

The Agent of Truth: Reflections on Robert Sokolowski's *Phenomenology of the Human Person*

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“I hope to show, not to demonstrate,
what we are as human persons.”¹

I

“The human person” shows up as himself, in person, in billions of instances and in any variety of activities—from laughing, dining, and story-telling to arguing, defrauding, and career-planning.

A phenomenologist aiming for an account of the human person surveys these varied activities fishing for material suitable for his descriptions. Letting them be appearances, he studies them; refusing to be distracted, he distinguishes contemplatively between the fact that they beckon his belief, emotion, and intervention and the structure of their showing up to do so. His elevation of these particulars into philosophical description is intended to illuminate human activities for us who follow his sketch. If he has done his job, and if we have followed him well, we may now return refreshed from contemplation, diving back into commitment and involvement with the human world, less naive and with keener sight.

The philosopher's description cannot be illuminating if it merely repeats, describing the variety without abridgment; but any abridgement runs the risk of distortion. Still, some features are more crucial than others to what it is to be a human person. Some activities are clearer displays of the person; the cloudier images could mislead us terribly if taken as models, if not understood as degenerate in light of the clearest pattern. The phenomenologist must take a stand, marking some features as capital and others as detail, some as paradigmatic and others as derivative. That is, to avoid both triviality and distortion, the phenomenologist's description must

1. Robert Sokolowski, *Phenomenology of the Human Person* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2008), 1. All references within the body of the present essay are to this work.

highlight the essential, and nothing else, as essential. Not all of us are good at this. Stopping the rout, taking the stand at the right spot, requires attentiveness, insight, and a dedication to truth wary of the attention-bending gravity of pre-philosophical interests. And the guide who manages to do his job well exercises more insight, skill, and virtue than those of us following along attentively.

Robert Sokolowski has been such a phenomenological guide in many books and articles for over 40 years, and his newest monograph, *Phenomenology of the Human Person*, will deeply reward any reader following it, regardless of any disagreements.

One of the book's virtues, clarity, also creates a problem. The book makes for deceptively simple reading. Our guide runs a danger in not letting on how difficult his job is: like his *Introduction to Phenomenology*, the book is bound to be underestimated. Though he calls us to "savor" certain philosophical puzzles before rushing toward solutions (e.g., the paradoxes of how the mind can know something other than itself, how the knowing person is and is not part of the world known, how philosophy is and is not part of the human conversation), our guide's clear, calm, and modest manner may obscure the difficulty of the questions, the skill with which his answers ward off dangers without letting us taste them, and his familiarity with the scholarly terrain. The obvious benefit is that the book rewards readers at various philosophical levels, but I suspect a lot more is going on in this book than first meets the eye.

This essay focuses on one set of themes among many in the book. Being, language, and the person form a triplet, so that the book must juggle metaphysics, philosophy of language, and philosophical anthropology. The following sections of this essay focus in turn on each of these. I hope to bring out their crucial interrelation in Sokolowski's account and thus to think through his highlighting of "veracity" as what is essential to the person and of a particular speech event (the "declarative") as a key disclosure of this essence. A related theme that interests me is Sokolowski's identification of philosophy with a reflection on the "conversation of mankind." This claim invites misconstrual, given a not uncommon misunderstanding of language that is disastrous for metaphysics, philosophical anthropology, and the vocation of philosophy. By misunderstanding this claim one could easily miss some implied differences with contemporary philosophy and misjudge Sokolowski's friendly amendments to Aristotle and Husserl. Moreover, one is bound to misconstrue this claim if one gets the triplet wrong: if one forgets that *language* is that by which persons together capture and share the syntax of the world, if one loses sight of *being* as that which is known and expressed in language, or if one leaves out the *person* as the knower of being and user of syntax.

II

I locate the key to *Phenomenology of the Human Person* in its metaphysics, in Sokolowski's creative, phenomenological appropriation of the Aristotelian tradition regarding "the predicables" and "abstraction of form." Sokolowski's direct discussion of these occupies rather few of the book's 323 pages, but it casts light on the book as a whole. Aristotle's five predicables (accident, property, definition, genus, differentia) from the *Topics* distinguish various ways we say something of something according to which dimension of the thing the saying makes clear. Sokolowski uses them as a way to develop his own phenomenological clarification of another classical topic, insight into essence.

When one starts talking about "form" or "essence" and some supposed privileged vision of it, it is no surprise that the more empirically minded philosophical characters get annoyed. But Sokolowski starts with a common and undeniable experience: when it comes to certain things, some people know what they are talking about, while others do not. Imagine finding yourself in a conversation with several people who know much more about boxing, or soccer, or jai alai than you do. You know *something* about it—its genus as a rule-governed athletic competition. Perhaps you know a bit more: you can picture the boxing ring and you think it amounts to two men striking each other; you know soccer is about kicking and you can picture the ball, the goals, and the girls in tall socks, etc. As you listen to the conversation, you can understand all the sentences about the various sportsmen and their physical and emotional characteristics and accomplishments, but you simply cannot tell why these facts rather than others are being focused on. Sokolowski wishes to trace how the person who reliably talks sense comes about out of either the person completely ignorant of the thing or the person who can talk only superficially or confusedly about it. According to Sokolowski, this happens in stages.

First, in our experience of or our conversation about a type of thing we do not yet understand, facts abound, but we do not yet have a foothold, a sense of what the thing is and why it is the way it is. Those who do not know what they are talking about may not even know it, but as they continue to talk their status as articulators of the world for us eventually crumbles before our eyes; at least in the content, often even in syntax, the person cannot make sense smoothly, but starts and stops, riding the clutch. This crumbling of sense and syntax is public. So is its foil, the smooth sense spoken by the person who knows what he is talking about. Sokolowski takes such conversation-events as the primary displays of insight into essence. Doing so should help us avoid the error that essential insight is occult and panoptic, a complete and sudden private vision by philosophers into some hidden core. Before philosophers reflect and comment on all this, persons have or lack, grope for or accomplish a sense of the essentials of things, and they do this primarily with and before others. This knowledge is displayed first and foremost in conversation and

need not be exhaustive to be genuine. Faking it happens, but faking it—whether self-consciously or not—is easier in speeches and in writing than in conversation (think of oral exams, where students without a foothold in the material will hang themselves when given even a little rope).

Second, acquiring this foothold involves getting a sense of the difference between the accidents that come and go and “the essentials” of the thing—what is proper or peculiar to the thing. The facts, now structured for us by the distinction between accidents and the essentials, are no longer an undifferentiated jumble. You may wonder as you listen to the conversation, why does being left-handed seem to make such a difference? How does the off-sides rule play out strategically? The more sense one has of what is peculiar to the sport, the more one will make sense of which facts are relevant, and how all the facts work together in the type of enterprise that boxing or soccer, for example, is. Until then, everything just seems like a bunch of stuff that happens. The essentials show up as explaining and structuring the many facts about the thing; they show up not as more facts but as a new dimension giving us leverage into the accidents’ being relevant or irrelevant in the conversation, surprise-worthy or predictable.

Third, after getting a sense of the distinction between accidents and “the essentials,” we must distinguish *within the essentials* between properties and essence. This presents a third dimension of the thing.

According to Sokolowski, properties are the *powers or potencies* underlying accidents. They are “specified and actualized” in accidents, but specifiable and actualizable by many other accidents as well. Though accidents are somewhat capricious—close to nonbeing, as Aristotle puts it—they still display something of the essentials. They each implicate a property of the thing, namely, the possibility that the thing undergo such an accident, the potency of the thing that makes room for that accident (but also a hundred others that could have been there instead). That Ben laughs at this joke is incidental to what he is; his risibility, and his fondness for certain types of jokes, are displayed in this laugh, which thus reveals something of who he is. That Manny’s reach is 67 inches is an accident, which is why we must be informed of it; but it is relevant to a conversation about boxing, since it is a specification of his ability to box (a property he has only because he has arms of some length to swing), and to box with a certain advantage or disadvantage. Accidents reveal properties.

Our first genuine familiarity with a thing, by which we distinguish between accidents and the essentials, is gained by recognizing it as the type of thing that can, that should or should not, or that generally does take on such and such accidents. The many accidents are organized for us as specifications of this or that property, where properties act like drawers of a bureau for the accumulating facts about the thing. But properties are penultimate to the essence and flow from it. We recognize something as a property when we see it as such, as not the essence but still *of* the

essence. Risibility is not what it means to be for Ben, although it is still curiously somehow essential, growing directly from what it means to be for persons. Rationality, which is part of Ben's essence, emerges as not just a feature privileged by us but as *explanatory*; as not just another property, but underlying and unifying the myriad properties. Essence is manifested as "the root and entity" of the thing, as Sokolowski puts it (108). And properties are not merely permanent accidents or features somehow belonging to each of a set of things inexplicably sharing a name; properties are manifested as powers that belong to the thing *as* the type of thing it is, and that *must* belong to it for it to be what it is.

Much of the difficulty in philosophizing about essence is the temptation to speculate rather than describe, and thus to reify essence. The mistake is to assume that accidents, properties, and essence are all, basically, the same type of thing and experienced in the same basic way. On the contrary, when the essentials distinguish themselves from accidents, and then the essence from properties, our experience takes on a multidimensional structure and a rich texture. To insist that essence must show up just like accidents do would be to demand that experience be flat and unisightful, and that all predication be univocal. (The flattening of experience and of things plays itself out in a flattening of language and logic, too, and ultimately in a distortion of the person.) The essentials of the thing cannot be understood as merely necessary and sufficient conditions because they are not merely special features, just like accidents but somehow tagged as intimately rather than capriciously related to the thing's existence. As Aristotle insists in the *Metaphysics*, the substance of the thing can be neither an element nor an attribute of the thing; it shows up, rather, as source and cause.

Thus, essential insight is neither merely sifting out the features necessary and sufficient for the thing, nor is it an esoteric philosophical epiphany of an otherworldly entity hidden within the thing like an ethereal avocado pit. After describing insight into essence, Sokolowski includes a discussion of shape, or physical form, as the primary property. Shape is not essence, but essence's first showing forth, our gate to recognizing the thing and the space for the thing's other properties. Rather than discussing *form* and its *abstraction*, Sokolowski prefers to discuss the thing's *intelligibility* and our "gradually or suddenly" coming to understand the thing as a consolidated, organized one (102). His terminology is a helpful gloss on the sedimented metaphors of "looks" and "shapes," because it helps us avoid hypostasizing essence as something that we could see or feel, something we should experience in just the same way we experience accidents, except that we never do. From the skeptical, common sense Missourian puzzling at what a "form" could possibly be (show me!) and an impulse to reduce it to shape, we move into realizing that to deny the "intelligibility" of things is simply to claim that things are not understandable and that there is no difference between the neophyte and the expert in the conversation.

Sokolowski's use of the predicables to illuminate *nous* fits within a broader theme of the book: the splendid force of syntax (categoriality, part-whole arrangement) in human life. With linguistic syntax, based in simple predications, we gain the ability to capture the part-and-whole structure (the "ontological syntax") of things for ourselves and others, rather than merely undergoing their current. And just as linguistic syntax allows an embedding of phrases that deepens meaning, with it we get deeper into the things we experience and express. With linguistic syntax in place we can then capture dimensions of things, like properties and essence, that cannot be merely undergone sensibly, that can be experienced only once syntactic thought has done a lot of work. Sokolowski argues that linguistic syntax informs how we perceive and allows us to think; at a higher level, it becomes propositional syntax, and its formal structure allows logic; finally, it permits a practical syntax to structure our desires and actions. By teaching us a language, other people open us up to the syntax of the world, shining a light on—and giving us the ability to shine light on—the part-whole structures of things presented to us and the means-ends possibilities open to us. Syntax unleashes our agent and practical intellects.

I have called Sokolowski's metaphysics rehabilitating aspects of ancient logic and epistemology the key to the book because it helps us understand the book's parts, why they are there, and how they hang together. The first two chapters are dedicated to the use of first person pronouns in what Sokolowski terms "declaratives": when the person, as self-responsible speaker or "agent of truth," declares his or her beliefs, wishes, deeds as his or her own (e.g., 'I believe . . .'). This is followed by several chapters discussing syntax and the emergence of full blown language out of what linguist Derek Bickerton calls "protolanguage." Other topics include the relation of the body and the brain to sensing and knowing; representationalism and physicalism; quotation; picturing and imagining; action and wishing; ends, intentions, and consequences; art and fiction; types of narrative voice; Aristotle's use of "likenesses" in linguistics and epistemology; and the use of "similitudes" in the medievals' metaphysics of knowledge. A natural reaction to this array of topics—and especially to the in-depth description of first-person pronouns that opens the book—is to be grateful for the insightful analysis of sundry human things, but to wonder why they are being spotlighted. Rather than focusing on the human person, the books seems dedicated to a series of features of human life.

One could go through the book understanding its pieces rather well and still not quite "get the point" of the book as a whole. That might be helped by understanding Sokolowski's method. He is interested in helping us grasp the essence of the human person, convinced that this is rationality, but rationality more broadly and concretely understood than usual ("veracity"). He highlights his position that the human person is, at heart, "the agent of truth," at every turn engaged in some way with the syntactical display of things. Rather than "demonstrate" his view, he

will show us sketches of the person. One cannot, after all, demonstrate essence; as *Topics* I.3 insists, dialectic and not demonstration is the road to first principles. In the preface, Sokolowski warns us of his view and his method for convincing us of it: "The human person is defined by being engaged in truth, and human action is based on truth. I do not intend to prove that human beings are specifiable in this way (what sort of premises could I use?), but rather to describe, analytically, what our engagement in truth means" (1). Again, in order to "shed light on this mystery" of the human person and to "bring out its dimensions," Sokolowski promises "to provide glimpses that clarify, not mechanisms that explain" (8).

Essential insight, he reminds us, cannot be transmitted: "Each of us has to 'get the point' on his own" (105). His book, with its array of sketches, is to be approached as a conversation with an expert: by engaging it, zigzagging between it and everyday life, one will come to see in syntax and declaratives, picturing and perception, planning and wishing, exhibits of reason at work, rather than a bunch of stuff humans happen to do. Sokolowski wants to illuminate the essence of human personhood, and in order to do so he must present what at first seem to be merely incidental features, and only gradually will we begin to distinguish accidents from properties, and then appreciate, beneath the properties, the unifying intelligibility.

III

The book is clearly Husserlian while simultaneously echoing Aristotle and the classical tradition developed up through the Middle Ages and beyond; it is also informed by every age of philosophy, by the continental and analytic traditions, and by contemporary linguistics, neurobiology, and psychology. Phenomenology, the book suggests, is able to recover for our times certain classical themes and insights while holding on to the best in modern and 20th-century philosophy, and can help us make sense of contemporary sciences relating to the person.

One adjustment Sokolowski makes to the Aristotelian and Husserlian traditions sticks out as crucial: the focus on conversation. Think of his genetic phenomenological analysis, recounted above, using the predicables to elucidate *nous*: putting conversation first *reverses* the traditional order of the three acts of the intellect. Traditionally, the understanding of indivisibles is the "first act of the intellect," followed by the "combination and division" of predication, and then reasoning. In Sokolowski's genetic account we move in the opposite direction: we start with others' conversations, into which we are drawn, and then, as we enter into the conversation and it enters into us, we gather and perform predications that lead us up to understanding essentials. For an Aristotelian or Husserlian, the prioritizing of and focusing on conversation is a non-violent but still fundamental and illuminating shift in thinking about thinking.

While insisting that "conversation cannot be the whole story" because "our minds are not emptied into public space" (303), Sokolowski argues that silent,

syntactic thought internalizes the thinking-with of conversation. Thought (as syntactical) happens in language, and language is primarily at work with others. Even more than thinking, writing allows a distance—and an alienating abstraction—from conversation as the primary instantiation of human reason. To varying degrees, modern philosophers (including Husserl at times) suffer from this abstraction, often distorting the sociality of the human person. Starting with the isolated thinking self holds an eccentric specimen up as paradigm and delivers us over to several typically modern mental logjams in epistemology and politics. In contrast, for Sokolowski, “None of our thinking is without an element of recapitulation” (78). The book’s conversational engagement with other thinkers illustrates this point: while the modern philosophical ethos idealizes “thinking for oneself,” Sokolowski’s view of reason would suggest that thinking for ourselves must not preclude us from thinking with others. Focusing on conversation highlights the mind as social and the known as shared.

Oakeshott’s essay “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind” provides a beautiful image here, one which Sokolowski repeatedly cites. A closer look at Oakeshott on conversation, art, and philosophy is worthwhile because it will put Sokolowski’s thought into some relief. Oakeshott suggests that, as a species, humans—“being descended from a race of apes who sat in talk so long and so late that they wore out their tails”—are characterized by an enduring conversation, the inheritance of which is our most valuable possession:

As civilized human beings, we are the inheritors, neither of an inquiry about ourselves and the world, nor of an accumulating body of information, but of a conversation, begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries. It is a conversation which goes on both in public and within each of ourselves.²

It is in being structured by and placed within this conversation that all things have significance for us. Oakeshott says, suggestively, this conversation “in the end, gives place and character to every human activity and utterance.”³ The “voices” composing the conversation are in particular modes or attitudes belonging to typified regions of human action so that, not just sentences, but all of human life—thinking, desiring and doing as well as speaking—is part of this conversation. All things are what they are, given meaning for us and by us, by our common life of ideas, structured by and expressed in our language and creatively regenerated by the continuous conversation.

Oakeshott conceives of philosophy as a reflection on this conversation, one

2. Michael Oakeshott, “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 488–541, here 490.

3. *Ibid.*, 491.

that “makes no specific contribution to it”; he tasks philosophy with understanding the partial voices (or idioms or modes of experience), such as natural science or practical activity.⁴ By understanding, philosophy may help prevent the confusion of voices, which often talk around each other, and may help resist the impolite dominance of the conversation by any one of these modes. “For each voice is prone to *superbia*, that is, an exclusive concern with its own utterance, which may result in its identifying the conversation with itself and its speaking as if it were speaking only to itself.”⁵ The voices of acquisition (practical life) and curiosity (science) have shown “bad manners” in their takeover of the modern conversation. There is much in Oakeshott’s essay to appreciate.

To abridge: the central point of Oakeshott’s essay is to deny, happily, that poetry has anything to do with truth. Poetry is, rather, a play of images for its own sake, a contemplating or delighting in images that are not signs for anything. Poetic activity, a retreat from the standard acquisitive or moral or scientific human modes, is misunderstood if confused with seeing or seeking truth, and is derailed by curiosity’s questions about “fact” or accuracy. To contrast: both in *Phenomenology of the Human Person* and elsewhere, Sokolowski presents painting and poetry and art generally as syntactically structured, truth-expressive displays—fully a part of man’s life of reason and truth.

Oakeshott would perhaps accuse Sokolowski of falling into *superbia*, where man only as “agent of truth” is permitted to speak, where every utterance must fit in to an inquiry about ourselves and the world. Oakeshott complains of this impulse: “We are urged, for example, to regard all utterances as contributions (of different but comparable merit) to an inquiry, or debate among inquirers, about ourselves and the world we inhabit. But this understanding of human activity and intercourse as an inquiry, while appearing to accommodate a variety of voices, in fact recognizes only one, namely, the voice of argumentative discourse, the voice of ‘science,’ and all others are acknowledged merely in respect of their aptitude to imitate this voice.”⁶ Is Sokolowski an impolite conversationalist, incapable of discussing anything but his own philosophical fascination, the human involvement in truth? No one familiar with Sokolowski or his work could think so. I suspect the difference between the two thinkers has a deeper source, one that will yield further dissimilarities.

Articulating how reason is at work in art fits into Sokolowski’s broader project of articulating the human person’s essence. This essence is rationality. Saying that so bluntly risks terrible misunderstanding, partly because modernity tends to construe rationality narrowly as merely calculative or procedural. Joseph Ratzinger

4. Oakeshott, “The Voice of Poetry,” 491, 495.

5. *Ibid.*, 492.

6. *Ibid.*, 489.

(Pope Benedict XVI) complains, for example, of the modern “self-limitation of reason” (which easily turns into a “mutilation of reason” and of the person) that construes reason as exclusively calculation or deduction subject to empirical verification.⁷ This creates a very sorry and rather dangerous situation because it abandons the most meaningful questions of being and being human to a level either beyond or beneath the personal. A re-broadening of reason promises a more humane view of human life, and this is part of Sokolowski’s project. He elucidates the person as the animal with *logos*, properly and broadly understood. Reason’s central occurrence is in the syntax of language, but reason is not limited to that. He suggests “agent of truth” as his gloss on the traditional “rational animal” because it avoids the connotation of inference and “encompasses all the forms of understanding, including those that go beyond language” (1).

Famously, Oakeshott also complains of the modern rationalist construal of reason, both in its “empiricist” and “rationalist” varieties, and laments its corrosion of our abilities to act well politically and morally and to maintain the traditions of liberal education. Nevertheless, Oakeshott and Sokolowski seem to differ concerning how far even a broad sense of reason extends in human life, and about how the world gives itself to human understanding. Sokolowski tells us, “Our rationality is not simply the power to have ideas, to calculate and draw inferences in our minds; our rationality is essentially a disclosure of things” (7). Oakeshott would probably agree with the first clause, but grimace at the second. Sokolowski’s project of articulating the human person as the agent of truth is not just about humans, but also about reason and the world, and on these Oakeshott and Sokolowski seem to diverge seriously.

First, Oakeshott rejects essentialism, which is crucial to Sokolowski’s views of the world, language, and the person. Things have and reveal their intelligibilities, and persons can grasp and articulate these intelligibilities. Second, Oakeshott insists that truth belongs only to propositions. Moreover, he does not study the syntax of art as Sokolowski does. The truth-display Sokolowski describes in art Oakeshott would not be adequately prepared to see. Third, though one can benefit greatly from much of his work without bothering about this sticking point, Oakeshott belongs in the tradition of British Idealism. By calling perceiving and thinking just modes of imagining, and calling things just a certain type of image,⁸ he seems occasionally to express a transcendental idealism with idiosyncratically troped words; he ultimately advocates a less refined idealism.

7. Joseph Ratzinger, “The Regensburg Lecture: Faith, Reason, and the University, Memories and Reflections,” in James V. Schall, *The Regensburg Lecture*, appendix I, 130–48 (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine’s Press, 2007), 141; Ratzinger, *Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 43, 40.

8. Oakeshott, “Voice of Poetry,” 496–97.

Oakeshott's rejection of essences, of truth as disclosure, and of realism cannot fit with Sokolowski's Aristotelian phenomenology of the person as the "dative of manifestation" and the "agent of truth." For Oakeshott, the truth-indifferent play of poetry is all that can survive of Plato and Aristotle's *theoria*, and there is no proper hierarchy among the various voices of the conversation or modes of human experience: "to make an experience of this sort [*theoria*] supreme," he remarks bluntly, "seems to entail a belief in the pre-eminence of inquiry, and of the categories of 'truth' and 'reality,' a belief which I wish to avoid."⁹ Fundamentally, Oakeshott denies that the person is *essentially* engaged in *truth* in the sense of "a disclosure of *things*."

These profound differences also surface in their views of philosophy. Sokolowski describes philosophy as "theorizing the human conversation," and here Sokolowski is borrowing something from Oakeshott without flagging his differences. Whereas Sokolowski takes linguistic syntax and the human conversation as essentially a display—the primary, but not only display—of human reason, which is itself our displaying of things, Oakeshott rejects the conversation as inherently an activity engaged with seeking and disclosing something independent of itself.

We must not object to Oakeshott's humane attempt to defend the playful open spaces of life, places set apart from the sprawling modern project of conquering the world in inquiry, technology, acquisition, and bureaucracy. But, as Sokolowski's thought suggests to me, these fields of poetry and play (and of celebration, worship, liberal learning, etc.) are also involved with truth. There is simply no way to avoid it. Perhaps Sokolowski would remind us that, like risibility, human playfulness in art is a property, understood only from its root, rationality.

By formulating philosophy as reflecting on and describing the human conversation, Sokolowski sounds less like Aristotle or Husserl and more like Oakeshott, or his contemporary Wittgenstein. The formulation risks trivializing philosophy into merely logical analysis or idiom description. Philosophy here may help sort out deep-sounding problems resulting from verbal confusion, but it would abdicate its office, its vocation to understand being and to understand the person as knower of being. Given that thinking is internalized conversation, a further risk would be either an Oakeshottian idealism that denies any reality independent of the conversation, or a linguistic Kantianism (not uncommon among philosophies of language in the 20th century, whether "Anglo-American" or "Continental") that locks reality away from us in a pre-syntactical and thus unthinkable realm. Despite its insistence on the publicness of thought and on language as a shared practice, this latter, not uncommon doctrine is still caught in the idealism-

9. Oakeshott, "Voice of Poetry," 512.

realism dilemma and the alienating assumptions of the way of ideas. Because it conceives of language and community as opaque intermediating entities, it distorts the being-person-language triplet. It offers no way around modern philosophy's estrangement from the real, its fixation on the will and on practice unhinged from any apprehension of the true and good, and its solipsism (whether of the individual or of the linguistic community).

These dangers are forestalled by an Husserlian move: the conversation itself displays things. Minding and talking are intentional accomplishments. Rather than trapping us inside themselves, they unlock the part-whole structures of the world for us. How syntax (or categoriality) does this is a major theme of the book. Both the logical syntax of the proposition and the grammatical syntax of the sentence are lenses for ontological syntax.

When Sokolowski identifies philosophy as reflecting on the human conversation, he does not mean that we trade things for words. Socrates comments in Plato's *Phaedo*, "I feared that my soul would be altogether blinded if I looked at things with my eyes and tried to grasp them with each of my senses. So I thought I must take refuge in discussions and investigate the truth of things by means of words."¹⁰ This makes the way of using language to understand being seem second best for us, as though the rich multidimensional truth of things could be served raw and in one course to the senses, and as though we should want to avoid the *medium* of words. For Sokolowski, insight into essence does not happen except with words: linguistic syntax is our indispensable lever prying open the world's essential dimensionality; it is more like a lens sharpening our perception than a picture substituting for experience of the world. Socrates continues, "However, perhaps this analogy is inadequate, for I certainly do not admit that one who investigates things by means of words is dealing with images anymore than one who looks at the facts."¹¹ We do not lose things, but gain a grip on them, by being inducted into the conversation. Thus, both sides of this statement really matter: philosophy is "theorizing the human conversation in all its amplitude, with the inclusion of the things that are brought into the conversation and correlated with it" (3). With this slight turn of phrase, with its implied understanding of language and of philosophy, our guide gently turns us away from a danger we might not even know is there. It signals a key difference, not only with Oakeshott, but with many other recent philosophers.¹² With it, we maintain the human ability, prephilosophical and

10. Plato, *Phaedo* 99e., trans. G. M. A. Grube, in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1997), 49–100, here 86.

11. *Ibid.*, 99e–100a.

12. For example, in her review of *Phenomenology of the Human Person*, Lilian Alweiss (who misidentifies Oakeshott as "the main inspiration" of the book) wonders rightly why Sokolowski does not engage more with Wittgenstein. She implies that Wittgenstein (and Husserl, too), by realizing that thought is related to its object only mediately through lan-

philosophical, to understand being and to be agents of truth and not merely tools of convention.

When Sokolowski repeatedly defines philosophy as understanding, marveling at, theorizing, or commenting on the human conversation, he uses a remarkably un-Aristotelian and un-Husserlian turn of phrase, pays some homage to Oakeshott, and seems to be approaching Wittgenstein; when he with careful consistency adds that the conversation encompasses the things said, the world as displayed, he is twisting Oakeshott's image for his own Aristotelian and Husserlian purposes:

The philosophical perspective is the one that reflects on the very dimension of the human conversation. It is comprehensive; it reflects on the whole of things, but on that whole insofar as it is manifested to human experience and speech. It reflects on all things, insofar as they become phenomena and legomena. Philosophy also discusses the first principles of the

guage or intersubjectivity, offers a notion of truth as a "social construct," "not absolute," "intersubjectively constituted," and "much different" from the traditional "conformity of the mind with reality." Sokolowski, she suggests, shrinks from facing this fact—which he "must realize" given his focus on conversation (Alweiss, 3)—because facing this understanding of truth would imperil his project of a phenomenological recovery of the pre-modern tradition. On the contrary, Alweiss simply disagrees with Sokolowski's treatment of the triplet of being, language, and person. Indeed, part of Sokolowski's project is showing how truth as "identity of knower and known" is not inconsistent with *truth as disclosure of reality to persons of a conversational community* and that language (along with thoughts, our brains, etc.) should not be understood as an opaque intermediating entity. Our knowledge relies upon communication with others (in transcendental sense: the world is "intersubjectively constituted"). But it is not the case that "truth is a social construct," if that phrase is used in opposition to any possible identity of knower and known. For her part, Alweiss seems to favor Wittgenstein because his view of language allows us to "leave metaphysics to itself" by getting us to "accept that *no* explanations can be given" and that the order that we seem to discover in the world is in fact our creation: "All that we find is our projection while the object slips away" ("Leaving Metaphysics to Itself," 359–60). Of course, some will not be convinced by Sokolowski's phenomenology of language and truth, his rejection of representationalism, and his insistence that others and linguistic syntax help activate our reason, unleashing our agent intellect instead of blocking our view of things. But he does discuss these at length. He does not avoid the issue of truth because it would imperil his project. Not a fear of facing the truth that truth is a social construct, but rather a different understanding of truth explains the fact that Sokolowski prefers Aristotle to Wittgenstein. (Note, though, the likes of Wittgenstein, Oakeshott, and Bickerton remain among the book's partners in the conversation about truth and the conversation; despite their disagreement on this crucial issue of truth, they are welcomed as agents of truth trying to fulfill their charge). For my part, I doubt that the notion of truth as an individual or social construct can explain the cowardice or courage that persons occasionally show in facing truth, our failure or success to develop our veracity nobly. See Lilian Alweiss, "Robert Sokolowski, *Phenomenology of the Human Person*," *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (July 3, 2009), <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=15487> (accessed January 29, 2011), and "Leaving Metaphysics to Itself," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 15 (2007), 349–65.

whole of things, that which is the best and highest in the whole, but these principles and excellences are themselves present in their own way to the human conversation, and philosophy tries to show how they are both present and absent and how they are distinguished from that which is generated by them. (220)

How does philosophy go about reflecting on this human conversation and its correlates? There are several modes of operation common in contemporary philosophy that fall short here. Philosophy does not merely reflect on the voice-modes or the arbitrary rules of speaking, untangling their confusions (therapeutic philosophy); or on the power-dynamics operative in the community's distribution of concepts (post-modern critique); or on the sense of words and sentences and their implications (abstract propositional reflection); or on whether various statements match the facts (applied propositional reflection or "critical thinking"). It reflects on the formal and necessary ways in which things and the whole and their principles appear and in which persons together accomplish an articulate understanding of them.

Far from trivializing it, Sokolowski tasks philosophy with omniscience. It tries to get the whole, to speak from a context without a context (312), from an unpunctuated "point of view" beyond the various modes or partial voices. This seems to me to make philosophy a paradox: the *human* mission for *omniscience*. This mission can easily degenerate (as non-philosophers testify) into hubris and arrogance, making philosophy something of a joke. The know-it-all doesn't know himself.

Is not the attempt to rise above the limited modes and partial voices in itself a failure of self-knowledge, an attempt to shake off the essentially limited human way of being and to bypass the always partial human approaches to being? Isn't philosophy a department and discipline among others, a part of the conversation, rather than a separated and unengaged commenter?

For Sokolowski, while philosophy is not just another voice in the conversation, it also cannot be detached from it (221). We are brought into philosophy only through the conversation, and each speaker in the conversation is already potentially, incipiently, partially philosophical. Philosophy is an extension and fulfillment of the reason truly at work throughout the conversation. It is parasitic, unable to replace or direct what it reflects on. It contemplatively, impartially, lets things and the conversation be, thus "achiev[ing] a kind justice in the domain of truth" (221). Yet (it seems to me) it also occasionally gives unsolicited advice to the varied voices, especially when certain types of confusion arise. Unavoidably, according to Sokolowski, philosophy will be heard by the others and be misunderstood as another partial voice (312). Philosophy must be misunderstood, but we must try not to misunderstand ourselves: "The philosopher is omniscient only formally and only in principle, that is, only potentially. . . . The potential omniscience of the philosopher is chastening, because, like Socrates, he is always aware that he does not know but is obliged to know" (321).

IV

Sokolowski begins the book by describing, analytically, an everyday human performance in speech, the declarative. I think the crucial aspect of a declarative is that in it the speaker explicitly takes ownership of—responsibility for—the content of the subordinate clause in some mode of reason at work. In what should consist the philosophical analysis of a sentence such as ‘I know this is a zebra’? Sokolowski opens the first chapter with Wittgenstein’s claim that the ‘I know’ here is expendable: “It does not matter whether the utterance is, ‘I know . . .,’ or ‘This is . . .’”

Oddly, Sokolowski uses the epigraph from Wittgenstein to open chapter 1 and then barely discusses it (one half paragraph, 18 pages later). I take this as an invitation for us to think Wittgenstein’s point through a bit more.

Wittgenstein is right that his comment is more logical than psychological. What happens when logical analysis passes for philosophical analysis? Logically, either ‘I know this is a zebra’ will be informative about me (the subordinate clause is fully subordinated, absorbed), or the ‘I know’ will drop out and the sentence will inform us that this is a zebra. To give this sentence a shape handy for our logical technique, we must decide between these two interpretations. According to Sokolowski’s description, the focus in this sentence remains the content of the subordinate clause—its meaning is not fully subordinated, it remains in the spotlight. On the other hand, the I that knows, the I who takes responsibility for the statement, I present myself, too, though marginally, as knowing and taking responsibility for the truth of the fact spotlighted. Sokolowski’s analysis seems to suggest that both interpretations distort the meaning of the sentence. Removing the speaker’s “I” flattens the declarative into just another assertion about the world. Perhaps we could say that in addition to the essential triple dimensionality of reality named by the predicables (106), there is also a fourth dimension of the world’s disclosure left out by the flattening tendencies of modern logic—the *personal* dimension of the appearing to . . . , the displayed by . . . Like philosophy in the human conversation, persons are neither submerged in nor detached from the world known to them and expressed in their predications.

The conversational declarative is a key way in which rational agents show up as themselves. Reason allows persons to think things syntactically, to think with others, to distinguish between appearance and reality, to want to get things right, and to take responsibility for how they think. Unassuming but rich, the conversational declarative captures all this in action and condensed.

The issue is not so much whether Wittgenstein’s truncation of the sentence changes the meaning (though it does). As a matter of fact, we use declaratives promiscuously, unselfconsciously, and transparently, and most particular declaratives seem accidental; as marginal, the ‘I know . . .’ might be ignored and the subordinate clause focused on. Still, each reveals something essential to speakers: they

can display themselves as displaying the world, and display the world as something appearing to them in a particular light ('I think . . .', 'I surmise . . .', etc.). In declaratives, persons present not just the fact expressed and highlighted, and not just themselves as undergoing certain mental episodes. They present various modes of their reason at work on the facts, positioning themselves *for others* in a certain relationship to the shared world of their conversation.

Wittgenstein erases the person from the declarative, making her invisible behind her sentence because, for him, the mere use of language is the only possible way to display one's agency to use language. If language clothes the world, the speaker who wishes her 'I think . . .' to reveal her I is on a fool's errand: she is trying to wear a mask of her own face to show the world who she really is. The user of language cannot (and can only) reveal herself by clothing herself more in language. Veiled head to toe, all mask, the person cannot appear on stage *in propria persona*. Sokolowski's account might suggest this is dehumanizing and demand that she be allowed to show her eyes in public, but Wittgenstein tells us that to want anything else is nonsense. If the declarative speech is condensed to its "logical" meaning, the speaker can say something about the world, or can say something about herself as another part of the world, but the person cannot *in the speech* show up herself, as simultaneously a dative of the world's display and an agent displaying for others.

And if the should-be-responsible agent disappears behind her speech, perhaps so goes the trust we might put in her utterances as a verdict about the world. Making the declaring I necessarily hidden would make all of us at best secret agents of truth, incapable of rendezvous, familiar with each other only through coded messages.

This thought is not deep, but paranoid and absurd. It invites rejection. We must not postulate some imperceptible entity, an otherworldly I, as the essential speaker behind or within the body making sounds. If there is no secret agent of truth sending us messages, it is either 1) because she is not secret, but can show up and identify herself to us as an agent governed by the norms of truth; or 2) because the thing making sounds is not an agent of truth and what we thought were coded messages aren't messages (instead, perhaps these "messages" would be symptoms of some physical condition, or perhaps another flicker in a self-contained circuit of images fully constitutive of the world). If the former is the case, then the declarative is not expendable, redundant, or meaningless, but a property, an ability flowing from and revealing the person's essence. If the latter is the case, the clothes analogy for language destroys itself and language; "words" would neither reveal nor conceal anything.

By pointing out the oddness of the body in front of us making sounds telling us that she thinks, perhaps Wittgenstein is simply emphasizing the unworldliness of the transcendental I (the eye that cannot appear in the field of vision). Perhaps for him the head-to-toe veil protects her, the I, from becoming just another thing

in the world. But most philosophers of the past century want to leave metaphysics to itself, banishing essences based on a strawman of them. In this context, Wittgenstein's rejection of the significance of the 'I think . . .' invites his influences to expose her, the speaker, as just another utterly worldly thing. For if the I is neither worldly nor otherworldly, she seems to be nothing, and the speaker becomes just what you see in front of you. Here metaphysics matters. We must resist the temptation to identify essence either with some ethereal and hidden thing-within-the-thing (e.g., the person is an otherworldly I, a necessarily covert sender and receiver of messages) or with a concatenation of accidents experiencable even by the un insightful (e.g., the person is just a member of that set of physical things or images to which the motion we call "talking" is sometimes predicated). A thing's essence is its intelligibility, dimensionally distinct from and the source and cause of its accidents and properties.

Without a decent metaphysics—a decent account of essence, property, and accident and how they show up—the absurdity of the secret agent thought leads naturally to a skeptical rejection of persons, reason, responsibility, and truth and would erode our conversation down to a bunch of flapping jaws emitting sounds. This is the human conversation shorn of eye-contact, and human encounters without eye-contact cannot properly arouse our *eros* for truth. For *eros* responds beautifully only to beauty, and a *person's* beauty shows principally through her face. After all, the face's shape centered in its eyes is the first showing forth of personhood. It is our gate to recognizing this animal as a person who can talk and talk back. Veiling the face and eyes has consequences for our appreciation and treatment of the person. By destroying our triplet, banishing the declaring veracious I would undermine our respect for persons, destroy language, and make being unintelligible for us.

Language *reveals* the world. Because our use of language displays the world it is an essential possibility that the *content* of the language we use (and not our mere use of it) displays our ability to think, even if the flattening tendencies of logical analysis make this performance seem redundant, irrelevant, or absurd. Whereas clothes conceal, speech, according to Sokolowski, is more like a magic wand or a spell allowing the world to emerge (100). (Words can also deceive and obscure, but we can understand these derivative instances only in light of the essence and fulfillment.) Contrasted to Oakeshott, Wittgenstein, Bickerton (et al.) with their hints toward either physical reductionism or linguistic idealism or odd marriages of the two, Sokolowski offers different understandings of *logos*, persons, and the world, and these three travel together.

This declarative ability—accidentally exercised billions of times a day in the human conversation—manifests and is understood only in light of human veracity, the essence of the human person. Sokolowski names veracity as the root of the human person as agent of truth, connoting the *eros* for truth, properly fulfilled

and most fully itself in exhibiting and taking in the show of things with their syntax. While today “rationality” or “reason” might connote an undirected ability to calculate, “veracity” names this dimension of us as a vector. It enjoys many manifestations in human life (grand and mundane, contemplative and practical), and as *eros* it can be twisted for many misuses (terrible and slight, tragic and farcical). It is prior to the virtues of attentiveness, honesty, accuracy, and courage that complete it, and prior to decision, which it makes possible. And it is social, not inherently selfish or alienating. Others are an essential aid in developing it, not a hindrance blocking access to reality. It needs to be cultivated, by oneself and with the help of others. “As human persons, we owe our rational life to those who have shared with us their thoughts, the way the world appeared to them.” (79). Its mature forms will not just spring up mechanically, though no decision can quite explain how a person faces it and lives up to it, or fails to do so.
