Loving Wisdom

Charles Blattberg
(Université de Montréal)

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

Never too dark for the blind to travel.
Scott Merritt

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

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 the result of doing so means that one ends up rejecting philosophy – involves making claims of the greatest scope and generality. Whether or not these are understood to be of universal relevance is one of the central issues at stake in the contemporary debates. But even those who emphasize philosophy’s limitations tend to do so by referring to all philosophy and philosophers, everywhere. And that, as someone once suggested to me, is why there can be no such thing as a truly modest philosopher.

It seems to me that there are three rival conceptions of philosophy on offer in the West today. My aim here will be to contrast them, to show how they diverge as well as how this divergence is based on their different historical roots. Then, drawing on all the hubris and chutzpah I can muster, I

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will suggest that one of them is the superior – albeit only philosophically-speaking. Because the others often make greater, if non-philosophical, contributions to truth.

“Theoretical philosophy” is how I refer to the tradition that has by far been the most successful in asserting its conception of the discipline, indeed 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, of reflection that aims for a unified vision of truth – has been accepted by so many for so long that calling it “theoretical” may even appear 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 (whether rationalist, empiricist or, in the case of Edmund Husserl, phenomenologist) that followed; 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.” It also has ancient roots, though more in Jewish than in Greek thought, in particular, in Rabbinic Judaism. Its contemporary manifestations, both poststructuralist and pragmatist, were made way for by Friedrich Nietzsche’s attacks on Plato and other theoretical philosophers, which is why its defenders are sometimes called “neo-Nietzscheans.” Yet on some readings Nietzsche shares a monism with theorists, albeit in a Heraclitean rather than Parmenidean sense. In any case, it’s not enough to refer simply to the rejection of theory, since difference philosophy is more of a complicitous critique of it. In fact, metaphorically speaking, one might say that it advances a blinking, vision-blindness (anti-)dialectic as an alternative 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. But they do this not so much in order to advance their own, alternative conception of reason as to make way for the differences of the “Other,” which they believe is suppressed by theory. While the most prominent difference philosophers this past century are surely Theodor W. Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Richard Rorty, I shall largely focus on the one who’s been the most sensitive to its Jewish roots, namely Emmanuel Levinas.

The third approach I call “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 so 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 the claim that there exists a fundamental methodological division between the human and the natural sciences, one absent from the other two philosophical approaches. Practical reasoning, moreover, is itself conceived as derivative of (largely pre-reflective) practice, indeed as but a form of practice, since it is said to share in practice’s 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 the practical philosopher believes that we need to listen, rather than look, for the truth.

Truth as so conceived is never going to be an all-or-nothing affair. On the contrary, it comes from the reconciliation, or integration, of contradictions or conflicts, and this depends on developing good interpretations of them, interpretations that will nevertheless always be imperfect. Otherwise put, reconciliation can never be total: greater integration is a matter of greater proximity to unity, not with reaching it. That said, some practical philosophers, those such as 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, such a Ludwig Wittgenstein, Isaiah Berlin, and Bernard Williams, are pluralists. And still others, such as Martin Buber, may be said to move between the two extremes.  

II

Theoretical philosophy has its origins in Socrates 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”) that is intended to replace the plurality of “blind” Homer’s

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 gods. 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. Against each of these three, the ancient theorist can be said to affirm one form or other of unity.

How, exactly, 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 may be said to have 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 to honour its divinities). There’s no small ambiguity regarding the nature of this theoretical transcendence, however. Plato even seems to appeal to two possibly incompatible forms of it. One consists of a “weak” transcendence in which 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). This approach can be associated with pagan cosmologies, wherein the cosmos constitutes a spiritual unity and theorizing would transcend no more than everyday divisions in order to achieve contact with immanent universals. Regarding ethics, the idea is that conflicts between goods are ultimately


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.
unreal, and so that we overcome them when we recognize the true, unified nature of moral reality. And regarding the self or soul, it too is seen as unified when we appreciate that it’s but a microcosm – both of the just *polis* and the whole universe.

The alternative “strong” transcendence is more radical. It comes to the fore when Plato’s Socrates tells of the philosopher who climbs *up out* of the cave, leaving the profane world behind altogether in order to perceive the light of the sun (*Rep.* 515e–516b, 532b). This is the proto-monotheistic Plato, the one for which 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 so 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 straddles the meanings of both “thought” and “language.” Ancient theorists tend to emphasize the former, with language serving as merely the vehicle for the thinking that articulates or “lays things out” in propositions in order that there can be true knowledge (*epistēme*).11 Moreover, this thinking is monological rather than dialogical, an implication of Plato’s account of the philosopher as 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

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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.


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 is what supposedly comes from attaining a unified vision: utter self-sufficiency (EN 1177a28–b1, b27–1178a3, 1178b8–18).

Ancient theorists, and a few modern ones, conceive of this unity as having an “organic” form, by which I mean that it exhibits a “holographic” holism, in which the whole is present in the parts (the principle upon which today’s holographic images are constructed).13 Two steps take us from here to the “systematic” unity that’s 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 referred to 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 threatens God’s omnipotence (because if the existing order was created as good, then God couldn’t change it as that would make Him bad). In consequence, they argued instead that theoretical universals were but the terms of propositions, and so that theorizing was not so much a virtuous expression of a way of life as a means of producing doctrines.16 Combined with the rise of modern

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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 Organicism 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.

epistemology and its subject-object dualism, theories then became mental representations of an independent reality.

The mechanism associated with all this, made possible by the reappropriation of Leucippas and Democritus’ atomistic philosophy of nature, then led to the idea that a theory’s parts (whether conceived of as individual atoms or as structures) are analyzable, able to be separated out into independently distinct components. When reassembled, they thus shouldn’t be described as “integrated,” since that is true only of the parts of organic wholes; rather, they should be seen as “interlocked,” since this term implies that the whole is “systematic.” Such a whole differs from the organic kind in that the latter’s parts are distinguishable yet never separable, since there’s a sense in which separating them out would “kill” them. That a degree of atomism is associated with systematic wholes is implied by Christian Wolff when, in 1770, he defined a system as “a collection of truths duly arranged in accordance with the principles governing their connections,” or relatively recently by Hubert L. Dreyfus for whom theorizing consists of “the systematic interrelation of distinguishable elements.” And that the idea of a “system” is often assumed to be synonymous with “systematic unity” is 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.”

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 so all of its inhabitants. John Rawls’ vision of the “well-ordered” society, one governed by his systematic theory of justice, can be interpreted in this way. Rawls is the leading contemporary political theorist, political theory having been aptly defined as “systematic reflection

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18 For more on these distinctions between organic and systematic wholes, and integrated and interlocked parts, see my “Parts and Wholes: Relations of Structure” (forthcoming).


on the nature and purposes of government.”22 Yet its worth noting that Rawls’ work exhibits a
tension that parallels the one based on the two forms of transcendence present in Plato’s thought.23
On the one hand, there’s the Rawls of the “original position,” the standpoint attained 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, Rawls believes, will come to adopt the principles of his theory of
justice, principles that are supposedly neutral to all of the various reasonable conceptions of the good
life.24 The theory, then, 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.”25 Thus does it provide an
eternal, because fixed and ahistorical, foundation for just societies everywhere. The affinities between
this and the strong transcendence of Plato’s cave allegory should be clear.

However, there’s also the Rawls who would have us reach his theory via a process of “reflective
equilibrium,” one that shares something of the spirit of Plato’s weak transcendence. For 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 it, reflective equilibrium entails only that
we “detach ourselves from some of our values while assessing them in the light of our other beliefs,”26
these latter being given the status of “provisional fixed points”27 for the purpose of assessment. The
goal, in other words, is not to discern something absolute, since one is merely reformulating some
historical givens in the hopes of making them more systematic – whether these are opinions about the

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23 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.

24 See Rawls, A Theory of Justice, esp. ch. 3.

25 Ibid., p. 514.


27 Rawls, Political Liberalism, p. 8; or see A Theory of Justice, p. 18.
nature of mind, say, or the rules underlying modern democratic practices. In the latter case, then, while Rawls’ 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 involves an interpretive kind of thought.

As one might expect, different readers have emphasized one or the other Rawls. Those such as Michael Sandel put the accent on the original position, while others such as Richard Rorty have stressed reflective equilibrium instead. Members of the former group sometimes complain that Rawls’ approach is monological, pointing out his stipulation that “we can view the agreement in the original position from the standpoint of one person selected at random.” But there’s reason to question the dialogical nature of reflective equilibrium as well. For one thing, the process is, sooner or later, supposed to reach equilibrium and so settle on a theory capable of being neutrally applied. Yet genuine dialogues rarely end completely, since, as Paul Ricoeur once put it, “every judgement calls for a ‘but’ beyond itself.” 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 cannot be expected to attain this; after all, even theoretical philosophers have yet to reach much of a consensus on anything. Of course, they can always respond

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28 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.

29 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.

30 Rawls, A Theory of Justice, p. 120.

31 “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.

that theirs is still an ideal worth striving for. Whether or not it is a realistic ideal 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 70CE, replaced the Biblical Judaism that, to the rabbis, had become too theoretical, too “Greek.” Biblical Judaism was essentially a dual affair, led as it was by prophets and priests. The prophets were responsible for the Hebrew Bible’s creation, thanks to the inspirations they (purportedly) received from mystical encounters with God. Much as with proto-monotheist ancient Greek theory, these encounters were understood to come from their having strongly transcended the world by leaving behind the social realm in order to connect with the divine. As for the Bible itself, it was meant to serve as the basis of the ancient Israelites’ new society. The priests’ task was that of realising 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 this should be done, one that shared something with the ancient Greek theorists. Because to the priests running the Temple – both the first Temple and the one built later after the first one was destroyed – the Bible was a perfectly unified text, one that embodied a conception of justice.

The Pharisees, the 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). 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. This was how the Sadducees, the sect that supported the priests who maintained the Second

33 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 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.
Temple, saw it, which is why they advocated strict, text-based applications. To the Pharisees, however, this was both wrong and dangerous, since it led to tragedies like the one recounted by an anonymous Pharisee scribe. It tells of how the Israelites’ struggle against the Hellenising King Antiochus was undermined by a belief that led to their being slaughtered: attacked during the Sabbath, when they were commanded to rest, they failed to defend themselves (2 Macc. 6:11).

But surely, the Pharisees protested, the Bible also commands Jews to live. That the Sadducean approach led to such calamities must mean that their theory-like conception of the Bible was deeply 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.” So the Pharisees proposed an alternative conception of the Bible’s perfection, one according to which it is perfect precisely because many of its parts contradict each other. The Bible, in other words, constitutes a “complex unity,” as the pioneering Zionist 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.

This, then, is how we should conceive of the Written Law, which appears as both unified and yet as made up 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 that of mystical prophesy. To close those gaps because one considers the Bible as like a theory capable of being straightforwardly applied would be to do a kind of violence to it, to “totalize” it and so block its conduits to the divine.

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36 Talmud Bavli: Bava Metza 30b (digital edition of the Koren Noé Talmud).
37 See Talmud Bavli: Sanhedrin 99a.
Still, this way of approaching the Written Law could be considered as yet another form of violence. Indeed, as the rabbis conceived of the events at Mount Sinai that led to the covenant between God and the Israelites, the Torah entered the world at the tip of a sword of Damocles. For it is said that, as the “offer” of the covenant was being made, the whole of the mountain was raised up above the Israelites’ heads – and it was clear that it would be dropped upon them should they fail to accept.39 Their response, understandably enough: “We will do and we will hear.”40 Notice how this is the reverse of what one would expect from a theorist, who always tries to know first, to understand theoretically, and only then act.41 Indeed, as a famous Talmudic story has it, what distinguished the Israelites from all other peoples was precisely their willingness to agree to the covenant without having examined it and so tried to understand it first.42 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’.”43 Central to this reading, then, is the assumption that before thought and understanding must come violence. Not only the violence of the imposed covenant, however, since as already noted the violence proper to mysticism came first, as when Moses and the other prophets had to be torn from their communities before receiving their mystical visions. Then followed the violence of the priests who, once again, were charged with applying those visions in a literal and so uncompromising fashion.

Thus did the Pharisees see themselves as replacing the violence of Biblical Judaism with another form of it. To them, the Second Temple’s destruction conclusively demonstrated the need for superseding the Sadducees’ approach. This they did by deconstructing its ostensibly unified vision in


40 Levinas, “The Temptation of Temptation,” p. 42. This is a Rabbinic way of translating Exodus 24:7; there are others.

41 For the theorist always examines first, before he “buys.” See, for example, Plato, Protagoras 312b–14b.

42 See Talmud Bavli: Shabbat 88a.

43 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.” Tractate Shabbat 88a–b.
order to make way for what I would call a “revelatory,” as distinct from mystical, creativity. It is what’s required if post-Temple Jews are to adhere to the covenant: revelations that support the creation of a new, 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].”

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

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

Second, there’s the application of Rabbinic laws (halakhah) to everyday life. These are utterly rigid and so violently interfere with the flow of everyday life such that, once again, gaps are widened or even introduced, openings that are supposed to make way for inspiration and so revelation.

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, one that closes us off from the “Other.” This happens

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46 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.
because theory forcibly incorporates whatever is to be known into the strictures of an ostensibly unified vision possessed by the knower; in this way, the Other’s challenging differences, its “infinity” of meaning, are limited, transformed into a self-affirming, containable “same.” 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.” Or as Theodor W. Adorno once put it, “the unity of logos is caught up in a complex of blame because it tends to mutilate what it unifies.” Finally, one might think of Foucault’s accusation that theory exhibits a will to truth, one that serves as “a system of exclusion.”

So the theories of theoretical philosophy, as well as those of other disciplines that share its tenets, are assumed to contain false unities. And where the Pharisees distinguished between Written and Oral Law, Levinas does so between “the said” and “the saying,” respectively. In order to make room for the latter, moreover, violence needs to be done to the former; theories, in other words, need to be deconstructed and so shown to not contain unified, applicable meaning after all. “In order to suppress violence,” declares Levinas, “it is necessary to have recourse to violence.” Or as Derrida once put it, deconstruction is but a “violence against violence.”

Yet it should be evident that the relation here is not one of simple opposition. Because just as the Rabbinic Jew relies on gaps in the Written Law in order to create the Oral, contemporary difference philosophers tend to begin by deconstructing theoretical texts or text-analogues,

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accentuating the spaces, the “blind spots,” within them. Indeed, this tendency is so marked that their approach sometimes appears parasitic on the theorist’s – though if we ask difference philosophers they will probably say that, ultimately, this is beneficial, even more “true,” to the host. As Adorno once wrote regarding art criticism, for example, it does “do violence to the works, but they cannot survive without it.” 54 So we can see why, although a critique, difference philosophy is also complicit. 55 No wonder so many difference philosophers express their ideas in ironic, sometimes even parodic, ways. 56

For a time, many were content to do no more than employ this irony as a means of undermining theories. 57 Many have also become more constructive, however, as with Foucault’s later work on behalf of a philosophy that can “think differently,” or Derrida’s claims on behalf of a justice that is always “to-come.” 58 This is a path that Levinas already began to tread much earlier, however. 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, since it is none other than the Divine that’s revealed via the many others in this world. And to Levinas, this is what it means to recognize that the saying always has something ethical to say. That’s why we find him writing in a paradoxical, disorienting style, as well as why “a saying that must also be unsaid” is perhaps the crucial characterization of the philosophical prose of Otherwise Than Being, recognized by many as

54 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, p. 480.


57 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).

his most mature work. Given the worry that defending any particular idea will contribute to the totalizations of theory, Levinas strives to mimic the plurality of conflicting assertions present in both the Bible and Talmud, thereby ensuring that his own writings facilitate the openness that revelation requires.

And where the Rabbinic sages hoped that the creative inspirations driving the revelations of scripture would be relevant to Jews everywhere, Levinas has also expressed the wish that revelation could provide a source of creative ethics for everyone. So just as scripture constitutes a kind of “epiphanic site” for Jews, Levinas would have everybody see – as well as be seen by – each and every human being in this way. Hence his repeated references to the notion that people have “faces,” that these make calls on us, and that what the first thing one “hears” 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 other 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 one’s ears. Think of Moses’ call of “Hear me, O Israel,” which was followed by his speaking “in the ears” of the Israelites (Deut. 31:30). With the revelation of the face, by contrast, it is the Other who “speaks” and one does not “hear” with one’s ears so much as with one’s soul. Revelatory speaking and listening should thus not be understood in sensory terms, which is why, when Levinas tells us that “the eye [of the Other] does not shine; it speaks,” it apparently 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 easily mislead. In fact, I would go so far as to argue that, as long as one remains wary of the theorist’s “idolatrous” attempts at capturing God within a rational vision (what Kierkegaard would call “theology”), then there should be room for recognizing how it is that difference philosophers largely retain theory’s ocularcentrism – as long, that is, as we embrace the darkness along with the light. This accounts for the paradoxes of their philosophy, where whatever is affirmed is also denied, since to embrace paradox is to embrace the gaps, the Nothings, that lie between – and within – the

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60 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).
parts of a whole.\textsuperscript{61} Blindness and not only insight are to be welcomed,\textsuperscript{62} since this reverses the theorist’s asymmetrical relation between self and other: instead of trying to attain power over something by capturing it within a unified vision, we should accept, and indeed submit to, the power that the Other has over us. Says Levinas: “since the Other looks at me, I am responsible for him, without even having taken on responsibilities in his regard; his responsibility is incumbent on me.”\textsuperscript{63} Because “[t]here is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me.”\textsuperscript{64}

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”\textsuperscript{65} 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.”\textsuperscript{66} 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.”\textsuperscript{67}

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 grasping society and its cultural and historical events, however, the human sciences require

\textsuperscript{61} For more on gaps, both within difference philosophy and elsewhere, see my “Gaps: When Not Even Nothing Is There,” \textit{Comparative Philosophy} 12, no. 1 (Jan. 2021): 31–55.


\textsuperscript{64} Levinas, \textit{Ethics and Infinity}, p. 89.


a “warm” form of reason, one that engages with the context. And pace Aristotle, this includes philosophy. Moreover, this warm reasoning not only has more in common with Aristotle’s phronēsis than with technē, but it also manages to contribute to well-being (eudaimonia) without any theory about what this is. To Aristotle, we need a theory that ranks the virtues on the basis of human nature, since this is the target at which practical reason aims (Eth. Nic. 1094a23–25). That’s why, as he famously claimed, “we deliberate not about ends, but about what promotes ends.”

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 alternating between reversing this and not. Because to the practical philosopher, we should refrain from distinguishing between thought and language at all. As Berlin has put it, for instance, “language” and “ideas” are “but alternative ways of saying the same thing”; or as Wittgenstein has remarked, “Now it is becoming clear why I thought that thinking and language were the same. For thinking is a kind of language.” Moreover, instead of the theorist’s attempt to attain 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 though 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. After all, only people can speak and listen in turn, can both dominate and subordinate themselves as they strive for understanding.

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Only embodied agents sensitive to their particular contexts can genuinely exchange, and so change, interpretations between them.\textsuperscript{72}

It’s for this reason, moreover, that practical philosophy emphasizes the aural over the ocular or (anti-)ocular, since, as Gadamer declares, “the primacy of hearing is the basis of the hermeneutical phenomenon.”\textsuperscript{73} Because when at their best, interlocutors listen for reconciliatory interpretations that will help “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, because more coherent and comprehensive, interpretations, those that succeed at “expressing” or “articulating” meaning as distinct from “representing” it. All of which requires its transformation, which combines both discovery and evolution.\textsuperscript{74}

While a form of practice, dialogical interpretation must obviously be distinguished from the revelatory “doing” of the difference philosopher. For one thing, practice is prior in a temporal sense: before any thinking, there is always prereflective habit, the practical background out of which any thought must emerge. This is the mode of being that Heidegger has called “average everydayness,” and Dreyfus “everyday coping.”\textsuperscript{75} They emphasize it because reflective interpretation naturally begins only once something has “shown up” to us, given that a conflict of some sort has prevented us from continuing on in our habitual ways.

For another thing, practice is prior in terms of significance, since it is fundamental to philosophical thought that, while extremely general, it’s once again still warm, still situated in a historical context and so on par with everyday thinking.\textsuperscript{76} That’s why even transcendental arguments,


\textsuperscript{74} For more on this aspect of dialogical interpretation, see my \textit{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.


which are supposed to be indubitable, can never be free of questioning.\textsuperscript{77} Of course, this is even more true of argument in moral or political philosophy, which must also proceed dialogically rather than being grounded in a theoretical foundation, whether absolute or only “floating,” or based on a revelatory openness to the Other. Any ethical rules, then, should be considered as no more than maxims, expressive guidelines that are 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 \textit{blindly}.\textsuperscript{78}

No wonder those practical philosophers sympathetic to monism tend to favour ocular metaphors, as when Heidegger, for whom the practical background constitutes “a \textit{totality} of involvements,”\textsuperscript{79} suggests that \textit{logos} consists of “letting something be \textit{seen} in its \textit{togetherness} with something.”\textsuperscript{80} By contrast, those sympathetic to pluralism can be read as assuming a fragmented background, though this seems to me to fail to account for why some things rather than others emerge from it and demand our attention. Only by recognizing how the background is neither one nor many, disunified though holistic, can we account for the prereflective prioritizing of the perception of some things over others.\textsuperscript{81}


\textsuperscript{79} Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, p. 191; my emphasis. Heidegger also tends to use “whole” and “unity” as synonyms, e.g. in ibid., p. 365.

\textsuperscript{80} Heidegger, \textit{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 \textit{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 \textit{On the Way to Language}, p. 101.

\textsuperscript{81} See my \textit{From Pluralist to Patriotic Politics}, ch. 3 § III; and “From Moderate to Extreme Holism,” in \textit{Patriotic Elaborations}. 
Has practical philosophy appeared only this 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 has it served as one of the main sources of Renaissance humanism but, even further back, it had an important place in both ancient Greek and ancient Jewish thought, albeit as minority traditions of the two.

Heidegger has made the case vis-à-vis the Greeks. Consider his claim that “metaphysics” originated with Plato’s “forgetting” of being, of the fact that philosophical meaning necessarily arises 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 that were later taken up by at least some of the Sophists.\(^{82}\) That said, Gadamer has argued that Platonic dialectic should be considered practical,\(^{83}\) and Martha Nussbaum has made a similar claim on behalf of Aristotle.\(^{84}\) But I don’t see how this avoids bringing these two overly 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.\(^{85}\)

More than anything, Protagoras favoured literary criticism and the study of history as the best means of moral education, since he recognized that each are highly interpretive endeavours.\(^{86}\) That’s why virtue is not something that can only be naturally inherited, since it can also be taught (\textit{didachē}). And though many read Protagoras’ famous aphorisms – “Man is the measure of all


\(^{86}\) As we can gather from Plato’s portrayal of him in the \textit{Protagoras}. 
things” and “Make the lesser reason stronger”\textsuperscript{87} — as implying a truth-denying relativism, others recognize how they support practical ideas such as that interpreted experience is what 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 gift from Zeus, from the \textit{technē} acquired for humanity by Prometheus (see \textit{Prot.} 321c–22d; though this is contradicted in \textit{Tht.} 166d–67d). Zeus’ gift, it’s worth noting, was delivered by Hermes, whose name serves as the root of the word “hermeneutics.”

This makes way for the notion that there were two kinds of Sophists, depending on whether justice is considered a \textit{technē} or not, and so whether the division between nature (\textit{physis}) and conventional law (\textit{nomos}) is considered fundamental. To Gorgias and his followers, distinguishing between the latter two requires downgrading \textit{nomos}, perhaps even assuming that is no more than an illusion, a mask concealing the natural power of the strong. To Protagoreans, by contrast, \textit{nomos} has its own integrity, which is why judging it, and so justice, requires something more like \textit{phronēsis} than \textit{technē}.\textsuperscript{88} 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 (which is to say aren’t adept at its \textit{technē}) never claim that they can, but everyone professes to have a sense of justice (323b).\textsuperscript{89} So justice must require something other than the technical expertise that comes from being well-trained. All of which suggests that we should recognize the natural science – human science methodological distinction that, as already noted, is central to practical philosophy (and so that Gorgias is, by implication, a kind of difference philosopher).\textsuperscript{90}

As 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 kinds of Jewish


\textsuperscript{88} 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 \textit{The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens}, trans. Janet Lloyd (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

\textsuperscript{89} 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.

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 First Temple’s high priest Zadok and then the priests 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, as they ended up serving as no more than the latter’s assistants.

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 (see Mic. 3:11). So we’ve reason to speak of the centrality of hermeneutics to their profession. And as their attire attests – the two main elements of which were the breastplate (hoshen) and the headplate (mitznefet) – they represented the people and God, respectively (Exod. 28:15, 28:36–38), standing as a dialogical bridge between them. Such dialogues, moreover, were possible because, as a reading of the story of Noah and the flood has it, the story closes with what appears to be God’s endorsement of a distinction between nature and human history (Gen. 8:21), one that was reiterated later by the covenant between Him and Abraham. So just like the Sinai covenant that followed, the implication is that there is a degree to which people are free from both God and nature, since it is only as free beings that they can 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 awarding of priority to ethical conduct over observing rituals. They also received confessions and so 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;

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91 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).

92 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.”

Judg. 17:5–13). But as Weber implies, 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; so very little was left to be determined by a roll of the dice.⁹⁴ That all this invokes the warm reasoning of practical philosophy also follows from Weber’s description of priesthood in general as “permanently associated with particular norms, places and times, and related to specific social groups.”⁹⁵

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. Instead of the Rabbinic “We will do and we will hear,” he takes the Hebrew letter vav of the text as a subordinate conjunction and so arrives at “We will do in order to hear,” a move that even Levinas admits constitutes “a perfectly legitimate usage.”⁹⁶ 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 to do so will always require interpretation.

V

If philosophy is “the love of wisdom,” then what might this say about the three approaches described above? Should we be choosing between them? Needless to say, it all depends on what one means by “wisdom.” One aspect of it is surely its relation to practical affairs: the wise are those who we can count on to provide counsel, whether personal or political. They got their wisdom, presumably, from experience, which accounts for why they tend to be older. And as for experience, Heidegger has helpfully distinguished between two conceptions: one refers to the confirmation of an idea via its immediate demonstration, through “experiencing” something for oneself; and the other emphasizes “undergoing” an experience because one has encountered

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 179.
something unexpected and disruptive and then learned from it. Revolutionary, it is the second that leads to wisdom. But do all such experiences do so?

Gadamer would say yes. To him, all experience is hermeneutical, since hermeneutics is universal: “Nothing is left out of the speech community; absolutely no experience of the world is excluded.” But are all experiences “of the world”? And if not, should we even be speaking 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. (Note how this led many to emphasize the metaphors of light and darkness, a point to which I will return 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 understood in sensory terms, which is to say that they are not phenomenological experiences.

Assuming that mysticism and revelation are indeed possible, then we need to interrogate the role, if any, of the self during such encounters. The objection to be raised is most obvious in the case of the former, for how to account for the mystic’s return to the world? Otherwise put, isn’t there something incoherent about the very idea of total mystical ecstasy? 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. Yet 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.

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100 “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.


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

Think, after all, of the violence often associated with creation, if only because art (at its best) is generally much 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” (just like prophecy). With interpretation, by contrast, the aim is more the realization or development of tradition, as Gadamer has often emphasized. Which brings us back to the wise, to those whose interpretive experiences have helped them to know a given society’s traditional practices especially well.

They lead me to make the following claim: since the philosophers of theory or difference are concerned with one form or other of creativity rather than with the practical reasoning that’s 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, one shared by even modern analytic theorists who praise “systematic beauty,” is clearly driven by motives that are other than 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

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103 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).


105 Lewis, Counterfactuals, p. 88.
as one made by an artist of one type against artists of another, say because the latter have more interpretation mixed-in with their creativity. Think of a poet today criticizing the novel form.\textsuperscript{106}

So while I accept that Wittgenstein was right to declare that, when it comes to theory, language tends to go “\textit{on holiday},” I don’t think this means that the theorists are simply \textit{mistaken}, as Taylor, for one, has suggested as regards modern epistemological theory.\textsuperscript{107} For their posing of supposedly “bad” questions – questions such as whether there is a world at all, or what the essence of justice might be, and so on – may indeed be unwise, but it could also be very creative. True, this suggests social and political theorists don’t really help us to \textit{understand} society and politics, yet their visions could offer us radically new perspectives on them. We simply need to keep in mind the degree to which they are utopian. And as Ricœur warns,

\begin{quote}
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.\textsuperscript{108}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{106} 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 Θεωοία. This belief may now be restated as the belief that what Plato described as Θεωοία 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 Θεωοία, 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 \textit{Rationalism and Politics and Other Essays} (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991, new ed. [1962]), p. 516 n. 13.


This risk is also present outside of philosophy departments, since 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, I would claim that it’s not, in fact, a means of doing social science so much as a way of making art. Yes, it engages in kind of “flight from reality,” but haven’t such flights always been essential to creativity? There is danger here arises only when the creators succeed in convincing policymakers to apply their theories to practice. Because even those that you would think are most obviously fictitious – from homo economicus to historical materialism – have still led to the undermining of many cherished goods.

That, then, is when we should be opposing the theory and allying ourselves with the philosophers of difference. Of course, as I have been arguing, they are no less creators – Deleuze and Guattari have even gone so far as to define philosophy as “the discipline that involves creating concepts.” Or consider Foucault who, because he aims not for a utopian theory, but for the epiphanies that can come through the spaces, the gaps between the fragments of our world, that 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.” So, 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.” After all, is he not right 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”? Still, why not try to transform through reconciliation, through making sense of our world? That, at least, is the ambition of the practical philosopher.

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109 Among the latter, see Donald P. Green and Ian Shapiro, *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory: A Critique of Applications in Political Science* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1994).
111 Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 5 (emphasis in original).
Moreover, if I’m right that the approaches of both theory and difference are more creative than interpretive, perhaps even more artistic than philosophical, then this means that each is wrong to reduce the practical approach to the other – something that their supporters often do. Yet it also means that there are many more artists in the world than most people, including many of the artists themselves, suspect. They have been too modest.