# Loving Wisdom

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Theorising is an activity which most people can and normally do conduct in silence. They articulate in sentences the theories that they construct, but they do not most of the time speak these sentences out loud. They say them to themselves. Or they formulate their thoughts in diagrams and pictures, but they do not always set these out on paper. They "see them in their minds' eyes."

Gilbert Ryle[1]

Never too dark for the blind to travel.

Scott Merritt[2]

I prithee speak. We will not trust our eyes
Without our ears.

Shakespeare[3]

## I

Hubris or chutzpah? The successful philosopher, it seems, must have a bit of both. Because despite the number of rival conceptions of Western philosophy on offer today, almost everyone agrees that to philosophize – even when it results in rejecting philosophy – is to make claims of the greatest scope and generality. Whether or not these are *universally* relevant is one of the central issues at stake in the contemporary debates. Yet even those who dwell on philosophy's limitations tend to find them in *all* philosophy and philosophers, everywhere. And that's why, as someone once suggested to me, there can be no such thing as a truly modest philosopher.

There appears to be three rival conceptions of philosophy in the West today. My aim here is to contrast them, to show how they diverge as well as how their divergences are based on their different historical roots. Then, drawing upon all the hubris and chutzpah I can muster, I will suggest that one

* Posted 29 January 2023. A previous version appears as chapter 13 of my *Patriotic Elaborations: Essays in Practical Philosophy* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009).

[1] *The Concept of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 27.

[2] "Wild Kingdom," in *Violet and Black* (Toronto: I.R.S. Records, 1989).

[3] *The History of Henry IV [Part One]*, ed. Maynard Mack (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987 [1598]), V.iv.141–42.

is superior – albeit only philosophically-speaking. Because the others sometimes make greater, if non-philosophical, contributions to truth.

"Theoretical philosophy" is how I'll refer to the tradition that has been by far the most successful in asserting itself – so much so that many consider it to be the only philosophical "game" in town. The premise at its heart – that philosophy consists of theoretical reasoning, reflection that aims for *a unified vision of truth* – has been so widely accepted for so long that calling it "theoretical" may even seem redundant. Regardless, I'm referring to the approach associated with the standard or classical readings of its Greek founders, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle; the one that was modernized in fundamental ways by Descartes and the epistemologists that followed him (whether rationalist, empiricist or, in the case of Edmund Husserl, phenomenologist); and among whose most sophisticated contemporary practitioners include Saul Kripke, Jürgen Habermas, and John Rawls.

Theoretical philosophy has been opposed – though "opposed" is, as I will show, too simple – by what is sometimes called "difference philosophy." Difference philosophers can also claim ancient roots, in Jewish thought, in particular, in Rabbinic Judaism. Its contemporary manifestations, both poststructuralist and pragmatist, followed Friedrich Nietzsche's attacks on Plato and other theoretical philosophers, which is why its advocates are sometimes called "neo-Nietzscheans." Yet on some readings, Nietzsche shares monism with the theorists, albeit in a Heraclitean rather than Parmenidean sense. In any case, difference philosophy is not a simple rejection of theory, since it is more a somewhat complicitous critique of it. In fact, metaphorically speaking, one might conceive of it as a blinking, vision-blindness (anti-)dialectic in contrast to theory's consistently ocular ambitions. Difference philosophers also reject all forms of monism in favour of a paradoxical unity of plurality – or "pluramonism," so to speak. However, they do this not to advance their own, alternative conception of reason so much as to make way for the differences of the "Other," which they believe is suppressed by theory. While the most prominent difference philosophers of the past century include Theodor W. Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Richard Rorty, I shall largely focus on the one most sensitive to its Jewish roots, namely Emmanuel Levinas.

I call the third approach "practical philosophy." Its *point de départ* is the distinction, first advanced by Aristotle, between theoretical and practical reason. But where Aristotle awarded primacy to the former, practical philosophers do to the latter. In practical philosophy, theories come from engaging a secondary or derivative form of reason – one relevant to mathematics, the natural sciences, and certain restricted domains within the human sciences, but not to philosophy as such. Hence their

claim that we should recognize a fundamental methodological division between the human and the natural sciences, which is absent from the other two philosophical approaches. Practical reasoning, moreover, is itself conceived as derivative of (largely pre-reflective) practice, indeed it is considered a form of practice as it is said to have the same dynamic and context-dependent qualities. This leads practical philosophers to claim that both thought and practice are fundamentally interpretive, since they aim for understanding. And they do this via dialogue, the exchange of interpretations, whether regarding texts or text-analogues. That's why practical philosophers believe we need to listen, rather than look, for the truth.

Truth, so conceived, will never be an all-or-nothing affair. On the contrary, it comes from the reconciliation, or integration, of contradictions or conflicts, and this requires developing interpretations that will nevertheless always be imperfect. That is, reconciliation can never be total: greater integration is a matter of moving towards to unity, not reaching it. That said, some practical philosophers, like Hans-Georg Gadamer, Martin Heidegger, and Charles Taylor, see this as arising within an overall unity, or at least within a world that could be unified in principle, and so they should be considered monists. Others, including Ludwig Wittgenstein, Isaiah Berlin, and Bernard Williams, are pluralists. And still others, above-all Martin Buber, may be said to move *between* the two extremes.[4]

## II

Theoretical philosophy has its origins in Socrates's and Plato's attempts to civilise Homer's warrior-ethic by moving "from the Many to the One," that is, to a unitary vision (the ancient Greek *theōria* means "viewing" or "contemplation") intended to replace the plurality of "blind" Homer's gods.[5]

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[4] On Heidegger's monism, see my "Antisemitism and the Aesthetic," *The Philosophical Forum* 52, no. 3 (Fall 2021): 189–210; and on Taylor's, see my "On Charles Taylor's 'Deep Diversity'," in Ursula Lehmkuhl and Elisabeth Tutschek, eds., *150 Years of Canada: Grappling with Diversity since 1867* (Münster, Germany: Waxmann Verlag GmbH, 2020). On Berlin's pluralism, see his "Two Concepts of Liberty (1958)," § VIII, in *Liberty: Incorporating* Four Essays on Liberty, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and on Williams', see his "Conflict of Values," in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Finally, regarding Buber, see his "With a Monist," in *Pointing the Way: Collected Essays*, ed. and trans. Maurice S. Friedman (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

[5] See A.W.H. Adkins, *From the Many to the One* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970); and recall that, as Giambattista Vico once pointed out, "Tradition says that Homer was blind and that from his blindness he took his name, which in the Ionic dialect means blind." *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968), XXX 869.

Three tenets of the Homeric worldview are to be superseded. First, regarding religion, there's its polytheism, its belief in multiple clashing gods who implicate themselves in human affairs. Second, regarding ethics, there's its idea, endorsed later by the great tragedians, that there exists a plurality of goods and that humans inevitably face irreconcilable conflicts between them. Third and finally, regarding the soul or self, there's its ideal of the warrior who achieves glory with the help of gods who inspire a kind of mania by entering through the spaces within his divided self.[6] Against each of these, the ancient theorist can be said to affirm a form of unity.

Exactly how this is to be done is not entirely clear, however. To Aristotle, for example, theorizing consists of uniting the mind (*nous*) with the object of thought: the former "participates" in the latter so that it can be shaped by its form (*eidos*) (*De An.* 430a20, 431a1, 431b20–23). And because this requires transcending our ordinary, everyday way of seeing things, Aristotelian theorizing has a spiritual quality (the ancient Greek word *theōros* was the title of the emissary of a *polis* who was to consult the oracle; and *theōria* also referred to the official delegation a *polis* would send to a neighbouring city-state in order to take part in its cult's rituals or honour its divinities).[7]

There's no small ambiguity regarding the nature of this theoretical transcendence. Plato even seems to appeal to two possibly incompatible forms of it. One consists of a "weak" transcendence, where the plural illusions manifesting in the everyday world are overcome by the theorist who manages to point the "eye" of his or her soul in the right direction (*Rep.* 516d, 518c–e).[8] This approach can be associated with pagan cosmologies, where the cosmos constitutes a spiritual unity and theorizing transcends no more than everyday divisions in order to achieve contact with immanent universals. Regarding ethics, the idea is that conflicts between goods are ultimately unreal, so when we recognize the true, unified nature of moral reality we overcome them. And regarding the self or soul, it too is seen as unified when we apprehend it as a microcosm – both of the just *polis* and the whole universe.

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[6] See Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind: The Greek Origins of European Thought* (New York: Angelico Press, 2013, 2nd ed.), ch. 1; and Adkins, pp. 13–27.

[7] See Nicholas Lobkowicz, *Theory and Practice: History of a Concept from Aristotle to Marx* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), pp. 5–9. Lobkowicz points out that the sacred connotations of *theōria* were also reinforced by the fact that the term reminded Greeks of the word *theos*, or god, something later highlighted by Plutarch and Greek fathers of the Church such as Gregory of Nyssa, Vasil the Great, and Pseudo-Dionysus.

[8] Taylor seems to me to over-emphasize this dimension of Plato's thought in *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), ch. 6.

The alternative "strong" transcendence is more radical. It comes to the fore when Plato has Socrates tell of the philosopher who climbs *up out* of the cave, leaving the profane world behind altogether to perceive the light of the sun (*Rep.* 515e–516b, 532b). This is the proto-monotheistic Plato, for whom neither persons nor the world are unified, since unity is an attribute strictly of the transcendent Forms (*Rep.* 511b, 531d, 537c; *Prot.* 329c–330b6, 349b1–d1). Think of Moses' declaration that "the Lord is One" (Deut. 6:4). The ethics here consequently shares something with the monotheist's paradoxical tension between sacred and profane, as when the philosopher-king finds that he must engage in a struggle between his obligations to philosophical truth, on the one hand, and political justice, on the other.[9] This tension is also reflected in his soul, which is charged with attaining unity by becoming god-like and mastering its all-too-human body, the source of irrational passions.[10]

Whether weak or strong, theoretical transcendence is consistently a matter of *logos*, a word that means both "thought" and "language." Ancient theorists tend to emphasize the former meaning, with language serving as merely the vehicle for the thinking that articulates or "lays things out" in propositions in order for there to be true knowledge (*epistēme*).[11] This thinking is monological rather than dialogical, an implication of Plato's account of the philosopher leaving the cave *alone* to *see* the truth (a silent endeavour). Indeed, as Hannah Arendt has described, because "every movement, the movements of body and soul as well as of speech and reasoning, must cease before truth," theoretical contemplation is a matter of "absolute quiet," the "almost breathless abstention from external physical movement and activity of every kind."[12] So successful theorists become god-like since, like the gods who already possess the happiness that's the goal of every human activity, they're free of the need to act (*praxis*). And that, Aristotle tells us, is what supposedly comes from attaining a unified vision: utter self-sufficiency (*Eth. Nic.* 1177a28–b1, b27–1178a3, 1178b8–18).

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[9] Regarding that struggle, see Leo Strauss, "On Classical Political Philosophy," in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 60–61.

[10] On philosophy as becoming like god, see Plato, *Theaetetus* 176a–b; *Phaedrus* 247c–49c; *Republic* 490b; and *Symposium* 211e–12a. For the idea that the body is but an infection, an obstacle to the soul's purification, see Plato, *Phaedo* 64c–67b, 69a–d; and *Sophist* 226b–31e.

[11] See Taylor, "Language and Human Nature," in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 222.

[12] Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, 2nd ed.), p. 15.

Ancient theorists, and a few modern ones, conceive of this unity as having an "organic" form, by which I mean that it exhibits an extreme holism in that the whole is present in the parts (the principle upon which, for instance today's holographic images are constructed).[13] Two steps take us from here to the "systematic" unity that is the aim of most modern theorists, especially since Leibniz.[14]

First, there's the distinction introduced by the Neoplatonist Plotinus between contemplation or passive union with the One, on the one hand, and theory or active dialectical knowledge, on the other.[15] The former is mystical, whereas the latter remains a kind of disposition, an intellectual virtue or *habitus*, as Aquinas called it. The second step comes in the wake of the theological debates that arose around medieval Nominalism. The Nominalists rejected Aquinas' claim that things lay claim to organically unified universal essences, since they believed that this would threaten God's omnipotence (for if the existing order was created as good, then God couldn't change it as that would make Him bad). In consequence, they argued that theoretical universals were merely the terms of propositions, making theorizing not so much the expression of a virtuous way of life as a means of producing doctrines.[16] And since philosophy had by then been reduced to the rank of "handmaid of theology," its role became that of supplying the latter with theoretical

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[13] See, for example, Plato, *Republic* 462c–d, 464b; and Aristotle, *Metaphysics Z* 10–11, the holographic interpretation of which is defended by Edward C. Halper in his *One and Many in Aristotle's* Metaphysics*: The Central Books* (Columbia: Ohio State University Press, 1989), ch. 2 § 7. Hegel is the most prominent modern thinker to affirm an organic form of unity. See, for example, Michael Wolff, "Hegel's Organicist Theory of the State," trans. Nicholas Walker, in Robert B. Pippen and Olaf Höffe, eds., *Hegel on Ethics and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[14] Nicholas Rescher credits Leibniz with the philosophical popularization of the term "system," which he equates with the concept of an articulated, ordered whole that, he believes, can be traced back to the ancient ideal of structured or organized philosophical thought (originally, "system" referred strictly to a physical rather than epistemic thing). See Rescher, "Leibniz and the Concept of a System," *Studia Leibnitiana* 13, no. 1 (1981): 114–22. However, I believe that what Leibniz popularized was a distinctly modern conception of the idea of a whole, one significantly less holistic than that of an organic whole. It is this modern conception that appears, for example, in Galileo's *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* (1632) and occasionally in Descartes' *Discourse on Method* (1637) and *Principles of Philosophy* (1644). Rescher himself concludes by pointing out how, for Leibniz, the ideal model of a cognitive system is provided by seventeenth century physics rather than by ancient Greek geometry (albeit because of the former's compatibility with the infinitesimal calculus).

[15] See Lobkowicz, *Theory and Practice*, pp. 47–53.

[16] See Armand A. Maurer, "The Unity of a Science: St. Thomas and the Nominalists," in Maurer, ed., *St. Thomas Aquinas, 1274–1974: Commemorative Studies*, vol. 2 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1974), though Maurer doesn't use the term "organic" as I do.

material.[17] Combined with the rise of modern epistemology and its subject-object dualism, theories then became mental representations of an independent reality.

It was the mechanism associated with all of this, made possible by the reappropriation of Leucippas' and Democritus' atomistic philosophy of nature,[18] that led to the idea that a theory's parts (whether conceived of as individual atoms or as structures) are analyzable, amenable to being separated into independently distinct components. Yet when reassembled, the parts shouldn't be described as "integrated," since that can occur only with the parts of an organic whole; rather, they're "interlocked," since this term implies that the whole is "systematic." Such a whole differs from the organic kind, which has parts that are distinguishable yet never separable, since there's a sense in which separating them out would "kill" them.[19] That there's a degree of atomism associated with systematic wholes is implied by Christian Wolff when, in 1770, he defines a system as "a *collection* of truths duly arranged in accordance with the principles governing their connections;" and again, relatively recently, by Hubert L. Dreyfus, for whom theorizing consists of "the systematic interrelation of distinguishable *elements*."[20] The idea that a "system," moreover, is often assumed to be synonymous with "systematic unity," an implication of Kant's famous declaration that "systematic unity is that which first makes ordinary cognition into science, i.e., makes a system out of a mere aggregate of it."[21]

So modern systematic theory claims an Enlightenment heritage. This accounts for its relative egalitarianism: to followers of the Enlightenment, theory should strive to illuminate the whole of Plato's cave and all of its inhabitants.[22] Nowadays, John Rawls' vision of the "well-ordered" society,

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[17] See Pierre Hadot, "Spiritual Exercises," in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 107.

[18] See Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), esp. pp. 150–51, 164.

[19] For more on these distinctions between organic and systematic wholes, and integrated and interlocked parts, see my "Parts and Wholes: Relations of Structure" (forthcoming).

[20] From Leibniz's *Logic* § 889, cited in Rescher, p. 116 (my italics); and Dreyfus' "Hermeneutics and Holism," in *Skillful Coping: Essays on the Phenomenology of Everyday Perception and Action*, ed. Mark A. Wrathall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 129 (my italics).

[21] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, eds. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A832/B860 (p. 691). See also Brigitte Falkenberg, *Kant's Cosmology: From the Pre-Critical System to the Antinomy of Pure Reason* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020), Appendix A.1.

[22] See Allan Bloom, "Interpretive Essay," in *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991, 2nd ed.), p. 403.

one governed by his systematic theory of justice, can be interpreted in this way. Indeed, Rawls is the leading contemporary political theorist, political theory having been aptly defined as "systematic reflection on the nature and purposes of government."[23] Yet it's worth noting that Rawls' work exhibits a tension that parallels the one between the two forms of transcendence present in Plato's thought.[24] On the one hand, there's Rawls' idea of the "original position," the standpoint we take whenever we step behind a "veil of ignorance" and deliberate in a way that takes no account of our personal values or abilities. Whoever does this well, Rawls believes, will come to adopt the principles of his theory of justice, which is neutral to all of the various reasonable conceptions of the good life.[25] The theory lays claim to an "absolute" objectivity, since to see our place in society from the perspective of original position "is to see it *sub specie aeternitatis*: it is to regard the human situation not only from all social but also from all temporal points of view."[26] In this way, it provides an eternal, because fixed and ahistorical, foundation for just societies everywhere. The affinities between the original position and the strong transcendence of Plato's cave allegory should be clear.

However, Rawls would also have us reach his theory via a process of "reflective equilibrium," which shares something of the spirit of Plato's weak transcendence. It consists of the kind of reasoning we should be undertaking before being attracted to a standpoint like the original position and, because of this, it doesn't require disengaging completely from the values and capacities that make us who we are. As Norman Daniels has described, reflective equilibrium entails only that we "detach ourselves from some of our values while assessing them in the light of our other beliefs,"[27] which have been given the status of "provisional fixed points"[28] for the purpose of assessment. The goal, in other

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[23] David Miller, "Political Theory," in Miller *et al.*, eds., *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Thought* (Oxford: Basic Blackwell, 1987), p. 383. Rawls frequently describes his theory as "systematic," and he's also written of the importance of attaining "systematic clarity" in one's thought: *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999, rev. ed.), pp. xi, xvii, xviii, 36, 410, etc.; and *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, exp. ed.), pp. 9, 15, 118, etc.

[24] Jürgen Habermas seems to have been straddling these two as well. See his "Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World," trans. Eric Crump and Peter P. Kenny, in *Religion and Rationality*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), p. 80.

[25] See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, esp. ch. 3.

[26] Ibid., p. 514.

[27] Daniels, "Introduction," in *Justice and Justification: Reflective Equilibrium in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 8.

[28] Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 8; or see *A Theory of Justice*, p. 18.

words, is not to discern something absolute, since we are merely reformulating some historical givens in the hopes of making them more systematic – whether these are opinions about the nature of mind,[29] say, or the rules that Rawls' believes underlie modern liberal democratic practices. In the latter case, then, while his ideal is still a systematically unified theory meant to serve as the basis for a just society, it's now conceived as something more like a platform floating on the river of history. Evidently, reflective equilibrium consists of an interpretive kind of thought.

Different readers have gravitated toward one or the other of these ideas. Some, like Michael Sandel, put the accent on the original position, while others, such as Richard Rorty, have stressed reflective equilibrium.[30] Members of the former group sometimes complain that Rawls' approach is monological, pointing to his stipulation that "we can view the agreement in the original position from the standpoint of one person selected at random."[31] But there's reason to question the dialogical nature of reflective equilibrium as well. For one thing, the process is eventually supposed to reach equilibrium and settle on a theory that can be neutrally applied.[32] Yet genuine dialogues rarely end completely, since as Paul Ricœur once put it, "every judgement calls for a 'but' beyond itself."[33] For another thing, the equilibrium is supposed to represent a social consensus around a single systematically unified set of propositions, which is to say around a theory of justice. But real interlocutors can't be expected to attain this; after all, even theoretical philosophers have yet to reach

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[29] Whence David Lewis: "One comes to philosophy already endowed with a stock of opinions. It is not the business of philosophy either to undermine or to justify these pre-existing opinions, to any great extent, but only to try to discover ways of expanding them into an orderly system. A metaphysician's analysis of mind is an attempt at systematizing our opinions about mind. It succeeds to the extent that (1) it is systematic, and (2) it respects those of our pre-philosophic opinions to which we are firmly attached." Lewis, *Counterfactuals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 88.

[30] According to Sandel, "The key [to *A Theory of Justice*] is to see the original position as the fulcrum of reflective equilibrium, in so far as it can be achieved. The original position is the fulcrum of the justificatory process in that *it* is the device through which all justification must pass, the place at which all arguments must arrive and from which they must depart." Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 2nd ed.), p. 47. To Rorty, however, Rawls stands apart from those for whom the "method of reflective equilibrium is not good enough." Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 183.

[31] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 120.

[32] "Liberal principles meet the urgent political requirement to fix, once and for all, the content of certain political basic rights and liberties, and to assign them special priority. Doing this takes those guarantees off the political agenda and puts them beyond the calculus of social interests." Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 161.

[33] Ricœur, "The Act of Judging," in *The Just*, trans. David Pellaner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 128.

much of a consensus on anything. Of course, they can always respond that their ideal is still worth striving for. Whether or not this is realistic is another question, however.

**III**

Difference philosophers would subvert theory, though they also admit to being complicit with it. In this they echo their intellectual ancestors, the Rabbinic Jews. Rabbinic Judaism, which has been the dominant form of the religion since the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, replaced the Biblical Judaism that, to the rabbis, had become too theoretical, too "Greek." Biblical Judaism was essentially a dual affair, led by prophets and priests. The prophets were responsible for the creation of the Hebrew Bible, thanks to the inspirations they (purportedly) received from mystical encounters with God. As with proto-monotheist ancient Greek theory, these encounters were understood to come from transcending the world, leaving the social realm behind to connect with the divine. As for the Bible, it was meant to serve as the basis for the ancient Israelites' new society.[34] The priests' task, then, was to realise this vision in practice and, following King David's reign, which witnessed the rise of the priesthood centred around the Temple in Jerusalem, there developed a monistic conception of how it should be done. In this, they shared something with the ancient Greek theorists. Because to the priests running the Temple – both the first Temple and the one built after the first was destroyed – the Bible was a perfectly unified text that embodied a conception of justice.[35]

The Pharisees, fathers of Rabbinic Judaism, rejected this vision. Yes, the Bible was perfect; as God Himself declared, "Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish *ought* from it" (Deut. 4:2).[36] But this shouldn't be taken to mean that it was comparable to philosophical theory, as if its laws were fully coherent and capable of being transparently read and applied. That's how the Sadducees – the sect that supported the priests who maintained the Second Temple – saw it, which is why they advocated for strict, text-based applications. To the Pharisees,

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[34] The newness of this society was ensured by Moses' decision to wander in the desert for forty years in order to replace the old generation with one untainted by idolatry (such as the construction of the golden calf).

[35] See, for example, Aelred Cody, *A History of Old Testament Priesthood* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969), esp. pp. 118–19; Deborah W. Rooke, *Zadok's Heirs: The Role and Development of the High Priesthood of Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), chs. 1–4; and William R. Millar, *Priesthood in Ancient Israel* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001).

[36] As Haim Cohn points out, this meant that "in His eyes, at least, the Law was self-sufficient and needed neither expansion nor detraction." Cohn, "Prolegomena to the Theory and History of Jewish Law," in Ralph A. Newman, ed., *Essays in Jurisprudence in Honor of Roscoe Pound* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1962), p. 45.

however, this approach was both wrong and dangerous. It led to tragedies like the one recounted by an anonymous Pharisee scribe that tells of how the Israelites' struggle against the Hellenising King Antiochus was undermined by a belief that led to their slaughter: attacked during the Sabbath, when they were commanded to rest, they failed to defend themselves (2 Macc. 6:11).

Surely, the Pharisees protested, the Bible also commands Jews to live. That the Sadducean approach led to such calamities showed that their theory-like conception of the Bible was flawed. Whence the Babylonian Talmud: "Jerusalem was destroyed only for the fact that they adjudicated cases on the basis of Torah law . . . and did not go beyond the letter of the law."[37] The Pharisees thus proposed an alternative conception of the Bible's perfection, according to which it is perfect precisely because many of its parts contradict each other.[38] Indeed, the Bible constitutes a "complex unity," as the essayist Ahad Ha'am once described it, for

> whenever we see a complex whole which captivates us by its many-sided beauty, we see the result of a struggle between certain primal forces, which are themselves simple and one-sided; and it is just this one-sidedness of the elements, each of which strives solely for its own end but never attains it, that produces the complex unity, the established harmony of the whole.[39]

This, then, is how we should conceive of the Written Law, which appears as both unified and yet made of struggling elements – in between which we should expect to find "gaps" of meaning, openings that make way for inspirations that drive a form a creativity very different from mystical prophesy. To effectively close those gaps because one considers the Bible as, like a theory, conducive to being straightforwardly applied, would be to do a kind of violence to it, to "totalize" it and thereby block its conduits to the divine.

Yet this alternative way of approaching the Written Law could also be considered a form of violence. In fact, as the rabbis conceived of the events at Mount Sinai that led to the covenant between

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[37] *Talmud Bavli: Bava Metza* 30b (this and all other such citations following are to the digital edition of the Koren Noé Talmud).

[38] See *Talmud Bavli: Sanhedrin* 99a.

[39] Ahad Ha-am, "Priest and Prophet," in *Selected Essays*, ed. and trans. Leon Simon (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1939), pp. 128–29.

God and the Israelites, the Torah entered the world on the tip of a sword of Damocles. For it is said that, as the "offer" of the Covenant was being made, the mountain was raised above the Israelites' heads – and it was clear that it would be dropped upon them should they fail to accept.[40] Their response, understandably enough: "We will do and we will hear."[41] Notice how this reverses what one would expect from a theorist, who always tries to know first, to understand theoretically, and only *then* act.[42] Indeed, as a famous Talmudic story has it, what distinguished the Israelites from all other peoples is precisely their willingness to accept the Covenant without having examined it and tried to understand it first.[43] And according to another, "When Israel accorded precedence to the declaration 'We will do' over the declaration 'We will hear', 600,000 ministering angels came and tied two crowns to each and every member of the Jewish people, one corresponding to 'We will do' and one corresponding to 'We will hear'."[44] Central to this reading, then, is the assumption that before thought and understanding must come violence. And not only the violence of the imposed Covenant; as already noted, the violence proper to mysticism came first, as when Moses and the other prophets were torn from their communities before receiving mystical visions. The violence of the Sadducean priests then followed, when they were charged with applying those visions in a literal and uncompromising fashion.

Thus did the Pharisees see themselves as replacing Biblical Judaism's violence with another form, since, to them, the Second Temple's destruction conclusively demonstrated the need to supersede the Sadducees' approach. This they did by deconstructing its ostensibly unified vision to make way for what I would call "revelatory," as distinct from mystical, creativity. It is what's required if post-Temple Jews are to adhere to the Covenant, since revelations support the creation of a new,

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[40] See *Talmud Bavli: Shabbat* 88a. Hence Levinas: "The teaching, which the Torah is, cannot come to the human being as a result of a choice . . . In the beginning was violence." Levinas, "The Temptation of Temptation," in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowitz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 37.

[41] Levinas, "The Temptation of Temptation," p. 42. This is a Rabbinic way of translating Exodus 24:7; there are others.

[42] For the theorist always examines first, before he "buys." See, for example, Plato, *Protagoras* 312b–14b.

[43] See *Talmud Bavli: Shabbat* 88a.

[44] Ibid. Commenting on this, Levinas has rhetorically asked, "Wasn't a third crown needed to reward the reversal of the sequence?" Levinas, "The Temptation of Temptation," p. 43. That the Sadducees shared a great deal with the Greek theorist is supported by another piece of *aggadah* (narrative). It portrays a Sadducee criticizing a Pharisee for failing to accept the Covenant in a way which the theorist could be expected to approve: "First ye should have listened, if within your powers, accept; if not, ye should not have accepted." *Talmud Bavli: Shabbat* 88a–b.

Oral Law that is no less authoritative than the Written. Because "From the day that the Temple was destroyed [marking the end of Biblical Judaism] prophecy was taken from the prophets and given to the Sages [i.e. the rabbis]."[45]

Rabbinic Jewish revelation takes two basic forms. First, there is Talmudic "study," where students participate in highly polemical debate (*makhlakot*) that aims, not to arrive at a shared understanding of the text that reconciles opposing positions, but to *accentuate* the adversity, to *increase* the space between those positions as well as between the contradictions in the text. As Levinas describes it,

> . . . to rub in such a way that blood spurts out is perhaps the way one must "rub" the text to arrive at the life it conceals . . . Has anyone ever seen a reading that was something besides this effort carried out on a text? [Revelatory reading] can only consist in this violence done to words to tear from them the secret that time and conventions have covered over with their sedimentations, a process begun as soon as these words appear in the open air of history. One must, by rubbing, remove this layer which corrodes them.[46]

This, then, is how Talmudists bring the radical form of openness that revelatory creation requires.

Second, there's the application of Rabbinic laws (*halakhot*) to everyday life. These are utterly rigid and so violently interfere with its flow, such that gaps are once again widened or introduced, creating openings for inspiration and revelation.[47]

Today, contemporary difference philosophers respond to the works of theorists in much the same way that the Pharisees did to the Written Law of the Sadducees. Consider the difference philosopher's claim that theory exhibits a totalising violence that closes us off from the "Other." This happens because theory forcibly incorporates whatever is to be known into the strictures of the ostensibly unified vision of the knower; in this way, the Other's challenging differences, its "infinity" of

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[45] *Talmud Bavli: Bava Batra* 12a. Levinas goes further, asserting that *everyone* is capable of revelation: "Revelation in the Jewish Tradition," in *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 133.

[46] Levinas, "The Temptation of Temptation," pp. 46–47.

[47] This is how I read Joseph Soleveitchik's *Halakhic Man*, trans. Lawrence Kaplan (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983). For more on *makhlakot* and *halakhah*, see my "On the Minimal Global Ethic," § III.i, in *Patriotic Elaborations*.

meaning, are limited, transformed into a self-affirming, containable "same."[48] This is why Levinas suggests that what I've been calling theoretical philosophy has a tendency to a "universal synthesis, a reduction of all experience, of all that is reasonable, to a totality wherein consciousness embraces the world, leaves nothing other outside of itself, and thus becomes absolute thought."[49] Or as Adorno once put it, "the unity of *logos* is caught up in a complex of blame because it tends to mutilate what it unifies."[50] Finally, one might think of Foucault's accusation that theory exhibits a will to truth, one that serves as "a system of exclusion."[51]

So the theories of theoretical philosophy, as well as those of other disciplines that share its tenets, are assumed to contain false unities. Where the Pharisees distinguished between Written and Oral Law, Levinas does between "the said" and "the saying."[52] To make room for the latter, moreover, violence must be done to the former; theories, in other words, must be deconstructed and shown not to contain unified, applicable meaning after all. "In order to suppress violence," declares Levinas, "it is necessary to have recourse to violence."[53] Or as Derrida has put it, deconstruction is but a "violence against violence."[54]

Yet it should be evident that the relation here is not simply one of opposition. Just as the Rabbinic Jew relies on gaps in the Written Law to create the Oral, contemporary difference philosophers often depend on the deconstructed theoretical texts or text-analogues, their spaces or "blind spots" accentuated. Indeed, this tendency is so marked that their approach sometimes seems parasitic on the theorist's, though the difference philosopher would probably say that, ultimately, their action is

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[48] See, for example, Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), I.A.4.

[49] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 75.

[50] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 267.

[51] Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," trans. Ian Mcleod, in Robert Young, ed., *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader* (Boston: Routledge, 1981), p. 54. Foucault would later come to argue that the will to truth itself suffers the violence of an *inclusive*, disciplinary "bio-power."

[52] See Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), I.3, II.3.d, II.4, V.3.

[53] Levinas, "Transcendence et hauteur," *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie* 56 (1962), p. 92 (my translation).

[54] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 117.

beneficial, even more "true," to the host. As Adorno once wrote regarding art criticism, for instance, it does "do violence to the works, but they cannot survive without it."[55] So we can see why, even while it critiques, difference philosophy is also, to a degree, complicit.[56] No wonder so many difference philosophers have chosen to express their ideas in ironic, even parodic, ways.[57]

For a time, many were content to do no more than employ this irony to undermine theories.[58] Many become more constructive, however, as Foucault did in his later work on behalf of a philosophy that can "think differently," or Derrida in his claims on behalf of a justice that is always "to-come."[59] Of course, this is a path that Levinas began to tread much earlier. To him, the point was never merely to counteract theory's denial of the "other" epistemologically, since we also need to be open to the revelations of the "Other," that is, to God. This is what it means to recognize that the saying always has something ethical to say. And that's why we find Levinas writing in a paradoxical, disorienting style, as well as why "a saying that must also be unsaid" is perhaps the crucial characterization of his prose in *Otherwise Than Being*, recognized by many as his most mature work.[60] In his concern that defending any particular idea would contribute to the totalizations of theory, Levinas strives to mimic the plurality of conflicting assertions present in both the Bible and Talmud, thus ensuring that his own writings facilitate the openness that revelation requires.

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[55] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 480.

[56] See, especially, Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). And as Linda Hutcheon describes postmodernism, which I would identify as the political philosophy based on the tenets of difference, "It is the function of irony in postmodern discourse to posit . . . critical distance and then undo it." Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 2002, 2nd ed.), p. 15.

[57] Derrida and Rorty, for instance, explicitly endorse this use of irony. See Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), esp. chs. 4–6; Derrida, "Psyche: The Invention of the Other," trans. Catherine Porter, in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); and Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, esp. p. 3 where Derrida tells us that there is a "mute irony" in all *différance*.

[58] Jean-François Lyotard, for example, limits himself to expressing "incredulity" at the "grand narratives" underlying such philosophy, all the while advancing a grand narrative of his own: *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

[59] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2: *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1985), p. 9; Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'," in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson, eds., *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 27.

[60] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 7; and see Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p. 74.

As the Rabbinic sages hoped that the creative inspirations driving the revelations of scripture would be relevant to Jews everywhere, Levinas also expressed the wish that revelation could provide a source of creative ethics for everyone. Just as scripture constitutes an "epiphanic site" for Jews, Levinas would have everybody see – and be seen by – each and every human being in this way. Thus his insistence that people have "faces," that they call upon us, and that the first thing we "hear" when they do is "Thou shalt not kill." I put the notion of "hearing" in scare quotes because this encounter with the face is clearly meant to involve something more than the phenomenological form of hearing essential to everyday dialogue; with the latter, the speaker is another person and what they say is, of course, heard with our ears. Think of Moses' call, "Hear me, O Israel," followed by his speaking "in the ears" of the Israelites (Deut. 31:30). With the revelation of the face, however, it is the Other who "speaks" and we don't "hear" with our ears so much as with our soul. Thus, revelatory speaking and listening is not to be understood in sensory terms; when Levinas tells us that "the eye [of the Other] does not shine; it speaks,"[61] we understand that it does so without making a sound.

All of which suggests that the classic association of Jerusalem with the aural, and Athens with the ocular, can be misleading. I would even argue that, as long as we're wary of the theorist's "idolatrous" attempts at capturing God within a rational vision (what Kierkegaard would call "theology"), there's room to recognize how difference philosophers largely retain theory's ocularcentrism – as long as we accept the darkness along with the light. This accounts for their philosophies' paradoxes, where whatever is affirmed can also be denied, since to embrace paradox is to embrace the gaps, the Nothings, that lie between – and within – the parts of a whole.[62] Blindness and not only insight are thus to be welcomed, [63] since this reverses the theorist's asymmetrical relation between self and other: rather than trying to attain power over something by capturing it within a unified vision, we should accept, and indeed submit to, the power the Other has over us. Says Levinas: "since the Other looks at me, I am responsible for him, without even having *taken* on responsibilities

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[61] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 66. This "non-dialogical" form of hearing is also advanced by Derrida in his *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, ed. Christie McDonald, trans. Peggy Kamus and Avital Ronell (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1982).

[62] For more on gaps, both within difference philosophy and elsewhere, see my "Gaps: When Not Even Nothing Is There," *Comparative Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (Jan. 2021): 31–55.

[63] On difference philosophy's critique of the ocularism of theory, see, for example, Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), esp. ch. 3 § 4; and Martin Jay, *The Downcast Eye: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

in his regard; his responsibility *is incumbent on me*."[64] Because "[t]here is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me."[65]

Evidently, difference philosophy's violence moves in the opposite direction to that of theory. We are to be struck by the Other's demands, and so placed in a position comparable to that of the Israelites who, as noted, had little choice but to accept the Covenant at Sinai. Rather than the simple unity of Athens, then, what's affirmed is the complex unity, the "unity of plurality" or "variety in unity"[66] of Jerusalem, which is to say wholes with numerous gaps within them – "constellations," to use the term Adorno inherited from Walter Benjamin. Or think of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's definition of the concept: "The concept is a whole because it totalizes its components, but it is a fragmentary whole."[67] Needless to say, Socrates would not have approved: "If [someone] were to show me that the absolute one was many, or the absolute many one, I should be truly amazed."[68]

**IV**

Practical philosophy adopts – but also transforms – Aristotle's distinction between the theoretical and practical forms of reason. Natural science relies on the disengaged "cold" reason of the theorist. When it comes to grasping society and its cultural and historical events, however, the human sciences require a "warm" form of reason, one that engages with the context. And *pace* Aristotle, this includes philosophy. Moreover, warm reasoning not only has more in common with Aristotle's *phronēsis* than with *technē*, but it also contributes to well-being (*eudaimonia*) without any theory about what this is. For Aristotle, we need a theory that ranks the virtues on the basis of human nature, since this is the

[64] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 96; see also Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 91.

[65] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 89.

[66] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 306; and Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 25.

[67] Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 16.

[68] Plato, *Parmenides*, in *Dialogues*, vol. 2, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), 129c.

target at which practical reason aims (*Eth. Nic.* 1094a23–25). That's why, as he famously asserted, "we deliberate not about ends, but about what promotes ends."[69]

The practical reasoning of the practical philosopher, however, helps with both aiming the arrow *and* setting up its target. In Aristotelian terms, its *logos* relies on character (*ethos*) and feeling (*pathos*), but not on the demonstrations (*apodeixis*) of logic. As such, it should be considered fundamentally dialogical, rejecting both the theorist's emphasis on thought over language (e.g. Aristotle, *De Int.* 16a1–9) and the difference philosopher's back and forth between affirming and denying this emphasis. For the practical philosopher, we should refrain altogether from making a distinction between thought and language. As Berlin has put it, for instance, "language" and "ideas" are "but alternative ways of saying the same thing"; or as Wittgenstein remarked, "Now it is becoming clear why I thought that thinking and language were the same. For thinking is a kind of language."[70] Moreover, instead of the theorist's attempt to gain power over the object of thought, to "capture it in one's sights," or the difference philosopher's more egalitarian alternating between this and submission to the Other, the practical philosopher upholds the symmetrical relation characteristic of interlocutors in everyday dialogue. And while this dialogue can be understood as having a spiritual dimension (a claim central to Buber's account), it takes place between man and man, not God and man.[71] After all, only people can speak and listen in turn, can dominate and subordinate themselves as they strive for understanding.[72] Only embodied agents sensitive to their particular contexts can genuinely exchange, and so change, interpretations between them.[73]

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[69] Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), 1112b33–34. See also Ronald Beiner, *Political Judgment* (London: Methuen, 1983), pp. 72–97; and my *From Pluralist to Patriotic Politics*, p. 97.

[70] Berlin, "From Hope and Fear Set Free," in *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, 2nd ed.), p. 247; Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916*, eds. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979, 2nd ed.), p. 82e.

[71] See Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970 [1923]); and *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Boston: Beacon Press, 1947).

[72] "And does this not mean that one who understands will always be in a subordinate position in respect to one who speaks and who will be understood?" Gadamer, "Reply to My Critics (1971)," trans. George H. Leiner, in Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift, eds., *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricœur* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), p. 285.

[73] See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012 [1945]).

It's for this reason, moreover, that practical philosophy emphasizes the aural over the (in)visible, since, as Gadamer declares, "the primacy of hearing is the basis of the hermeneutical phenomenon."[74] At their best, interlocutors *listen* for reconciliatory interpretations that help them "make sense" of a question's confusing particulars. Thought that is fully transparent and unified is beyond the reach of this warm dialogical reason, yet those who engage in it can still develop better, more coherent and comprehensive interpretations that succeed in "expressing" or "articulating" meaning as distinct from "representing" it. All of this requires its transformation, which combines both discovery and evolution.[75]

While it is a form of practice, dialogical interpretation must obviously be distinguished from the revelatory "doing" of the difference philosopher. For one, practice is prior in a temporal sense: before thinking, there is always prereflective habit, the practical background out of which thoughts tend to emerge. This is the mode of being that Heidegger called "average everydayness," and Dreyfus "everyday coping."[76] They emphasize it because reflective interpretation begins only once something has "shown up" to us, a conflict of some sort that has prevented us from continuing in our habitual way.

For another, practice is prior in terms of significance, since it is fundamental to practical philosophical thought that, while extremely general, it's once again warm, because situated in a historical context and so on par with everyday thinking.[77] That's why even transcendental arguments, which are supposed to be indubitable, can never be free of questioning.[78] Of course, this is even more true of argument in moral or political philosophy, which must also proceed dialogically rather than

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[74] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989, 2nd ed. [1960]), p. 420.

[75] For more on this aspect of dialogical interpretation, see my *From Pluralist to Patriotic Politics*, ch. 3, sect. IV(i). I think it's because Gadamer follows Heidegger in (over-)emphasizing discovery that he's uncomfortable with the notion of "progress" in hermeneutics. See Gadamer, "Reply to My Critics," p. 283.

[76] See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962 [1927]), esp. pp. 67–71, 421–23; and Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's* Being and Time, *Division I* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), pp. 3, 85, 88ff.

[77] See Taylor, "Philosophy and Its History," in Richard Rorty, J.B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner, eds., *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), esp. p. 17. See also Ricœur, "Action, Story, and History: On Re-Reading *The Human Condition*," *Salmagundi*, no. 60 (Spring-Summer 1983): 60–72, p. 60.

[78] See Taylor, "On the Validity of Transcendental Arguments," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

being grounded in a theoretical foundation, whether absolute, or "floating," or based on a revelatory openness to the Other. Ethical rules, then, should be considered no more than maxims, expressive guidelines to be "mediated with" rather than "applied to" practice. For they too are contributions to dialogue rather than abstract principles constitutive of theory. Because as Wittgenstein once put it, "When I obey a rule . . . I obey the rule *blindly*."[79]

No wonder practical philosophers sympathetic to monism tend to favour ocular metaphors: Heidegger, for whom the practical background constitutes "a *totality* of involvements,"[80] suggests that *logos* consists of "letting something be *seen* in its *togetherness* with something."[81] By contrast, those sympathetic to pluralism tend to assume a fragmented background, though one has to wonder how they can account for why some things emerge from it and demand our attention while others don't. It seems to me that only by recognizing that the background is disunified though holistic can we account for the prereflective prioritizing of the perception of some things over others.[82]

Has practical philosophy appeared only the past century, first with Buber's turn from mysticism to dialogue and then, among the other thinkers mentioned, with Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Gadamer, Berlin, and Taylor? I don't believe so. Not only did it serve as one of the main sources of Renaissance humanism but, even further back, it had an important place in ancient Greek and ancient Jewish thought, albeit as a minority tradition in both cases.

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[79] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, eds. G.E.M. Anscombe, Rush Rhees and G.H. von Wright., trans. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958, 2nd ed.), para. 219. Taylor seems to me to misinterpret this statement as lending support to Saul Kripke's reading that Wittgenstein advocates a monological, rather than dialogical, conception of interpretation. See Taylor, "To Follow a Rule," in *Philosophical Arguments*, pp. 167–68. Could this be because he follows Heidegger (e.g. *Being and Time*, p. 187) in identifying the primary mode of access to truth with "seeing" rather than "hearing"? In Taylor's writings, knowledge – including that relevant to the humanities and human sciences – tends to be referred to with the use of ocular metaphors.

[80] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 191; my emphasis. Heidegger also tends to use "whole" and "unity" as synonyms, e.g. in ibid., p. 365.

[81] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 56 (my emphasis on "seen"). Elsewhere: "from the beginning onwards the tradition of philosophy has been oriented primarily towards 'seeing' as a way of access to entities *and to Being*. To keep the connection with this tradition, we may formalize 'sight' and 'seeing' enough to obtain therewith a universal term for characterizing any access to entities or to Being, as access in general." Ibid., p. 187. Later, however, Heidegger, moves towards the aural: "The sound of speaking and of its source in saying . . . points to simple phenomena. We can see them once we pay heed again to the way in which we are everywhere under way within the neighborhood of the modes of Saying. Among these, poetry and thinking have ever been preeminent." Heidegger, "The Nature of Language," in *On the Way to Language*, p. 101.

[82] See my *From Pluralist to Patriotic Politics*, ch. 3 § III; and "From Moderate to Extreme Holism," in *Patriotic Elaborations*.

Heidegger made the case vis-à-vis the Greeks. Consider his claim that "metaphysics" originated with Plato's "forgetting" of being, and so that philosophical meaning is best understood as arising from a partly prereflective world of shared historical practices. That's why we should recall the lessons of the pre-Socratics, especially Anaximander, Parmenides, and Heraclitus, who were proto-practical philosophers later taken up by some of the Sophists.[83] That said, Gadamer has argued that Platonic dialectic should be considered practical,[84] and Martha Nussbaum has made a similar claim on behalf of Aristotle.[85] I fail to see, however, how this avoids bringing these two close to the Sophists, who they rightly considered their intellectual enemies. This is especially true of Protagoras, the greatest of the ancient Greek practical philosophers.[86]

More than anything, Protagoras favoured literary criticism and the study of history as the best means of moral education, as they are highly interpretive endeavours.[87] Virtue is not something that can only be inherited naturally, it can also be taught (*didachē*). And though many read Protagoras' famous aphorisms – "Man is the measure of all things" and "Make the lesser reason stronger"[88] – as implying a truth-denying relativism, others recognize that they support practical ideas such as the idea that interpreted experience provides the standards for judging probable truths, or that truth claims are best tested through dialogical argument with others. Think of Plato's account of Protagoras' creation myth, which distinguishes the wisdom required for just politics, a

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[83] See, for example, Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 47–49; and "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), pp. 143–47.

[84] See, for example, Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1980); and Jean Grondin, "The Task of Hermeneutics in Ancient Philosophy," in *Sources of Hermeneutics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).

[85] See Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, rev. ed.), though on pp. xxiv-xxviii of the preface to the book's second edition, Nussbaum says she disagrees with the many who (like myself) read the first edition as portraying Aristotle as an anti-theorist.

[86] For a critique of the idea that Plato's (so-called) dialogues contain a practical conception of philosophy, see my "Opponents vs. Adversaries in Plato's *Phaedo*," in *Patriotic Elaborations*; and my "Critique de l'interprétation gadamériene de Platon," in Yves Couture and Martin Breaugh, eds., *Les anciens dans la pensée politique contemporaine* (Quebec: Les Presses de l'Université de Laval, 2010). For support for the claim that Aristotle is a theoretical monist, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007, 3rd ed.), esp. p. 157.

[87] As we can gather from Plato's portrayal of him in the *Protagoras*.

[88] Protagoras, "Fragments," trans. Michael J. O'Brien, in Rosamond Kent Sprague, ed., *The Older Sophists* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1972), B1, B6b.

gift from Zeus, from the *technē* acquired for humanity by Prometheus (see *Prot.* 321c–22d; though this is contradicted in *Tht.* 166d–67d). Zeus' gift, it's worth noting, was delivered by Hermes, whose name serves as the root for the word "hermeneutics."

This makes way for the notion that there were two kinds of Sophists, depending on whether or not justice is considered a *technē*, and so on whether the division between nature (*physis*) and conventional law (*nomos*) is considered fundamental. To Gorgias and his followers, distinguishing between the latter two requires downgrading *nomos*, perhaps even assuming it to be no more than an illusion, a mask concealing the natural power of the strong. To Protagoreans, by contrast, *nomos* has its own integrity, which is why judging it, and justice, requires something more like *phronēsis* than *technē*.[89] After all, as the character based on Protagoras in Plato's dialogue of the same name points out, people who can't play the flute (that is, those not adept at its *technē*) never claim that they can, but everyone professes to have a sense of justice (323b).[90] So justice must require something other than the technical expertise that comes from being well-trained, which suggests that we should recognize the methodological distinction between natural science and human science that, as noted, is central to practical philosophy. (As well as that Gorgias is, by implication, a kind of difference philosopher.[91])

For an ancient Jewish source of practical philosophy, consider the Levitical priesthood of Biblical Judaism's pre-monarchic period. As with the Sophists, there were two basic kinds of Jewish priests: the Levites, from Moses (who was not only a mystic: "Hear, O Israel") to Abiathar and his followers, and the Aaronites, from Moses' brother Aaron to the First Temple's high priest Zadok and the priests of the Second Temple supported by the Sadduceans. The Levites were dominant before King David centralized power in Jerusalem and built the First Temple. From that point on, Levites played second fiddle to Aaronites, serving as no more than the latter's assistants.

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[89] Though Jacqueline de Romilly doesn't go this far, she also distinguishes between Protagoras' and Gorgias' approaches, and she even associates the former with the defence of a certain form of truth. See her *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

[90] Gadamer echoes this latter claim when he writes, "One finds that everyone claims to know the right for all." Gadamer, "Reply to My Critics," p. 293.

[91] See Scott Consigny, *Gorgias: Sophist and Artist* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001). Peter Levine, however, also reads Protagoras in (roughly) this way: see his *Living Without Philosophy: On Narrative, Rhetoric, and Morality* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), ch. 3.

Before then, however, Levitical priests were the ones commanded to "teach Jacob thy judgments, and Israel thy law" (Deut. 33:10; see also Lev. 10:8–11; Jer. 18:18; Ezek. 7:26; an occupation for which, like the Sophists, they were paid, as we see from Mic. 3:11). Thus, we have reason to speak of the centrality of hermeneutics to their profession.[92] When they taught, these priests wore a breastplate (*hoshen*), which represented the people, and a gold-plated turban (*mitznefet*), which represented God, thus embodying their standing as a dialogical bridge between the two (Exod. 28:15, 28:36–38, 39:31). All this was undergirded by the distinction between nature and human history, one supported by the story of Noah and the flood, (Gen. 8:21) and reiterated later by the covenant between Him and Abraham.[93] This covenant implies is that there's a degree to which people are free from both God and nature, since it is only as free beings that they could choose to enter into – and interpret – a covenant.

It's worth mentioning at this point that the offices of the Levitical priests were never particularly concerned with sacrificial functions. Weber emphasizes their this-worldly rationality when he cites their rejection of magic and their preference for ethical conduct over observing rituals.[94] They also received confessions and were responsible for "reconciling" the guilty with God (Num. 5:6ff; Lev. 4:20, 31; 5:10; 6:7), which they did by manipulating the Urim and Thummin, thought to be a kind of die that gave yes or no answers to inquiries (Deut. 33:8; Judg. 17:5–13). As Weber implies, however, this was a highly dialogical process, since "everything depended on the way that the question was put," and many complicated preliminary questions had to be settled before one could be placed before God; very little was thus left to be determined by a roll of the dice.[95] That all of this invokes the warm reasoning of practical philosophy also follows

[92] For they were "the authoritative *interpreters* of the Law." Moses Buttenweiser, "Priest," in Isidore Singer *et al.*, eds., *The Jewish Encyclopaedia*, vol. 10 (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1905), p. 193 (my emphasis).

[93] See David Hartman, *The Significance of Israel for the Future of Judaism* (Jerusalem: Shalom Hartman Institute, 2004), p. 14. Hartman immediately follows this point with another about how God further differentiates between human history and nature when His role shifts from Creator to Covenant-Maker with Abraham, thereby accepting "that the Divine Will alone does not ensure that the human world will mirror His vision for history."

[94] See Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, eds. and trans. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (New York: The Free Press, 1952), pp. 219–25.

[95] Ibid., p. 179.

from Weber's description of priesthood in general as "permanently associated with particular norms, places and times, and related to specific social groups."[96]

I think that Buber (from the moment he took his famous dialogical turn) can be said to have taken up the spirit of the Levitical priesthood. Notice how he translates the Israelites' acceptance of the covenant at Exodus 24:7. Rather than the Rabbinic "We will do and we will hear," he takes the Hebrew letter *vav* of the text as a subordinate conjunction and arrives at "We will do in order to hear," a move that even Levinas admits constitutes "a perfectly legitimate usage."[97] If we follow Buber in this (though I prefer "We will do and so hear," as it even more strongly associates doing and hearing), then we arrive at the practical philosopher's idea that thinking is a form of practice. Otherwise put, the Israelites declared their intention to fulfil the terms of their covenant with God by carrying them out in practice, knowing that doing so always requires interpretation.

**V**

If philosophy is "the love of wisdom," what does this say about the three approaches described above? Should we choose between them? Needless to say, it all depends on what's meant by "wisdom." One aspect is surely its relation to practical affairs: the wise are those we can count on to provide counsel, whether personal or political. Their wisdom comes, presumably, from experience, which accounts for why they tend to be older. As for experience, Heidegger distinguished between two conceptions: one refers to the confirmation of an idea via immediate demonstration, through "experiencing" something for oneself; the other emphasizes "undergoing" an experience because one has encountered something unexpected and disruptive and then learned from it.[98] Presumably, it is the second that leads to wisdom. But do all such experiences manage this?

Gadamer would say yes. To him, all experience is hermeneutical, since hermeneutics is universal: "Nothing is left out of th[e] speech community; absolutely no experience of the world

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[96] Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, vol. 1, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, trans. Ephraim Fischoff *et al.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 426.

[97] Levinas, "The Temptation of Temptation," p. 42.

[98] See Heidegger, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1988), pp. 19–23.

is excluded."[99] But are all experiences "of the world"? And if not, should we even speak of "experience"? Not if you're, say, a Christian Neoplatonist, whose goal is mystical unification with the divine One, since this is said to require going beyond reason by engaging an apophatic process that negates experience. (This led many of them to emphasize the metaphors of light and darkness,[100] a point I'll return to below.) Similarly, if revelation as Rabbinic Jews conceive of it is what you seek, then it's worth recalling Levinas' remark that our encounters with the face of the Other shouldn't be understood in sensory terms, which is to say that they are not phenomenological experiences.[101]

Assuming that mysticism and revelation are indeed possible, it's worth interrogating the role, if any, of the self during such encounters. Yet the case of the former, how can we account for the mystic's return to the world? That is, isn't there something incoherent in the very idea of total mystical ecstasy?[102] Perhaps, then, we should accept that there's a degree to which mystical union is indeed an experience, making it a form of phenomenological perception.[103] But mysticism's association with the ocular suggests that it must still be distinguished from everyday experience – something which, we can agree with Gadamer, is thoroughly interpretive.

While I want, here, to keep the question of the veracity of mysticism or revelation at bay, it seems to me that these concerns suggest something about an activity which most people regard much less dubiously, namely artistic creation. For it, too, must surely be distinguished from everyday interpretation – it's not for nothing that great artists are described as visionaries of the imagination.[104] Any universal hermeneutics is problematic, then, because it seems to exclude, or

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[99] Gadamer, "Reply to My Critics," p. 277.

[100] See Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), esp. pp. 1–8.

[101] "I do not know if one can speak of a 'phenomenology' of the face, since phenomenology describes what appears. So, too, I wonder if one can speak of a look turned toward the face, for the look is knowledge, perception." Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 85. Levinas has also distinguished between the ethical "testimony" that he associates with encountering the Other and "experience" in ibid., p. 115.

[102] As R.C. Zaehner argues throughout his *Mysticism Sacred and Profane: An Inquiry into Some Varieties of Praeternatural Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957).

[103] Meaning that, following Franz Brentano's "intentionality" thesis, it's an experience *of* things in the world: *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, ed. Linda L. McAlister, trans. Antos C. Rancurello, D.B. Terrell, and McAlister (New York: Routledge, 1995, 2nd ed. [1874]), esp. pp. 88–91.

[104] See, for example, Berys Gaut, "Creativity and Imagination," in Gaut and Paisely Livingston, eds., *The Creation of Art: New Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

at least reduce, not only mysticism but also the commonplace distinction between fiction, in its widest sense, and non-fiction – that is, between what artists do (create) and what critics do (interpret).[105]

After all, think of the violence often associated with creation, if only because art (at its best) is more disruptive than criticism. We might even say that art strives for a diremption from tradition, which explains why creations have a greater potential than interpretations to be original, to be "ahead of their time" (like prophecy). With interpretation, by contrast, the aim is the realization or development of tradition, as Gadamer has often emphasized. This brings us back to the wise, to those whose interpretive experiences have helped them to come to know a given society's traditional practices especially well.

This leads me to make the following claim: since the philosophers of theory or difference are concerned with creativity rather than with the practical reasoning that is the basis of interpretation, then they are best understood as "artist-philosophers." I realize how strange this must sound, especially given Plato's famous attack on the poets, but I wonder if he has simply been misunderstood, even by himself. For his aspiration to unity of articulation, which is shared by even modern analytic theorists who praise "systematic beauty,"[106] is clearly driven by motives other than the rational. After all, what is the struggle for unity, whether organic or systematic, in a disunified world if not a means of creativity? Plato's attack, I'm suggesting, should be reinterpreted as one made by an artist of one type against artists of another, perhaps because the latter have more interpretation mixed in with their creativity. Think of a poet today criticizing the novel form.[107]

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[105] Nietzsche complained about philosophy's reduction of the former to the latter in his *The Will to Power: Selections from the Notebooks of the I880s*, ed. R. Kevin Hill, trans. Hill and Michael A. Scarpitti (London: Penguin Random House, 2017), no. 811.

[106] Lewis, *Counterfactuals*, p. 88.

[107] This reminds me of one of Michael Oakeshott's footnotes: "I have said that I am inclined to think that what I mean by 'contemplation' is all that can survive in the Platonic conception of Θεωοίά. This belief may now be restated as the belief that what Plato described as Θεωοίά is, in fact, aesthetic experience but that he misdescribed it and attributed to it a character and a supremacy which it is unable to sustain. By understanding 'poetry' as a craft, and craft as an activity of imitating ideal models, he followed a false scent which led him to the unnecessary hypothesis of non-image-making, 'wordless' experience, namely, that of 'beholding' the ideal models to be copied. Nevertheless, the Platonic Θεωοίά, if it were admitted to be image-making, would direct our attention to an activity of image-making which would not be 'copying' and whose images would not be 'representations'." Oakeshott, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," in *Rationalism and Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991, new ed. [1962]), p. 516 n. 13.

So while I accept that Wittgenstein was right to declare that, when it comes to philosophical theory, language goes "*on holiday*," I don't think this means that the theorists are simply *mistaken*, as Taylor, for one, has suggested as regards modern epistemological theory.[108] For their posing of supposedly "bad" questions – questions such as whether there's a world at all, or what the essence of justice might be, and so on – may indeed be unwise, but it can also be very creative. This suggests that while social and political theorists don't really help us *understand* society and politics, their visions can offer radically new perspectives on them. We simply need to keep in mind the degree to which they are utopian, and as Ricœur warns,

> The nowhere of utopia may become a pretext for escape, a way of fleeing the contradictions and ambiguity both of the use of power and of the assumption of authority in a given situation. This escapism of utopia belongs to a logic of all or nothing. No connecting point exists between the 'here' of social reality and the 'elsewhere' of the utopia. This disjunction allows the utopia to avoid any obligation to come to grips with the real difficulties of a given society.[109]

This risk is present outside of philosophy departments as well; all who work with theories in the humanities or social sciences ought to be wary of it. In much of political science today, for example, rational choice theory remains a dominant paradigm. Yet despite how it tends to be conceived by both practitioners and critics,[110] I would claim that it's not, in fact, a means of doing social science so much as a way of making art. That is, while it indeed engages in a kind of "flight from reality,"[111] such flights have always been essential to creativity. The danger here arises only when creators succeed in convincing policymakers to apply their theories to practice. Because

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[108] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, eds. P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Hacker, and Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, rev. 4th ed.), no. 38; and see Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology," in *Philosophical Arguments*, p. 2, where he writes: "In some circles, it is becoming a new orthodoxy that the whole enterprise from Descartes, through Locke and Kant, and pursued by various nineteenth- and twentieth-century succession movements, was a mistake."

[109] Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. George H. Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 17.

[110] Among the latter, see Donald P. Green and Ian Shapiro, *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory: A Critique of Applications in Political Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

[111] See Ian Shapiro, *The Flight from Reality in the Human Sciences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

even those that you would think are most obviously fictitious – from *homo economicus* to historical materialism – have led to the undermining of many cherished goods.

That, then, is when we should oppose the theory and ally ourselves with the philosophers of difference. And as I have been arguing, they are no less creators – Deleuze and Guattari have gone so far as to define philosophy as "the discipline that involves *creating* concepts."[112] Or consider Foucault: because he aims not for a utopian theory, but for epiphanies that can come through spaces, gaps between the fragments of our world, he has insisted that "discourses must be treated as discontinuous practices, which cross each other, are sometimes juxtaposed with one another, but can just as well exclude or be unaware of each other."[113] Borrowing Levinas' vocabulary, we might see Foucault as striving to make room for *infini* alongside the *totalité*, which is to say for a creativity that "occurs in the interstice."[114] After all, is he not correct that there's a degree to which the world is shot through with "lines of fragility . . . kinds of virtual fracture" that allow us to "open up the space of possible transformation"?[115] Still, why not also try to transform this world through reconciliation, through making sense of it? That, at least, is the ambition of the practical philosopher.

So if I'm right that the approaches of both theory and difference are more creative than interpretive, and perhaps even more artistic than philosophical, then each is wrong to reduce the practical approach to the other – something that they often do. Each should also recognize that there are many more artists in the world than most people, including many artists themselves, suspect. We might even say that they have been too modest.

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[112] Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 5 (emphasis in original).

[113] Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," p. 67.

[114] Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 85.

[115] Foucault, "Critical Theory / Intellectual History," trans. Jeremy Harding, in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977–1984*, ed. Laurence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 36.