that is, the claim that the "world" is nothing but a linguistic construction. But what would it mean to talk or think about a "world" outside of language? Philosophers sometimes posit questions such as "were there two objects in the world before the use of the number two? This is really a nonsense question, because the numeral 2 is how we represent and count objects, not what constitutes the objects. And to say, for example, that black holes existed before we conceived them is simply to project our current beliefs backward and to neglect the extent to which theories and facts change in the course of the history of science and the extent to which we are really talking about different and incommensurable conceptions of what constitutes the "world."

So, again, we must ask, what can philosophy actually do for science – or literary criticism for literature, or sportscasting for sports, and so on. It is difficult to give a definite answer, but many of our practices, and maybe particularly the sciences, do not have a built-in dimension of critical self-reflection. Consequently, they often turn to philosophy when confronted with issues about their identity. I suggest, however, that we jettison the assumption that the role of philosophy is to specify transcendental forms of reality and judgment that exceed what we consider knowledge and truth in areas such as science, religion, and everyday life. But it is also necessary to dispense with the assumption that science can step in to solve philosophical issues.

During the mid-twentieth century, one of the popular paradoxes often discussed in college classes was that of Eddington's "two tables." This dilemma emerged in 1935 when the astrophysicist Sir Arthur Eddington, who some credit with empirically verifying Einstein's special theory of relativity, argued that contemporary science could at last solve the great philosophical problem of reality. He said that in sitting down to write, he had pulled his chair up to his two tables. One table was our everyday commonsense table with four legs and a flat top, but he said this entity was actually an illusion. Even though he assumed that he would never succeed in making people believe it, he argued that the only real table consisted of atomic and subatomic particles. But it was actually Eddington who was wrong and defended an illusion. In a "world" conceived as consisting of physical particles, there are no tables. At best, Eddington was making an