The cat that is not there –
a non-philosophical view of philosophy

Ron Aharoni

A philosopher is a blind man looking in a dark room for a black cat that is not there.
(Attributed to William James)

While these words are being written, atrocities are performed in my name in the territories occupied by Israel – Gaza and the West Bank. Senseless, racism-motivated mass murder is going on, daily. Deliberate starvation in Gaza and pogroms by the Jewish settlers, aided by the Israeli army, in the West Bank. In times like these dealing with trifles like philosophy seems immoral. I am deeply ashamed, but have no effective way to fight it, apart from writing these words.

Prologue

> I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.
>
> (Mark Antony, Julius Caesar by William Shakespeare, Act III, Scene ii.)

This book has one goal: to define "philosophy". Is it an important problem? This depends, of course, on whether philosophy itself is significant. To answer this, we first need to know what it is, namely to complete the task the book has set itself. So, please be patient. Is it interesting? Yes, for those who are interested in such problems ("It is a good book for those who like such books", Lincoln gave his opinion on a book). I, for one, am interested. Partly because of my past interest in philosophy, and partly "because it is there". Important or not, the phenomenon is intriguing. What is this strange creature? To this day, there is no agreed-upon answer. Philosophers absolve themselves with vague definitions like "clarifying concepts". A patently evasive answer – the free will problem, for example, is not about clarification of concepts. Nor are most of the problems we shall encounter in the book.

This is a re-write of a book by the same name published in Hebrew, in 2009. It is not a translation: it differs from the 2009 version, because its writer is different. My understanding of the nature of philosophy remained the same, but my views on writing changed. I no longer heed the philosophers peering over my shoulder. Life is too short for that. I also got more impatient with philosophers.

The definition reached is not complimentary. We shall detect a conceptual structure that lends a philosophical flavor to problems and discussions. The most important fact about it is that it is flawed. Dismantling it, as should be done, results in vanishing of the philosophical tint. The problems themselves survive, but their taste changes. They become ordinary questions about reality.

This may be hard to digest. A whole field built on shaky foundations? But perhaps it is not so strange, noting the field's eccentricities. And remember that I come to define philosophy, not to defame it. Is philosophy worthy or not – this is not the question. I am only committed to finding the thought patterns that characterize it, namely those that people tag as "philosophical". If this results in disrespect for the existing philosophical lore, so be it. My only obligation is to the validity of the characterization, and that alone should also interest the reader.

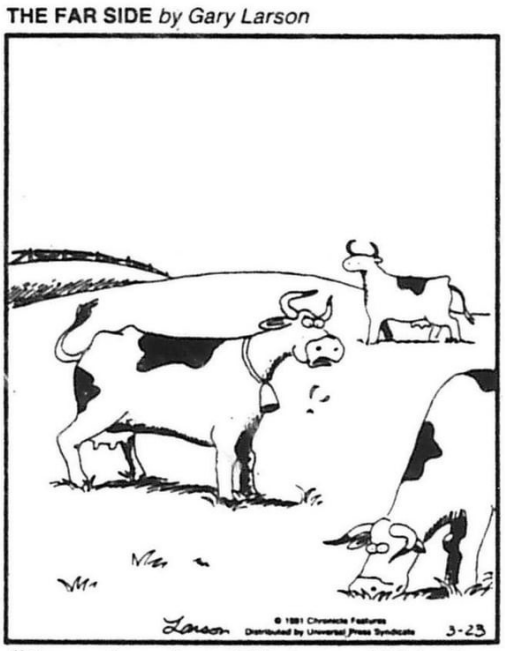
For whom the bell tolls?

> Never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.
>
> (John Donne, Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, Meditation XVII.)

The bell in Donne's poem announces a funeral.

A delicate point is the book's intended audience. With the original Hebrew version, I felt no qualms. It was written with a twofold audience in mind: lay readers and connoisseurs. As Mozart once wrote to his father, it contained something for both.

Well, it reached neither. A few hundred copies were sold, and I wouldn't be surprised if some of those were bought by cat lovers, or people who lost their pet. In spite of my criticism, of the two audiences I would be happier if it reached the second. They know what I am speaking about. They regard the question as important. I would have loved to see one of them raise his or her head from the lawn, as in Gary Larson's cartoon below, and realize that they have been eating grass. This will never happen. It is more likely for a cow to experience such illumination than for a philosopher, who has endured so many years of philosophical education, to experience such estrangement to his occupation.



"Hey, wait a minute! This is grass! We've been eating grass!"

As to academia, I was naïve. I was blind to the extent of the snobbery, or simply - to human nature. I did not appreciate the power of the shield of "we are professionals, you are an amateur". "Professionality" - in what sense? What knowledge does a philosophy scholar acquire in a lifetime of study? He does not master specific facts—philosophy is not about facts. The mantra of "critical thinking" is, if anything, ironic. Apart from religion, I know no other field in which there is so much deference to authority. There is no other field in which observation is replaced by studying the teachings of famous thinkers. In no other field (apart from religion) does quoting big names inspire such awe. Take for example

Wittgenstein's famous "throwing the ladder after having climbed it", another way of saying "This sentence (being itself philosophical) is meaningless". A patently nonsensical dictum is endowed with an aura of depth, solely by virtue of its originator's reputation.

For whom the bell does not toll?

Anyone convinced of the existence of a quantum leap between amoebas and humans, a jump from mechanical entities to free agents, should avoid this book. If you believe that man is essentially different from a baboon (the animal Darwin used for comparison) this book is not for you. If such is your way of thinking, I will not be able to engage you in the chapters about the free will and the mind-body problems. Do not waste your time. If famous names invoke your awe, skip this book. It means you are not going to think for yourself.

If, on the other hand, there is a chance that you can be convinced that man is not essentially different from a complex computer program, that computer programs can have will that is no less free than that of man, please stay. I will try to explain why on the surface it doesn't look so, and why a man can comprehend it about others, but (at least not in full) about himself.

A Legend

Many years ago, in a far-off land, reigned a king, the most enlightened king that ever ruled a country. Order and cleanliness prevailed in the kingdom. Streets sparkled, education flourished, and alongside the king, the government functioned according to strict yet modern principles. The king took special pride in one of his government offices, which we would today call the "State Comptroller's Office." Its task was to scrutinize the activities of all other government departments with meticulous thoroughness. Heading this office was an individual of unimpeachable integrity, a person whose honesty and humility stood out even amidst the upright atmosphere of the kingdom.

The kingdom was a steady ship sailing calm seas, and it seemed this might last forever. But sometimes, when outward appearances suggest perfection, a subtle internal flaw begins to gnaw away. A worm sounds its ticking. One fateful night, the king awoke, his heart gripped by anxiety and his body drenched in cold sweat. A disturbing thought struck him: While every government office had someone overseeing it, there was one exception—the Comptroller’s Office itself! What if corruption had crept into it? Who would prevent its employees from taking bribes to conceal irregularities in other departments?

The thought alarmed him so much that he decided to call his advisors immediately. At the sound of the royal bell, summoned to his chamber, they stumbled in, bleary-eyed and tousle-haired, clad in their nightwear, wondering what grave emergency had prompted their summons. Upon hearing the king’s concerns, they sighed with relief. "This is a simple matter," said the eldest. "Select the four most honest members of the office—individuals already known for their incorruptibility—and task them with examining the rest of the department."

The king, however, remained unconvinced. "And what if corruption infects these four themselves? Or if, through innocent neglect, they fail in their duties? After all, even the most conscientious people make mistakes."

The advisors quickly offered another solution: "These four can evaluate their actions from the previous day every morning. With hindsight, they will surely identify any missteps."

But the king’s unease persisted. "Examining the past isn’t enough—it might already be too late. The special unit must monitor its own actions in real-time, including its self-monitoring."

The advisors exchanged troubled glances. One of them, after clearing his throat, cautiously ventured, "My king, I fear this is impossible. A person cannot evaluate their own evaluation while performing it, just as they cannot lift themselves by pulling their hair. One can examine others or reflect on their own past actions but not assess what they are doing at this very moment."

The king, however, refused to relent. His enlightenment gland worked extra time. His nature would not allow him to accept such limitations. If the advisors claimed the task was impossible, he would issue a royal decree to make them comply. And so, by royal command, a special unit within the Comptroller's Office was established to monitor its own activities, including the act of monitoring itself, in real-time.

Of course, the king's advisors were right. The royal decree was impossible to implement. Examining the very act of the current examination is akin to defining something by itself, or to a thought contemplating itself, or—if we stretch the analogy a bit, it's like giving birth to oneself. But a royal decree is a decree, even in an enlightened land, and the advisors decided to act as though they had fulfilled it. In simple terms, they pretended. Four individuals were chosen to carry out the task, and the chronicles of the kingdom recorded their exploits under the assumption that the king's decree had been carried out. That is, as if the four examined the other activities of the auditor's office, but also, in the process, examined their own act of examination. These were very interesting books. When one assumes the fulfillment of

the impossible, absurd conclusions emerge. Strange paradoxes arise, and problems slip away like mirages the moment one tries to grasp them.

Ask for the use

> The meaning of a word is its use in the language.
> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *philosophical investigations* §*43*.

The book's core lies in the words "non-philosophical" in its subtitle. Philosophers smugly assume that the definition of "philosophy" is itself a philosophical task. In his book *what philosophy is* (Danto 1968), Danto even plays it smart and defines philosophy as "the only field whose definition lies within its scope", a definition that may be correct as far as scope is concerned, but tells you nothing about the essence of the field.

No, defining "philosophy" is not a philosophical task, whatever the definition of the latter is. It is totally empirical, namely based on observation. Whether the definer admits it or not, he observes people's conceptual behavior. His aim is to identify the conceptual structure people tag as "philosophy". And observation is never philosophical. The antipode of "philosophical" is "empirical", which is "studied by observation".

In fact, every definition, of any concept, is empirical. "Look at the use", as Wittgenstein commands, and people often add "not at the meaning". "Look" is "observe". To define a term, for example 'definition' (what we are doing in these vrey lines) scrutinize the way people use it.

The distinction in question is between looking from the inside and from the outside. The game of meaning can be played by its owner, or by an onlooker – the latter being a referee watching from the lines, or an entomologist looking at a colony of ants. "Look at the use" means "View from the outside".

The entire book is a de-fabling (realization) of the fable in the "legend" chapter. We shall see that philosophizing is precisely what the super-enlightened king did. It is characterized by confusion between the two positions, observer and observed. It emerges when you assume the two simultaneously. You are at once a player and a referee. The philosopher insists on holding the positions of investigator and investigated simultaneously. This is the conceptual structure that, though unaware, we identify as philosophical.

The enlightened king in the fable was a philosopher.

Outline

Here is a short road map:

1. "Part 0", the "legend" – the fable on the king who was too enlightened for his own good.

2. Part 1 presents the coveted definition as well as our main tool – separation between object and subject, between observer and observed. This plainly means asking the question about somebody else, totally separate from yourself. This invariably robs it of its philosophical feeling, and sometimes disposes of the problem itself. Infallibility of this rule is the key to the coveted definition, which is:

> Philosophy is the study of human concepts without separating the conceptual system studied from the system used for the study.

The disappearance of philosophical feeling upon separation is a touchstone. Want to discard the book right away and save reading? Provide a counterexample.

3. Part 2 contains a belated introduction of the heroine, Mlle Philosophy. Her attractivity, and techniques she uses to study her object, namely conceptual behavior.

4. Separation is a prerequisite for a sound conceptual structure. Its absence means shaky ground. No wonder this leads to conundrums. Part 3 deals with the most common of those – skepticism. Can we trust our senses and values? Or in another form – when I make a statement, whether factual or prescriptive, does it relate to something in the world or in me? Am I coercing my limitations on my view of the world? Applying separation (which is the only sound way) skepticism disappears. No great loss – skepticism does not add wisdom. It is merely conceptual gymnastics.

5. Part 4 deals with the most pernicious manifestation of non-separation: the identification of mental events with their knowledge, identification embodied in the dictum *Cogito ergo sum.* It assumes that (for example) to know you are in pain you do not have to observe your reactions, you know it directly. This is a natural assumption, but a flawed one, hence leading to paradoxes. The fact that such an error is considered a major achievement (as many view the *Cogito*) should raise eyebrows and give a clue as to the nature of philosophy. Indeed, this identification is a landmine. It breeds the mind-body problem.

6. Part 5 is about the role of time. Philosophy divides into two parts - one dealing with man's relation to the past, and the other with the future. What the past engraves in our brain is called "knowledge", and its study is called "epistemology". Man's relationship with the future is in most cases through decisions. Philosophy of the future deals with decisions. Mostly generalized decisions, namely values - ethics, aesthetics, philosophy of science. The latter, because beyond description of the scientific discipline, philosophy of science is about choice – in this case of scientific values.

   The book concludes with the problem of free will, which is the decisions version of skepticism. Skepticism speaks about knowledge of knowledge ("How do we know"), at the core of the free will problem is the impossibility of deciding on your decision – one cannot decide on one's motives. The free will problem stems from non-separation, or by another name - circularity, but in a subtler way than other problems.

7. Epilogue, on the philosophical experience.

Part 1: A definition

A strange endeavor

> Philosophy, both in its historical origins and in each individual, begins with wonder.
> (Aristotle, Metaphysics, 982b)

> What is philosophy? I don't know, and I have no formula to offer.
> (Friedrich Waismann, Austrian-English philosopher, 1896–1959)

> I cannot define 'pornography', but I know it when I see it.
> (Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart)

Philosophy loves riddles. Some are of paradox form, namely pointing at an apparent contradiction arising from nowhere. Such are the free will and mind-body problems. Others just pose wonders: about the world, about man's position in it, about values, the way our thoughts operate, the modes of grasping reality. Lots and lots of riddles. One of the most elusive of those is its own nature. What is this strange activity? What part of the world does it study? Seemingly, none. It has no concrete, well-defined object. Once its object is pinned down, the question ceases to be philosophical and becomes empirical. Sometimes worse, it dissolves altogether, leaving behind a Cheshire Cat's mocking grin. Will-o'-the-wisps. It is antipodal to tangibility. It is easier to seize an eel by its tail than to grasp the subject of a philosophical problem.

The confidence with which we identify philosophy testifies to its sharp contours. These call for a succinct definition. Unfortunately, most existing definitions are fuzzy. Take, for example, Moore's definition. G.E. Moore (1873–1958) was a colleague of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Bertrand Russell in Cambridge. He helped procure Wittgenstein a professorship, for which he was rewarded by dismissiveness - "An example of how far someone could get in life with absolutely no intelligence whatever" - (Monk 1990). Wittgenstein's arrogance was rivaled only by his insecurity. Moore opened his book, *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, with a chapter on the nature of philosophy.

> The most important and interesting thing philosophers try to do is to give a description of the whole universe, to note the most important things we know about it… and to understand how these things relate to one another… In short, a general description of the entire universe.' (Moore 1953)

'Science studies particulars, philosophy generalities'. This common view is not only vague, but also off mark. For example, the mind-body and free will problems do not deal with generalities. In fact, no problem we shall encounter below is characterized by 'generality'. Moore made no attempt to confront his definition with facts. The philosophical culture is peculiarly tolerant to counterexamples.

And yet, philosophy exerts a mysterious allure on generation after generation of young people. This is partly explained by the brazenness of its promise. Remember Moore? – "a general description of the entire universe." A bit pretentious, especially for a field that hasn't produced a single firm insight in all its years of existence. Grasp all, lose all. Yet, the promise is there. The temptation of penetrating the secrets of the universe is hard to resist.

Moore's view of philosophy is common. Philosophy is expected to address the most fundamental questions: What are matter and time? What exists in the world, and what does not? Philosophy promises insights into "meta-problems", the general nature of the world. The fact that the promise is never fulfilled does not dishearten newcomers. Like barrel-jumpers in Niagara Falls, they believe they will be the first to succeed.

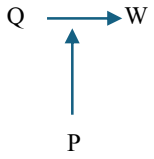
A definition and a touchstone

Envisage a sailor stranded on a desert island, wasting away for months and years. One day he discovers another shipwreck survivor on the far side of the island. Imagine the relief and the joy. This was my experience when, amid the diffuse and generally misdirected definitions of *philosophy*, I came across one that—once rephrased—coincides with mine. It is R. G. Collingwood's definition, found in his posthumously published book *The Idea of History*. Collingwood (1889–1943) accomplished much in the few years allotted to him, in many of which he was seriously ill. He was a philosopher of history and an active archaeologist. Throughout his career he was interested in the definition of philosophy and dedicated an entire book to it. In his *An Essay on the Philosophical Method* (Collingwood 1933) he promoted a common view – that philosophy is second-order inquiry—thinking about thinking. Its task is to analyze and clarify the assumptions underlying any discussion. In Collingwood's words - "An attempt to discover what we mean when we say what we say."

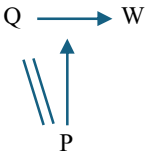
A standard view faces standard difficulties. Thinking is part of the real world – what makes its investigation special? Thoughts about thoughts can and should follow the "look at the use (of concepts)" rule. This use is part of the worldly events, and as such it can be traced empirically, and "empirical" is antipodal to "philosophical". To answer "what is truth", one should observe how people use this notion, so the discussion is descriptive. Also, the heaviest philosophical problems, the mind-body and free will, seem to present a mystery that does not succumb to just analysis of the concepts used (some philosophers claim they do – we shall examine this claim later). Possibly this is the reason that in his posthumously published book, 'The idea of history', Collingwood changed direction and adopted another definition. Its essence is that the second order and first order thoughts are confused. Thinking about thoughts on an object is identified with thinking about the object.

> (COL) Philosophy never considers thought in isolation. It always deals with the relationship between thought and its object, thus addressing both equally. (Collingwood 1946)

This sounds abstruse, so let me illustrate it with a diagram and two examples. The diagram is



P, the philosopher, observes a relation between a person Q and some worldly object W. But then it turns out that P is also interested in W, which means that he is also in the position of Q. The picture is thus



The left slanted lines signify equality – P is identical to Q. She is observing her own relationship with W. P thinks she is studying the relationship between Q and W, while in fact she is also studying W.

An apt name for this maneuver is "deflection". It means a discrepancy between the assumed object of investigation and the real object. As a first example, consider the question that preoccupied Socrates, what is 'good', or 'good life'. From the outside it is 'what are Smith's (a generic name) ethical values?', or

the values of some given society. This is a totally descriptive question, settleable by observation, and hence non-philosophical. Of course, Socrates will remonstrate – I don't care one iota about Smith's values. Not even about the values of my compatriots, the Athenians (especially those). I want to know what the *right* values are. This means that he puts himself also in the position of the decider. Not exclusively – a pure decision is not philosophical. What makes the problem philosophical is trying to have it both ways.

Or consider solipsism: can the entire world be a figment of my imagination? The question is about the relation of "perception" between my consciousness and the world W. But the problem is totally dependent on the assumption that I am part of the picture. That I watch *myself* watching the world. Asking it about another person – "is it possible that the entire world resides in the imagination of John Smith?" is silly.

Collingwood claims that this double position – the identity between observing and observed – is what makes a discussion philosophical. The deflection here is of a special type – that of vantage point. P (the philosopher) looks at a relation Q→ R between a person Q and a part R of reality, and then it turns out that he is also at Q's position. Like Q, he is investigating R. He assumes a double role.

When asked about somebody else, totally separate from the observer, so goes the claim, any question ceases to be philosophical. Sometimes, as in the solipsism conundrum, it even ceases to be. For example, the classic "what is truth?" becomes "how does Smith handle the concept of truth? When does he say that a statement is true?" – a descriptive, non-philosophical problem. Philosophers will say that this is not the meaning of the question – they also want to know what truth really is. Which means they are also occupying the place of the decider on the notion.

Summarizing:

> (DEF) DEFINITION: Philosophy is investigating thought, assuming that the conceptual apparatus used for the investigation is identical, or at least interacts, with the structure studied.

In fact, this mode of investigation is impossible. It is the investigation required by the enlightened king in the "legend" chapter. The eye cannot see itself (*Tractatus* 5.6331). We only presume it does. Studying yourself, you must create within you a separate faculty to do the job. The perception of your own thinking should not differ from that of a separate person. Philosophy appears when you transgress this rule; when you believe your view of yourself is special; that you have exclusive access to your own mind.

If (DEF) is correct, then separation of the object from its investigator (namely of P from Q) removes the philosophical aura.

> (TOUCHSTONE) Philosophy dissolves upon separation of observer from observed.

"What is justice" turns into "How does Smith handle the notion of `justice'? What is his view of `being just'?" A totally descriptive question. This is a true touchstone: find one counterexample and the definition crumbles (and lucky-you will be exempted from reading any further).

(DEF)'s implications look preposterous. If indeed philosophy results from non-separation between observer and observed, somebody (philosophers, to be concrete) is in trouble. Because separation is a must. Non-separation is not an option. You can't dance at two weddings at the same time. The eye cannot see itself (Wittgenstein), valid discussion is always "from the lines", the position of a detached observer. A strange, but inevitable conclusion is that there is no place for valid philosophizing. It is not that philosophy's arguments are erroneous. They are just non-philosophical. Formulated soundly, any discussion ceases to feel philosophical.

This is brazen indeed. Do I mean to say that generations of illustrious thinkers have been guilty of an elementary error? That they have been fighting windmills? I have two answers to that. One is – bring me one piece of knowledge that philosophy has added to the world – I mean real knowledge, not skepticism – and I will re-consider my view. The other is that compared with claims accepted by the philosophical community my claim is tame. The idol of modern philosophy, Wittgenstein, accused philosophers of much worse. He claimed that all philosophical problems and statements are meaningless. Including this very sentence. Why? Because every meaningful sentence is composed of atomic sentences, like "The cat sat on the mat", "her eyes are blue", connected by logical connectives like "and" and "or". And philosophical statements are not like that. Ridiculous? Indeed, but said by the right person. Snobbery is the name of the game. My claim is far less extreme. It is not that philosophical discourse is gibberish, but that when viewed the right way it is factual. These are not the philosophical questions that should be dismantled, but their philosophical aura.

Philosophers on (DEF)

The bulk of the book consists of evidence for (TOUCHSTONE), and thus for (DEF). But before starting, let me quote. In philosophy do what philosophers like to do – cite. Here are some views of the imperative to look from the side.

The American philosopher Thomas Nagel made this a central point in his philosophical world view. Here is his stance on the mind-body problem.

> The mind–body problem is essentially connected with the first-person point of view. It is only because I am directly acquainted with my own consciousness that the problem of its relation to the body arises at all. If I considered other people only from the outside, the problem would not come up.
> (Nagel 1987, ch. 2.)

> The mind–body problem arises because we must describe a reality that includes our own mental lives both from within and from without. If we describe it only from without, the problem disappears. (Nagel 1986, p. 15)

And the same about the problem of free will:

> The problem of free will, like the problem of consciousness, arises because of the conflict between an internal and an external view of ourselves. From the outside we are just natural objects, subject to physical laws. From the inside, however, we view ourselves as agents, faced with choices. The external standpoint leaves no room for freedom, but from the internal one the sense of freedom is inescapable.
> (ibid., p. 112.)

Separation between investigator and investigated can be done by looking at your past self. There is no danger then of confusion between observer and observed. Schopenhauer used this stratagem:

> Everyone believes himself a priori to be perfectly free, even in his individual actions, and thinks that at any moment he can begin another manner of life… but a posteriori, through experience, he finds himself subject to necessity. This contrast between the two standpoints is the very essence of the problem of freedom.
> (Schopenhauer 1839, p. 68.)

From the outside (looking back), determinism reigns; from the inside (participating in the game of decision-making), freedom is undeniable. What makes the problem philosophical is trying to have it both ways at once.

Two components and fear of circularity

Non-separation has two possible effects: generation of a problem, or inducing philosophical flavor on one. In the first case the problem is purely philosophical. Its entire *raison d'être* is non-separation. It posits a flawed conceptual structure and then sounds an alarm over the resulting paradoxes. Such problems do not have any component relating to reality, no new insight on the real world will ensue from their solution. Their benchmark is that they vanish upon separation. Naturally, they are few.

(1) In epistemology - solipsism.

(2) In the theories of decision and values – (i) Hume's values-skepticism: 'from an *is* you cannot deduce an *ought*', and (ii) The problem of free will.

(3) In the theory of mind – the mind-body problem.

Non-separation results in a phenomenon known as 'circularity'. Something affects itself, or is self-defined, like a number defined as 'itself, plus 1'. Assumed to be pointing at an actual number, this leads to a paradox: 1=0. A purely philosophical problem does just that – it defines a circular configuration and then points at the impossible conclusions.

An impure problem does have a component relating to reality, that like all mundane problems can be studied by observation. But it falsely appears as if any attempt at answering it will breed circularity. The result is a sense of groundlessness, so familiar in philosophy. The earth disappears beneath one's feet. This is 'fear of circularity'. Once separation is applied, it transpires that the fear was unfounded, there is no monster in your closet, and no philosophical flavor to your problem.

So, like complex numbers (no real analogy, just an amusing similarity) philosophical problems have two components – real and imaginary. The effect of separation is different on the two. The imaginary component disappears, while the real component stays, but loses its philosophical flavor.

A purely philosophical problem – solipsism

> If a peasant were to say that he does not believe his tax collector exists, even though the latter stands plainly before his eyes, he would rightly be deemed insane. But when a philosopher puts forth the same claim, he expects us to admire the profundity of his wisdom.
> (Leonhard Euler, from 'Letters to a German Princess')

'Couldn't the entire world be just part of my dream?' – total skepticism is one of the problems most identified with philosophy. Hardly anybody takes it seriously, laymen because it is so strange, philosophers because it is naïve, there are more sophisticated formulations of skepticism. But it is still alive, more than two millennia after its inception. Lewis Carroll, an astute derider of philosophy, applied separation. He asked the question about somebody else: the Red King, who is lying under a tree and snoring. Alice is warned that she is just part of his dream, and will disappear as soon as he wakes up.

'Is the entire world just a dream of the Red King?' is plainly silly (laymen are right). The whole point is that if the Red King asked it about himself, he wouldn't be able to refute it by observation. It would be circular, depending precisely on the perception that was doubted.

An impure problem – what is truth

> What is a theory of truth but a series of battered truths?
> (J.L Austin, Truth, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Vol. 24, 1950.)

> There is nothing more mundane and less puzzling than the concept of truth. (P. Horwich, Truth, Clarendon Press, 1990).

> If someone thinks or claims something, what makes it true? These questions may seem either profoundly deep or utterly trivial. This duality is a hallmark of philosophical inquiries.
> (George Pitcher, `Truth,' Englewood Clif, NJ: Prentice-Hall)

Deep, or trivial? Whole libraries have been devoted to the subject, and still, it is trivial. The aura of depth results from an unfounded fear of circularity. Upon separation, the question is how people handle the concept of ‘truth'. How would Smith examine the truth value of 'My cat is sitting on the mat'? He has mechanisms connecting words with the world, for example serving to identify cats and their location and posture. He would compare his findings about the cat ('sits' or 'doesn't sit') with the sentence. A child could write a program performing this task.

Here the fear of circularity raises its uninvited head. The process of assessing 'truth' that I just described is known as the 'correspondence theory'. It says that

> (TRUTH) The sentence 'the cat sits on the mat' is true if the cat sits on the mat.

The problem is that (TRUTH) seems tautological. Inattention may make it sound 'The cat sits on the mat if the cat sits on the mat'. But you cannot get more wrong than that. (TRUTH) is not a tautology, and cannot be. The two parts of the phrase are not identical, since the first speaks of a sentence, the second of a cat.

It is unbelievable (though in philosophy there is no such thing as `unbelievable') to what extent people have gone to avoid the imaginary circularity. In particular, there are theories that try to lift `truth' by pulling at its own hair. By these theories, you do not compare the sentence with reality, but with other sentences. Not correspondence, but consistency. The system should be coherent – each sentence supporting the others. I do not care whether the cat is sitting on the mat or not, if it is consistent with the dog's hosting its cousins, I may hold the belief that both are true. This is real circularity – eventually you justify sentences in a circle. In legal terms it is called testimony coordination.

As usual (but still, surprisingly), philosophers fail here in their primary role, which is observing reality. This is not the way people determine truth. To check if the statement "the cat is black" is true, people do not examine their other claims. They look at the cat.

Another remedy to the illusory fear of circularity is "pragmatism". Truth is what is useful. If believing that the cat sits on the mat is beneficial, I am allowed to believe that. If the belief that the spirits of your tribal ancestors reveal themselves to you persuades the tribe to support you economically, believe in the revelation of the spirits (in Israel this is not fictitious, it is the actual state of affairs). The founder of this trend, the American Charles Peirce (1839–1914), compared human knowledge to a cable made of thin interwoven threads. It does not matter what the entire cable is connected to; what matters is that the threads are interconnected.

I am ashamed of wasting the reader's time on such a sham. The fact that the philosophical community takes such things seriously is no excuse for me to dabble in it. Nobody, when asked if the sentence "the

cat is sitting on the mat" is true, asks if it is beneficial to assume so. The only benefit of the discussion above is the realization that in philosophy-

> Listen to the never haves,
>
> then listen close to me—
>
> Anything can happen, child,
>
> ANYTHING can be.
>
> (Listen to the Mustn’ts, Shel Silverstein, Where the sidewalk ends)

Eleven impure problems

This chapter collects evidence. Eleven questions, that do not vanish upon separation, but the philosophical feeling does. They all share one essential property: NOTHING HAS EVER BEEN SAID OF ANY OF THEM THAT IS NOT OBTAINED BY OBSERVATION. The answers to all of them is empirical. This is, in fact, obvious. To address "what is meaning" you must be familiar with the use of the word, to know that it does not signify green cheese or the moon. This may be concealed by an *en passant* type of discussion, but it is there. Note that my aim is not to answer the questions, but to show their empirical nature. "Empirical" does not imply "simple". I will go over some main points in each. Apologies to those shocked by the simplification – but those I will ask: has any solid non-observational fact written about any of them?

1. What is philosophy?

Obviously, this is not a purely philosophical problem. To answer you must observe something - philosophers. To see, for example, that they do not study metallurgy or ancient Chinese. But it is not only non-pure – it is not philosophical at all. As already discussed, the protagonist problem of this book is not philosophical. Very non-philosophical. Plainly, because no definition is. The only way to define a concept is by watching people use it. An empirical, and hence non-philosophical endeavor. Even accepting the common definition of "concepts clarifier", is done by observation – studying the use of the concepts.

2. What is meaning

What is the meaning of the sentence "The cat sits on the mat"? Answer: that the cat sits on the mat. Appallingly circular. The fear of circularity is even more direct than in the definition of `truth'. Who will buy such a tautology as a definition? Wise people will. It is not at all a tautology – the first half speaks about sentences, the second about cats. Our brains have mechanisms that connect texts with reality. The same as discussed above in the analysis of `truth'. We know them by familiarity with the conceptual behavior. For example, we know that when Smith says "cat" he doesn't mean "dog" by his behavior and words.

3. What is beauty?

This is a classic. Why the question is allotted to philosophers – this is explainable, but not excusable. ”What has an effect of beauty on our brains?" is a purely psychological problem. A very hard one, indeed – nobody has come up with a satisfactory answer, but it is psychological. One psychological answer was given by Herbert Spencer (1820 – 1903) and his supporter, Freud. In his “The Philosophy of Style,” Spencer argued that

> pleasure in beauty comes from the economy of mental effort.

We constantly summon mental energy to organize the stimuli impinging on our brain from the external world. Having an organized image of the world is a prerequisite for understanding and predicting it. In art, so says Spencer, we promptly detect some order in the stimuli, and can save the enlisted energy. In music the order is in the rhythm, and in the ratios between the pitches of the tones (harmony). The saved energy translates into pleasure – just like the pleasure of victory over a foe. Joy of victory stems from the redundance of further effort of fighting.

This is the best step I know towards understanding the mechanism of beauty. Admittedly, not a large step. For example, it does not explain why certain music moves us deeply while other is just beautiful. These

problems are deep and difficult, but they have nothing to do with philosophy. They are purely psychological. They are classified as philosophical just because of the confusion – is beauty in the eyes of the beholder, or in the world?

Here is Kant on the subject:

> Beauty is disinterested pleasure.

The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy elaborates:

> Judgments of beauty are based on feeling, in particular feelings of pleasure, however, of a distinctive kind: it is disinterested, which means that it does not depend on the subject's having a desire for the object… Whatever you call "imagination" participates in the game.

This contains a correct observation: indeed beauty is detached from utility. But it misses what Spencer's definition has – an attempt at explanation. What makes it philosophical is "in me or in the world". We search for inner properties of the beautiful object, rather than the way Smith interacts with it.

4. The ontological status of aesthetic concepts

Is "beautiful" an absolute attribute, or is it determined by reactions of the observer? This is a favorite among philosophers. To answer, we need to observe somebody's use of the terms "exists outside, in the real world", with respect to her perception of beauty. Obviously, it is subjective, non-tangible, often controversial. By the common use of the concept, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

5. Reference vs. meaning

A proud couple told me how they taught their toddler names of objects, by pointing at them and pronouncing the names aloud. The boy did not understand the principle: he clutched the finger.

There is a difference between pointer and pointee (=the object pointed at). A house is not identical with its address. The identification of the two is the error common to the child and the enlightened king in the legend opening the book. The distinction between them is trivial, not something to write home about, certainly not a learned paper. Still, since 1892, the year Frege published his paper "sense and reference" ("sense" is the pointer, "reference" is the object) it is all the rage among philosophers, perhaps because of the linguistic attire given by Frege. Ironically, philosophers themselves do not always respect the distinction. We shall see that some famous problems emerge from non-separation of pointer from pointed at.

Here is a sophistry on the subject, one of those mental exercises that philosophers are proud of instead of being ashamed. The following statement is valid:

> The country bordering Canada from the south
> = the country bordering Mexico from the north.

The fact that two pointers refer to the same country carries non-tautological information. However, if you replace pointers by pointees, you get the tautology US=US.

This would be even simpler with in the non-trivial sentence

> The country bordering Canada from the south is the US.

If you replace "The country bordering Canada from the south" by "US" – you get the empty US=US. Pointer is not pointed, Q.E.D.

Forgive me, dear reader, for dwelling on such trifles. The book is about what philosophers do, and this is what they do, and what they are paid for. It is enough to view the exercise from the outside, to realize its inanity, and to lose the feeling of philosophicality.

To be fair to Frege, another of his contributions, in mathematical logic, was a turning point in the history of mathematics. He understood that a mathematical proof is a sequence of statements, each following its predecessors according to a few simple rules. This led to the mechanization of thought, and eventually to the invention of the computer.

6. Putnam's "Twin Earth"

A truly silly philosophical game concerning meaning and reference was suggested by Hilary Putnam (1926 – 2016). He concocted the following thought experiment. Imagine a Twin Earth — a planet exactly like Earth in every way: same environment, same people, same languages. But there is one crucial difference: the liquid called "water" on Twin Earth is not H_2O. Instead, it is a chemically different substance, **XYZ**, though it looks, tastes, and behaves *exactly* like H_2O.

So:

- On Earth, when someone says "water," they refer to **H_2O**.
- On Twin Earth, when someone says "water," they refer to **XYZ**.

Even though the two people might be internally identical (same brain states, same memories, same sensory input), what they mean by "water" is different. The conclusion is that meaning is different from pointer. The pointers are the same, but not the meanings.

I wanted to familiarize the reader with what is going on behind the doors of philosophy departments. One day the academic Bastille will be stormed by people who find out.

7. Theseus' ship

The players of the New-York philharmonic have all changed since a hundred years ago – why do we still call the orchestra by the same name? This is a variation of a riddle by the Greek philosopher Plutarch (40-120 AD). Theseus was the mythological king of Athens, half human - half god. The planks of his ship were replaced each in turn, when rotting, until no plank of the original ship remained. Plutarch asked - why do people identify it with the original ship?

This is classical "in me or in the world" skeptical problem. From an onlooker's point of view, it is trivial. Why does Smith relate to the ship as having constant identity? He has a mechanism in his brain, of keeping the identity of objects, mainly by spatial continuity. When a cat moves, or a baby grows, Smith can follow the continuous changes. Thus he views the ship as the same all along.

When you ask it about yourself instead of about Smith, you fear circularity - perhaps it is in your own mind? But no - you are not allowed to ask about yourself. You must keep the separation. If you ask the problem about your own perception, you should first establish inside your mind a separate, observing entity.

No one can beat a determined separator.

8. Is the World Composed of Facts?

Wittgenstein's best-known book (the only one published in his lifetime), the *'Tractatus'*, opens with:

> The world is all that is the case.

The meaning is: the world consists of facts, not of things. It is hard to think of a more philosophical sounding statement. If we succeed in de-philosophizing it by looking from a third-person perspective, we shall be in shape.

So, how does it look from a third-person perspective? The question is: "Smith divides the events in the world into facts—the cat sits on the mat, the Earth revolves around the Sun. Is he correct? Or are the events in the world organized differently?" In this formulation, there's no problem. Clearly, the information about the world divides into well-defined parts—not entirely, but to a significant extent. Just as the material world is divided into objects, not in an absolute sense, but generally speaking.

So, yes—the world is composed of facts, in the sense described above. Philosophical? Not at all. It is observational. Smith indeed divides what he witnesses into parts he calls "facts". Philosophy begins when I ask the question about myself. A new concern arises: "In me, or in the world?" – the usual one. And the answer is always the same – in the world. From the outside, this is obvious. As usual, the skepticism is mistaken, because the observing "I" and the observed "I" are two different entities. It is permissible to rely on the first to examine the second.

9. What does it mean, `to understand'?

This is yet another obviously philosophical question. Or is it? Not when viewed from the outside. Note that I am not trying to answer the question – it is almost as hard as "what is beauty". But when viewed from a third person's perspective it is factual. From that perspective many clever things can be said, on grasping relationships, laws governing the topic, the relationship with explanation. All these are factual, not philosophical.

Different people will take this question differently. A layman would not care about a precise definition. A computer scientist would write a program that understands sentences, or even scientific theories (not impossible, at the current state of AI). He will describe the workings of his program, and you will understand what to understand is. A cognitive psychologist will observe people struggling with texts, and will make some useful comments.

10. Do amoebas have will?

When my children were young, sitting at the backseat of the car they would elbow each other and then, in a sanctimonious tone, say "It’s because of the turn!" Unbeknownst to them, they touched upon a profound philosophical issue: What does it mean for an action to be intentional? Why raising my hand is voluntary, and a sneeze is not? Does will cause the action, in the same sense that gravity causes objects to fall?

Looking from aside, it is not hard to see what brings will into the picture, what makes me say "I want" rather than just do it. These are impediments. If an action is obstructed, we construct in our mind a symbolic image of the desired goal, and start searching for ways to circumvent or overcome the hindrance. In the case of raising the hand, the obstructions are miniature, but they are there. The raising of the hand is therefore not automatic. Does will cause the action? This is a question about the notion of "cause". Looking at the way Smith uses the notion of "cause" we shall probably discover that he does consider the will of Jones as causing the action. And when an amoeba overcome an obstruction, Smith will call its action "voluntary". Possibly not, but the observation will yield some answer.

11. What does it mean, "to exist"?

Facing the task of programming human concepts to a computer – will "existence" be one of the hardest? Will it be harder than "love" or "sadness"? I don't think so. "Existence" is applied to entities we construct in our minds – cats, emotions, the number "3". And we say that an entity constructed this way exists if we can relate to it as a unit – "Juliet's love, the square root of 3". The answer is complex, but there is nothing mysterious or deep about it.

Part 2: An ID

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.
(Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act 1)

Yes, but there are also many things in philosophy that are not dreamt of in heaven or on earth.
(Lichtenberg, German physicist and wit, 1780–1825)

A unique legacy

> There is no finality to philosophizing. There are no answers, only the way.
> (Karl Jaspers, The way to wisdom, 1951)

Imagine a book in which the basic attributes of the heroine – her age, height, color of eyes, history, sexual preferences – are told only towards the middle of the story. Well, you do not have to imagine: you are holding such a book in your hands right now. Only now am I coming to tell the history of philosophy, its attractions, its proponents and its detractors. Why? Because this is gossip. Gossip is interesting, but when the protagonist is a conceptual structure, it shouldn't come first. So, this part is an acquaintance, often on a light note. Following a short history, I will discuss the allure that philosophy holds for some people, and the repulsion it exerts on others.

Modern theater is a Greek invention. So too are democracy, axiomatic geometry, and the concept of proof. It is astonishing how a small group of people, over a few centuries, managed to chart the course of Western culture for millennia to come. Alongside these achievements, the ancient Greeks also left at the doorstep of humanity a peculiar inheritance, a unique way of thinking that was unknown before and has since found no equal — philosophy.

The term *philosophy* was coined by a mathematician. It was Pythagoras (570–496 BCE), a Greek who spent most of his life in the Italian peninsula. He meant the name literally—*the love of wisdom* (*philo* means *love*, and *sophia* is *wisdom*). Any contemplation of the world, not for practical purposes but for the sake of deeper understanding, was "philosophy". In Pythagoras' time, most of those who considered themselves philosophers were speculating physicists. Is everything made of water? (Thales, the great polymath from Miletus, thought so.) Or perhaps air? (This was the claim of Thales' student, Anaximenes.) Or fire? (Such was the doctrine of Heraclitus.) Leucippus and his student Democritus developed an atomic theory of matter, while others debated whether matter could come into existence out of nothing.

A gradual shift began shortly thereafter. From studying the world, philosophers turned their focus to thinking about knowledge of the world. Xenophanes, a contemporary of Pythagoras, was the first to articulate skeptical ideas: Can we truly know anything for certain?

The art of doubt was cultivated by the Sophists, teachers of rhetoric whose craft flourished in the fifth century BCE. They also shaped the concept of philosophy as self-reflection and critical inquiry into the concepts of the investigator. However, the beginnings of philosophy in its modern sense are traditionally attributed to Socrates (470–399 BCE), who elevated the investigation of concepts to an art form. “Socrates brought philosophy down from the heavens to us,” testified Cicero (106–43 BCE), the Roman thinker and statesman.

The philosophical legacy of the Greeks was transmitted to Western culture primarily through the writings of Socrates’ disciple, Plato (427–347 BCE), and Plato’s student, Aristotle (384–322 BCE). Aristotle’s works served as the bedrock of Western thought for approximately 1,500 years, until the end of the Middle Ages. Even during this period, when scientific thought lay relatively dormant, philosophy continued to thrive, captivating generation after generation and evolving into a multifaceted discipline.

Yet its mystery remained. Whichever way one turns it, there are riddles. How does a field that “leaves everything as it was” – so testifies Wittgenstein - achieve such widespread popularity? What kind of insights are expected from a field that still grapples with the same questions posed 2,500 years ago, with progress limited to more sophisticated formulations? No other field devotes as much of its research to the words of its pioneers. In no other academic department but philosophy will you find so many courses named after individual thinkers rather than subjects. In mathematics, there is no course titled

"Pythagoras", in philosophy there is a course titled "Plato". In physics, you won't find experts on Einstein, while in philosophy departments, you'll encounter experts on Wittgenstein.

Best is to leave the phrasing of these questions to a philosopher. Here they are in the words of Karl Jaspers (1883–1969), a German existentialist thinker, from his book *Introduction to Philosophy*:

> What philosophy is and what its value might be are matters of dispute. Some expect extraordinary revelations from it, while others dismiss it as objectless speculation. Some regard it with reverence as a profoundly meaningful endeavor by exceptional individuals, while others scorn it as the unnecessary musings of dreamy people. … Unlike the sciences, philosophical thought does not progress. We are undoubtedly far ahead of the Greek physician Hippocrates, but we are likely no more advanced than Plato.

The philosopher, says Jaspers, is a "lover of wisdom" rather than a "possessor of wisdom." In other words, the philosopher seeks knowledge but does not claim to hold it. The value of philosophy lies not in finding the truth but in the search for it.

Strange, you must admit. Is there any other field in which the questions are not meant to be solved? Philosophy is the only field in which questions matter for their own sake. The tacit assumption is that the central problems will never be solved.

The allure of philosophy is itself a puzzle on its own. Science offers the joy of understanding, and of communal research. Philosophy offers only unease. "In philosophy, it is always better to ask than to answer, for an answer might do injustice to the question," said Wittgenstein (*Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*). Everything remains open to eternal debate – a situation that, to a scientist, is a cruel and unusual punishment.

> Among the serious philosophers I know, it is universally agreed that when they read a new paper, they not only find infuriating errors, but the entire premise strikes them as fundamentally flawed.
> (Stanley Cavell, Must We Mean What We Say?)

Science is done nowadays in teams. About 75% of math papers are collaborative. In philosophy joint papers are a rarity – about 20%. Why? Because there is no objective subject matter. It is hard for two philosophers to agree on ideas.

Stagnation

Any definition of philosophy must explain one of its most conspicuous properties: stagnation, the total lack of progress. Here are some testimonies about this property.

> Philosophy makes no progress. (L. Wittgenstein 1930)

> In mathematics and natural science, reason has made continuous progress; in metaphysics, it has not been able to take a single step forward. (Kant, Kritik)

> In philosophy we are still where the ancients were. (Arthur Schopenhauer, Parerga and Paralipomena, 1851).

> I do not think that philosophy has made any progress since Plato. (G.E. Moore, cited in Malcolm 1958).

> The fact that many philosophical problems remain unsolved after thousands of years should be an encouragement, not a discouragement. (Russell 1912).

Behind the despair, in all of these you sense a tinge of pride. "God can't create a stone so heavy She can't lift. We can ask questions we cannot answer." (DEF) offers an explanation: as long as a philosophical problem survives (with its philosophical aura) it is not studied factually. And no problem can be solved without inspection of reality.

The philosophical spell – the story of Ludwig Wittgenstein

> If someone were to say that my work is of no use to physicists, I would not be surprised in the least. In fact, I should only be surprised if it were."
> (Wittgenstein's Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics, ed. Cora Diamond, p. 278)

Some people swear by philosophy as an infinite source of wisdom, others see it as nonsense and vanity. In at least one case, this conflict was embodied within a single person - Ludwig Wittgenstein. He is quoted in this book extensively, for three reasons. One is that quoting puts you on safe ground. Another is that he was preoccupied with the same themes dealt with in this book –

(1) Circularity, in its "language as the jail of our knowledge" formulation,

(2) The private access we have (or rather, do not have) to our inner minds.

The third use I will have of Wittgenstein is as a human shield. If he is allowed to slander philosophy and philosophers, why can't I. As mentioned above, my verdict is less extreme – just the philosophical air, not the problems, originates in a baseless fear.

But let me return to Wittgenstein's story. It is hard to remain indifferent to the intensity of this man, and to his anguish. Because suffer he did, almost every day of his existence. His diaries contain frequent thoughts of suicide, an act taken by three of his four brothers. The remaining brother, Paul, had his own version of misery. He lost his right arm in Russian captivity in WWI, but did not give up his dream of becoming a concert pianist. He used his enormous inheritance to commission concertos for one hand from the best composers of his time, and had a hard time accommodating his style to their demands. They often did not think highly of his musicianship.

Wittgenstein wrestled throughout his career with a love-hate relationship with philosophy, just as he struggled with everything else in his life. He claimed that he engaged with philosophy only to free himself from it—and to free his fellow human beings from its burden. Philosophy, he argued, is a disease.

> In my book (referring to Philosophical Investigations, published posthumously), I claim I can leave a philosophical problem when I wish. This is a lie; I cannot do so.

So he confided to his friend and student Rush Rhees.

Wittgenstein in a more cheerful mood

In 1908 he traveled from Vienna to Manchester, to study aeronautics, but upon the advice of his teacher in Germany, Gottlob Frege (1848–1925), he moved to Cambridge to study under Russell. During World War I, while a prisoner of war in Italy, he compiled his ideas into a book — a feat he never managed to repeat. At the suggestion of G.E. Moore, the book was titled *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, in homage to Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. Today, it is simply known as the *Tractatus*, Latin for "treatise." It is a lean book in two senses. It is very short (80 pages in the first edition), and its style is austere. It consists of seven chapters, each opening with a proposition, followed by interpretations, which lead to interpretations of the interpretations, and so on. The opening proposition is: “The world is everything that is the case.” The second chapter revolves around the statement: “What is the case—a fact—is the existence of states of affairs.” The third opens with “A logical picture of facts is a thought.” The fourth: “A thought is a proposition with sense.” The seventh and final proposition stands alone, with no interpretation: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent.”

The style is abrupt, fragmented and ascetic, mirroring the war that was going on outside, or perhaps a war within. The aim was to solve all philosophical problems, by declaring them meaningless, because they are not testable. The concluding sentence is that the entire book is in error, and had better been replaced by silence. Nobody protested – a genius needs not be consistent.

What was his secret? How did he become the philosophical prophet of the 20th century? Was it his writing style, his personality, or his ideas? Probably a combination of the three. The air of sainthood, the intensity and peremptoriness had their effect on the people close to him. They viewed him with awe. "God has arrived. I met him on the 5.15 train", so wrote to his wife the economist John Maynard Keynes. That was after he participated in a delegation of Cambridge scholars that received Wittgenstein upon his arrival from Europe in 1929 (marking the beginning of his second philosophical period).

> He was in many ways very insecure, continually feeling guilty, continually criticizing himself… And yet he had the authority of a prophet. He did not argue, he pronounced.
> (Fania Pascal, recollection, published in Rhees’ *Recollections of Wittgenstein*)

What made the *Tractatus* so famous? In part, the oracle-like style. Terse and peremptory. No arguments, just statements.

> 1. The world is the totality of facts, not of things.
>
> 4.01 A proposition is a picture of reality.
>
> 4.031 A proposition is a model of reality as we imagine it.
>
> 6.421 Ethics and aesthetics are one.

I wonder where he got 6.421. And the famous sentence sealing the book, blocking any possible further discussion:

> 7. What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.

Meaning that this sentence, too, shouldn't be said. The readiness to accept this sentence as wisdom reflects on the culture of the philosophical community – the leeway they take. The impression is that of unfathomable depth, mysterious wisdom.

Wittgenstein argued that the world consists of facts, described by propositions. Language is a picture of the world. Just as the world consists of “atomic facts,” indivisible and fundamental, so too are sentences in language composed of atomic propositions. For example, “Today is Tuesday, and the cat is black”.

This interpretation of language is monastic, mirroring Wittgenstein's asceticism in his personal life. The claim: one can only state atomic facts and connect them with logical terms like "and," "or," and "not." The classical philosophical problems, like mind-body, cannot be expressed this way, and hence are meaningless. The only way to do philosophy, he claimed, is to let someone speak about philosophy and then show them that their words are meaningless. By this, he believed he had solved, by cutting the Gordian knot, all philosophical problems.

The pretension of depth is not the main reason for Wittgenstein's central stand in modern philosophy. The reason he became a biblical prophet was that he touched the exposed nerves of the main philosophical engine – circularity. This has two facets.

(a) The jail of language. How we cannot escape its cage, because we cannot think not using words. This, by the way, was not an original idea – his teacher, Frege, dwelt on it some 40 years earlier.! One cannot step outside one's way of understanding. The question of whether the world truly matches the way we speak about it is therefore unanswerable. Wittgenstein's solution - abandon the question altogether and focus on describing the use of concepts. Language, he claimed in his later philosophy, is autonomous. Its structure and grammar cannot be justified by comparison with the world but can only be examined in themselves. "Coherence theory of truth" – do you remember?

(b) The task of knowing our own minds is circular once we assume identity between a mental event and its knowledge. Its assumption leads to "private language" – the impossibility of such was a cornerstone of his second period. The conclusion, "don't look at the meaning of a concept, look at the use", is an alternative formulation of our rule – look from without, not from within, look from aside, at the use.

Finishing the *Tractatus* marked a personal crisis, possibly a delayed effect of his war experience. He felt he had completed his mission and sought a new direction. He distributed his vast inheritance among his siblings and became a teacher in a rural Alpine school. There, he spent miserable years battling what he saw as his students' obstinacy and lack of understanding, but actually he fought his own nature. As with himself, he was harsh with his students. Following a violent incident that left a student physically harmed, he was dismissed. Years later, he sought out his former students, now grown, to ask their forgiveness—They refused.

He considered becoming a monk (he was of Jewish descent, but had undergone a Christian religious transformation during the war), but fortunately, his sister invited him to design her house. For two years, he collaborated with a renowned architect, teaching himself architecture in the process. Members of the Vienna circle tried to engage him in their meetings. He agreed to participate in some meetings, in which he sat with his back to the others while loudly reciting Rabindranath Tagore's poems.

Eventually, in 1929 he caved in and accepted a position at Cambridge. In 1947, he retired and attempted to complete his second major work, *Philosophical Investigations*. Like the *Tractatus*, it was a fragmented collection of reflections. It was published posthumously in 1953. In his later period, as in the first, he focused on the relationship between language and reality. Are they structured similarly? In the *Tractatus*, he wrote that every proposition has the form "This is how things stand" (e.g., "The cat is black"). In *Philosophical Investigations*, he recanted, arguing that this structure is imposed by language, not by reality. Again, fear of circularity:

> This is a sentence we repeat to ourselves countless times. We believe we are following the nature of the thing, but in fact, we are merely following the form in which we perceive it. We are trapped in a picture and cannot escape it, for it lies within our language.

This "picture" is an illusion created by language. The sentence *I am in pain* resembles *I am fat* in structure, leading us to falsely assume they share the same status. In fact, Wittgenstein argued in *Philosophical Investigations*, *I am in pain* does not describe a situation but is more akin to a cry of pain. Language misleads us into thinking pain is an object in the world. To escape the enchantment of language, one must not focus on the meaning of words but on their use. This is precisely the switch from being inside (a cry of pain is that of the insider) to outside (the describer, observing my reaction, the one I call "pain").

Have all these added a layer to human knowledge? Probably not. Skepticism is not knowledge. It is a struggle to unravel the web you have spun around yourself.

Enjoying defamation

Ha, the joy of slandering. The cousin of *Schadenfreude*. Not in vain did Plato and Aristotle equate laughter with derision. Derision means "you are empty, there is no need for me to expend energy to decipher your intentions – you are too stupid to cause me harm." Generation after generation, philosophy has been everybody's punching bag - scientists, men of letters, and above all – philosophers themselves. Why does philosophy elicit such a strong response? Probably because of the presumptuousness, the empty promise of "higher (or deeper) understanding".

It didn't take long from the birth of philosophy to its first parody. In his play *The Clouds*, written in 423 BCE, Aristophanes mocks the Sophists and mistakenly associates Socrates with them. In the play, Socrates is portrayed as a cunning, greedy old man who runs a school of argumentation, distorts logical reasoning to win cases, starves his students, and steals food from other schools. He invents his own mythologies, and his arguments are ridiculous.

Since then, mockery has not ceased. Insults such as "There is no absurdity so foolish that it hasn't been said by some philosopher at some point" (Cicero), "Philosophy is a path with many roads leading from nowhere to nothing" (Ambrose Bierce, 1842–1914), "Philosophy is meaningless answers to unsolvable problems" (Henry Adams, 1838–1918), and "When a philosopher says something true, it is trivial; when they say something non-trivial, it is false" (Carl Friedrich Gauss, 1777–1855), and even worse, abound.

The physics Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg was a determined foe. In his youth he devoted years to the subject, only to be disillusioned. In his book *Dreams of a final theory* he devoted a long vituperative chapter to philosophy. The only benefit in reading a philosopher, so he claimed, is that it deflects you from reading the work of other philosophers.

> The insights of philosophers have occasionally benefited physicists, but generally in a negative fashion—by protecting them from the preconceptions of other philosophers.

And then there is, of course, Wittgenstein, who claimed again and again that all he himself said was meaningless.

> My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as nonsensical." (Tractatus 6.54)

Russell had a strange claim –

> Philosophy is to be studied not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions... but rather for the sake of the questions themselves.

Philosophers view both meaninglessness and unattainability as an indication of depth. Why? Because both mean hanging in air, an abyss below you. Abysses look deep.

> Philosophy is a perfectly useless enterprise—except perhaps for confusing those who believe in it. (Paul Valery, poet)

Let me conclude this chapter with a list of slanders. Just to clarify that I am not alone (and for my own enjoyment).

> I know of no one who has participated actively in the advance of physics in the postwar period whose research has been significantly helped by the work of philosophers (Steven Weinberg, Dreams of a final theory)

> The philosophy of science is about as useful to scientists as ornithology is to birds. (Richard Feynman)

The insights of philosophers have occasionally benefited physicists, but generally in a negative fashion—by protecting them from the preconceptions of other philosophers. (Weinberg, Dreams of a final theory)

At best, philosophy of science is a pleasing gloss on the history and discoveries of science. (Weinberg)

After a few years' infatuation with philosophy as an undergraduate I became disenchanted. The insights of the philosophers I studied seemed murky and inconsequential compared with the dazzling successes of physics and mathematics. It may seem to the reader (especially if the reader is a professional philosopher) that a scientist who is as out of tune with the philosophy of science as I should tiptoe gracefully past the subject and leave it to experts. (Weinberg)

Alongside the surprising effectiveness of mathematics, another equally puzzling phenomenon is the unreasonable ineffectiveness of philosophy. (Weinberg)

Confusion, absurdity, and perplexity are undoubtedly present in philosophy.
(Peter Strawson, Analysis and Metaphysics, p. 9)

Most assertions and problems in philosophical works are not false but meaningless… The deepest problems are not problems at all. (Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 4.003)

From time to time since then I have tried to read current work on the philosophy of science. Some of it I found to be written in a jargon so impenetrable that I can only think that it aimed at impressing those who confound obscurity with profundity. (Weinberg)

After surveying three decades of professional writings in the philosophy of science, I can conclude that these almost arcane discussions, verging on the scholastic, could have interested only the smallest number of practicing scientists. (George Gale)

Why is philosophical discussion significant if it destroys everything interesting, grand, and important? Because everything we destroy is nothing but a house of cards. (Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, Section 118)

There is a surprising unanimity among physicists that philosophy has nothing to say to them. They do not read philosophy or feel the need to read it. I have never had a conversation about philosophy with any of my colleagues in physics departments. (Weinberg)

What is the difference between mathematics and philosophy? In mathematics, someone important is someone who said something important. In philosophy something important is something said by somebody important.
(Azriel Levy, Israeli mathematician)

The illusion of depth

Philosophical arguments are never complex. The most involved philosophical discourse cannot compete even with simple mathematical proofs in the number of beads on its thread of ideas. Philosophers do not pride themselves on complexity, but on depth. Indeed, depth is not conditioned on complexity. For example, Frege's definition of mathematical proof (I will say a few words about it later) is profound despite its simplicity. But the sensation of depth in philosophy is special. We never reach its bottom, because it is deceptive. It is the result of fear of circularity, which is unfounded. The kitten in the picture stands on firm ground and still believes there is an abyss beneath him. Is there anything deeper than an infinite abyss? Solid land is one simple operation away – separation, but philosophers celebrate its absence.

For this reason, while non-pure problems do not evaporate upon separation, they often lose their sensation of depth. We saw this, for example, in the definition of 'truth'.

The only thing we have to fear is fear itself. (Franklin D. Roosevelt in his inaugural address, 1933)

Yet another cat (very much there): in comics the protagonists sometimes do not fall until they look down and realize that the ground has disappeared under their feet.

Two "non-sequitur" claims

I sometimes wonder: what do philosophers expect as solutions to their problems? How will a solution to the mind-body problem look like? In mathematics, old legendary problems are solved from time to time. The solution is invariably extremely complex, and requires new, beautiful ideas. Philosophy, as noted, is never complex, only "deep". A philosophical problem will never have a complex solution, because if the solution consists of a hundred steps, a paralyzing debate will rage already on the first.

The resilience of the questions testifies that the fault lies already in their formulation. They are *non-sequiturs*, namely unanswerable because of some inherent mistake. Had they really pointed at a segment of reality, investigating that segment would produce some progress. This never happens. Every philosopher is sure that he is contributing to the advancement of the field – that's why he works so hard. Yet looking back at the last 2500 years he himself will find no essential progress.

> It takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place.
> (The Red Queen, Through the looking glass, Lewis Caroll)

> We are no wiser than the ancients. But there is one thing we do know, namely, that we are not any wiser.
> *(Wittgenstein. Culture and Value*, p. 7e in the 1980 Blackwell edition)

So, there is no way around it - the problems are flawed. In what way? There are two possibilities: meaninglessness, and erroneous premises. Wittgenstein championed the first in his first period, and the second in his second period. In either case he dismissed all problems. The Gordian knot is thereby cut, the show is over, everybody home. Amazingly, this empty reasoning caught. People like cutting Gordian knots, and crave idols, that save them the effort of thinking. The applause is a result of laziness. More than an observation it is a wish, of getting rid of the puzzles in one swipe.

The second *non-sequitur* claim, that of faulty conceptual structure, is more sophisticated. For one thing, it does not claim one sweeping error. Every problem originates in its own special mistake. A famous case is the mind-body problem. Let us leave Wittgenstein for a while, and switch to his disciple, Gilbert Ryle. In his book "The concept of mind" (1954) he claims that the problem is born out of a simple, very stupid mistake: we watch a person's pain, will, thoughts – all physically manifested. These are the components from which we construct the notion of his "mind". But not realizing this, we are looking for the "ghost in the machine", the mind within, and ask "but where is the mind?" The answer is – it is all of those, combined. Ryle calls it a "category mistake", and compares it to a person visiting a university campus, observing the buildings, the students and the professors, and then asking "but where is the university?" The meaning of "Smith's mind" is the physical components from which the concept is constructed. Observed from the outside, the mind of a person is a collection of his reactions.

Both *non-sequitur* claims are problematic. The assertion of meaninglessness fails because the problems nevertheless seem meaningful. The other claim, of veiled errors, fail because they do not explain why the errors persist. The lifespan of a mistake should be measured in minutes, perhaps hours—not thousands of years.

So, indeed, what do philosophers expect as solutions to their conundrums? The answer is simple: they do not expect solutions.

> Jacob is hired to sit at the gate of the Shtetl (a small Jewish town in pre-WWII Eastern Europe) and announce the arrival of the Messiah when he comes. He complains about his low salary. "Yes", they agree, "but consider the tenure!"

Some definitions of philosophy in the literature

The few definitions below are taken from *Philosophy bites,* an anthology collected by Edmonds and Warburton (2010) https://www.amazon.com/Philosophy-Bites-David-Edmonds/dp/0199576327. (Of course, the title is there because its claim is controversial.) See if you can extract from them a coherent picture. I cannot. To me it looks like one big mishmash. I bring it here only as testimony for the lack of any structure in the existing perception of the field.

> *C. Grayling*: Philosophy is enquiry into all those things which we do not fully understand.
>
> *Brian Leiter*: Philosophy is concerned with foundational or fundamental questions about the nature of everything else that human beings do: how we live, how we ought to live, what art is, what we know, whether we know anything, what science is, and so on. In that sense philosophy really is the most capacious of all the disciplines even if it isn't, as Kant thought, the queen of the sciences.
>
> *Ray Monk*: Philosophy is the attempt to understand ourselves and the world.
>
> *Thomas Hurka*: Philosophy is abstract thought guided by principles of logic and ideals of precision in thought and argumentation about the most general issues concerning human beings and the world and our place in the world.

Chat GPT fares here better than the human attempts. Here is what she has to say.

> Philosophy is the study of fundamental questions about existence, knowledge, values, reason, mind, and language. It seeks to understand the nature of reality and our place within it through critical thinking, logical analysis, and systematic reflection. At its core, philosophy asks questions like:
>
> - What is real? (Metaphysics)
>
> - How do we know what we know? (Epistemology)
>
> - What is the right thing to do? (Ethics)
>
> - What is beauty? (Aesthetics)
>
> - What is the nature of reasoning? (Logic)
>
> Philosophy isn't just about finding definitive answers—it's often more about exploring the questions deeply, examining assumptions, and clarifying concepts. It influences many other fields, including science, politics, art, and religion, by providing tools to think critically and question established beliefs.

It looks like Chat thinks highly of the field.

Sophistry

Some more inanities. Just for acquaintance with the field.

From time to time, philosophers anoint a fashionable genius, who satisfies their hunger for the stamp of “science.” The "new" contribution is usually of one of two types – a re-formulation of a circularity problem, or a solution to a circularity problem. Sometimes the result is sophistry. The term comes from the Sophists, whom we have already met - a loose group of scholars, who roamed the streets of Athens, and taught, for pay, rhetoric and the art of persuasion. In modern terminology, their art was Talmudic quibbling.

Saul Kripke (1940 – 2022) was one such hailed genius. He started his career as a child prodigy - he read all of Shakespeare's texts by the age of 9 (would you be happy if your child did that?) and wrote a mathematical paper by the age of 17. Here are three of his claims to fame.

Wittgenstein's paradox

There are episodes in philosophy that make me tear my hair out. One of those is a thought experiment, devised by Wittgenstein, that is considered a clever paradox. Suppose your friend tells you, all excited, that he has just come up with a wonderful numerical sequence – "Can you guess the rule?" he challenges you, and writes the sequence – 1,2,3,4, … When he reaches the100-th term you look at him incredulously, and predict that the next term is 100. "No!" he exclaims triumphantly. "It is 13!" What? You ask, how did you get that? "You did not understand my rule", he says, with a smirk. "The n-th term is n, apart from multiples of 100, for which it is 13. The sequence goes …97,98,99,13,101,102,…,199,13,201,…".

Wittgenstein came up with this "paradox" in relation to the game of meaning, one of his favorites. His original sequence was more complex, but it is just another point against him that he did not put it to the simplest form. The moral of the paradox is that no finite number of examples can determine an infinite sequence. What he cared about was not sequences, but language. No finite lore of examples can dictate the rules of a language.

Here is what Chat GPT has to say about the reception of the paradox:

> There is no exact number of papers written on Wittgenstein’s paradox—especially as it has become a central issue in philosophy of language, mind, epistemology, and metaphilosophy—but the number is in the thousands, easily.

Kripke `solved` the paradox by declaring that indeed there is no way to extract rules from finitely many examples, but there are community practices of assigning meaning (completing the rule from the given data). He applied it to language – no finite experience with samples of a language can teach you the whole picture, but there are accepted rules.

I mention this exchange of ideas mainly to show readers where their taxes go, and what your child is learning if he takes philosophy. But in this book I am committed to understanding not the value of the discourse, but the source of philosophical impression. In this case it comes from the switch of standpoint – we start being inside, playing the game of "learning language from samples", to looking from the outside, to study the rules of how the meaning is eventually chosen. Since I suffer, both from the paradox and the `solution', I exempt myself from proceeding with the discussion.

Naming and necessity

A famous argument, appearing in Kripke's book *Naming and necessity (1972),* is aimed at showing that the mind cannot be reduced to physical terms. Kripke is a *non-physicalist*. Here it is:

1. The identity "Pain = brain signals firing" is not a necessary truth, so says Kripke - it is conceivable (and thus possible) that pain could exist without nerve signals. An alien with no brain can feel pain.

2. Therefore, pain is not identical to signal firing.

Hah, there goes what remains of my hair. Part 1 is nothing but the `direct knowledge' hypothesis, the assumption that we know our mental events directly from their mere existence - an error we keep warning against. Just the pernicious *Cogito,* that we shall castigate below. The guy knows about his pain without needing to observe anything in the world. But even if the *cogito* sin was not performed – let the reader judge whether Kripke's argument adds wisdom.

The Liar Paradox

A famous contribution of Kripke concerns the Liar Paradox. The paradox considers the sentence

> L="This sentence is false".

The truth value of L is the opposite of itself – L is true if and only if it is false. A paradox. The faulty underlying assumption (there is such behind every paradox) is that every sentence falls from heaven with a truth value tag attached to its collar. This is a mistake. You must work to get the truth value. That is, you should compare the sentence with reality. This is how the notion of truth works in the real world.

In this case the reality to be compared with is the truth value of L (this is what the sentence speaks about, so this is what should be confronted with the sentence), so to find the truth value you first must find the truth value itself – a circular task. Thus there is no truth value, hence no paradox. Kripke's approach (like others before him) is formal – it constructs truth values of sentences step by step, each built on its predecessors. This way no cycle ever appears. Sounds mathematical, hence impressive, but what is the value of such a scheme? None, this is not how we assign truth values in real life. It will never cross the boundary from philosophy to reality.

Two cultures

Charles Percy Snow, a scientist and novelist, delivered in 1959 a Cambridge lecture that was later extended to a book, and gained fame, "The two cultures". It confronted the scientific culture with that of the humanities. The message was that if only poets knew the second law of thermodynamics and scientists would read Shakespeare sonnets, the world would be salvaged. (The second law is that in a system not exchanging energy with the outside, entropy increases, meaning that the order decreases with time.) The second condition, that scientists will be immersed in the humanistic way of thinking, seems in these turbulent days more relevant than ever. We must have firm values and protect them, or else machines will take over with uncontrolled consequences.

In hindsight, the book did not have any impact. The name and the hope it embodies are attractive, but that's it. It is often cited, but scientists do not read Shakespeare more than before, and poets allude to the increase of entropy, but only as a gimmick. There is no real affinity – and this I write as an author of a book on the similarity between the mechanisms generating beauty in math and poetry. An artist will not gain much from knowing science, and a scientist will be enriched by art, but no more so than laymen.

The two cultures are dissimilar, and will remain so. Here is a list of differences.

1. In science, there is usually general consent about quality – disputes on value are relatively rare. In the humanities there are no clear criteria for quality. The result is a lot of academic politics.

2. Science is for the young. The Fields medal, which is the mathematical analogue of the Nobel Prize, is restricted to people younger than 40. In mathematics most of the major discoveries were made by young people. Galois (1811 – 1832) laid the foundations of modern algebra in a will he wrote the night before he was killed in a pointless duel at the age of 20. Newton invented calculus at the age of 24. When he was 23 years old, Kurt Gödel proved a theorem that changed the course of mathematics – not every true fact about numbers can be proved from the standard axioms. A young brain can form new patterns. In the humanities, experience is an advantage.

3. Science is democratic. In the humanities it is often more important who said, than what he said – breeding the strange phenomenon of experts on the writings of previous thinkers.

4. In the humanities knowledge grows like stalactites, in slow motion. A scientific discovery arrives (following hard work and long hatching) in a flash illumination.

5. Science progresses rapidly. The physics of ancient Greece is of interest to historians, not to physicists. Life wisdom, by contrast, is timeless: open an ancient parables book and you will find wisdom relevant to this day.

6. Science, in particular mathematics, is constructed layer upon layer. The buildings are often very tall. A mathematical proof, written explicitly, can fill entire books. To learn General Relativity, you need first to read books, both in physics and in math. Philosophical ideas often relate to previous ones – but usually by way of rebellion, of the form "Yes, but…"

This is a meta-book on a meta-subject: not in philosophy, but about it. In this section I will go one step higher: asking not about its nature, but about its appeal. What attracts young people to a field that mainly promises frustration? There are at least three sources of allure.

A Sisyphic fate

A man may work from sun to sun,
A woman's work is never done.

Philosophy means to be on the way. Its questions are more essential than its answers, and every answer becomes a new question.
(Karl Jaspers, Philosophy is for every man)

A philosopher's work is never done — not because every answer breeds a new question (as Jaspers claims) – this is true for every domain of knowledge. It is because he is caught in a bind. His real task is to observe reality, more specifically – human thought. This he should do in an experimental way, like in any other worldly phenomenon. But an answer achieved by observation is instantly discarded – this was not the poet's intention. Philosophy is not about facts. Philosophers will never admit that their profession is empirical, and that the answers to their problems are descriptive. They are damned if they use observation, and more damned if they don't.

Consider, for example, definitions. Diogenes Laërtius, in his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (3rd century CE, Book VI, 40), recounts an amusing episode. Plato's `definition' of `humans' was "A man is a featherless biped". It is not clear how seriously his disciples took it, but 600 years earlier the definition met the wit of another Diogenes, the one who dwelt in a barrel, and carried a lamp in daytime to look for an honest man. He brought a chicken, plucked its feathers, and said "here is your man".

A definition is not only meant to delineate scope, but also to give a clue as to the nature of its object. It should be done by observation of the handling of the concept. Here is another Example: "knowledge". Plato defined it as "justified true belief". The "justified" precludes fortuitous hit of target. For example, somebody who thinks that the fourth president of the US was James Monroe (it was James Madison, Monroe was the fifth) "knows" the first name of the fourth president, but not really.

This is philosophy at its worst. The `definition' does not have much to do with the way knowing is recognized. The delineation (scope) of "knowledge" is largely accurate, but non-informative. Plato and his disciples would have fared better if they tried not to delineate, but to observe. For example, to realize when does Alexandros say that Nikos knows that the cat is on the mat. Perhaps Nikos was told by somebody whose authority he respects, perhaps he saw the cat. The formal definition is not informative. For example, it is impossible to draw from it an essential point – that knowledge (as opposed to guessing or predicting) is engraved in the brain by past events.

Generality

I feel the earth move under my feet (Carole King)

"What is justice?" is a philosophical question; "Is it just to prioritize human well-being over that of animals?" less so; "Is it moral to keep a pet when there are starving people in the world?" is even less philosophical; and "Which is better to have, a dog or a cat?" is not philosophical at all.

Philosophy prefers generalities. This is why it studies values rather than specific decisions. The more general a problem is, the more philosophical flavor it carries. Some see generality as the very definition of philosophy. While science deals with particulars, philosophy—so goes the boast—deals with "totalities." It seeks the general basis of phenomena. Among all definitions of philosophy, this is one of the least accurate, since every abstraction involves generalization. Thinking means generalizing. And yet, the persistence with which this trait recurs in definitions offered indicates that it contains some truth.

The reason is the hierarchy of implications. The more general a decision is, the less likely it is to follow from other values, and the more likely it is for the ground to disappear from under our feet. It is like the worldview of the ancients: they believed that the Earth stood on four elephants; the four elephants stood on a giant turtle; the turtle was supported by a cosmic serpent; and the serpent supported himself by holding his own tail in his mouth. The question *what the Earth stands on* is only slightly philosophical; *what do the elephants stand on* is a bit more; *what does the turtle stand on*—even more; and *what supports the serpent* is a thoroughly philosophical question. Even the serpent's solution to his dilemma is philosophical: it is the solution of Baron Munchausen, who pulls himself up by his own hair.

Matter and time are so fundamental that they cannot be defined using more basic concepts. For that reason, they are the subject of philosophical inquiry. If a value or concept can be grounded in other values or definitions, then there is solid ground to stand on. But if the value or concept is too general to be supported by other values, a sense of hanging in the air arises. That is, a philosophical feeling.

Clarification of concepts

Socratic dialogues (written by his pupil Plato) are literary marvels – pleasure guaranteed. But why do they feel philosophical? Let us take as an example a dialogue called "Gorgias".

> **Socrates:**
> Tell me, Callicles — do you believe that justice is merely a human convention, something agreed upon by people? Or is there a natural form of justice?
>
> **Callicles:**
> In my view, Socrates, there is a justice according to nature — and it does not always match the laws made by men. The weak gather together and create laws to protect themselves, but in nature, the strong rule, and those who are superior should dominate those who are inferior.
>
> **Socrates:**
> So you're saying that true justice is the dominance of the stronger?
>
> **Callicles:**
> Absolutely. That is nature's law. It's not right for the better and braver to be shackled by the rules of lesser men.
>
> **Socrates:**
> Interesting. But tell me — does the strong man truly benefit himself by indulging every desire?

Here comes an argument about hedonism – is it good, or bad? Socrates, not surprisingly, recommends moderation.

> A life of unrestrained pleasure, the very thing you praise, would be like a leaky jar—always needing to be refilled, never satisfied.

A beautiful metaphor, old Soccie. Beautiful and wise. But remember - there are people who like leaking jars.

a priori

As I already wrote, there are chapters in the book of philosophy that cause me acute suffering. Mainly, when there is a large gap between wisdom and pretense. One such chapter is about the notion of *a priori.* Two philosophers, Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804) and Willard Quine (1908-2000) made their names through it.

How do you know that if the cat does not (not sit on the mat) then it sits on the mat? Namely, that "not-not" is "yes"? And how does a computer know it? The second question is more illuminating, since a computer can be only observed from the side. So, we observe, together with it. We see that the wiring in the computer is arranged in such a way that this tautology holds. The computer watches its behavior and its wiring, from which it deduces that this is its rule. No big deal.

This is a logical tautology. Logical tautologies are known *a priori*, meaning that they do not necessitate observation to be reached. They are true by mere meaning. You do not need to look at the cat to know that he either sleeps or does not sleep. Of course, you must observe something else – the wiring of your brain, or your conceptual behavior. The problem is about something, and this something must be observed.

There are also semantic tautologies, that do not depend on form, but on content. They are usually a matter of definition. The popular example in academic philosophy is "all bachelors are unmarried". Semantic and logical tautologies are said to be "analytic". "Analytic" means trivial, definitional, empty of real content. Its opposite is called "synthetic", which means following from observation. The philosopher who brought these two terms to philosophy's center stage was Immanuel Kant. His main claim to fame is spotting statements that (so he claimed) are synthetic (not semantic or logical tautologies) and yet they are *a priori*, namely must be true. Notably, our perception of space is such, and so is the existence of causality. We shall reach his argument in the chapter "self-lifters", two chapters ahead.

Why are these notions philosophical, and where does their attributed depth come from? All problems of the form "Is it in me or in the world" look deep. In this case – "is the knowledge of logical tautologies innate in my brain?" or "Is my brain programmed to handle spatial phenomena?" is of this type. Such problems pull the rug from beneath one's feet. An abyss opens – how are you sure this is so? By what argument? And abysses are deep. On the other hand, no programmer will think that writing a program that handles spatial phenomena is deep, or will find it hard to make his program examine the wiring that leads to logical tautologies.

Two dogmas

The next chapter in the history of philosophy is mainly instructive from the point of view of the politics of the humanities. Its protagonist is a paper that is unanimously hailed as "the most important development in modern philosophy". Here is its praise in ChatGPT.

> Few philosophical papers have enjoyed the afterlife of W. V. O. Quine's *"Two Dogmas of Empiricism"* (1951). It is routinely presented as a decisive rupture: the collapse of logical empiricism, the end of the analytic–synthetic distinction.

The first dogma Quine attacks is the sharp distinction between analytic and synthetic. For example, the truth of "all bachelors are unmarried" depends on knowledge acquired by observation - the definitions of "married" and "bachelor". It is not completely analytic.

Wise? Not really. There is no question that you need to know the meaning of the concepts. That's the whole point of the *a priori* argument. And what does Quine intend to convey – that "All bachelors are unmarried" has the same status as "*All bachelors are unhappy"*? This was The Grice–Strawson reply in (Grice and Strawson 1956). I hope the reader forgives me for not going into this polemic. It is so inane.

The second dogma is that every meaningful statement can be reduced to immediate sense experience (this is called "verificationism"). Quine said -

> Individual sentences are not tested in isolation
>
> Experience bears on whole theories or systems of belief

I cannot understand the depth, so I will excuse myself again, and leave it to the reader to form an opinion. I am only obliged to explain what gives it the philosophical aura. This comes, as usual, from the question of whether the knowledge of the statement lies in me or in the external world.

Deflection

> I meant what I said and I said what I meant
> An elephant is faithful one hundred percent.
> (Horton hatches the egg, Dr. Seuss)

Speaking about the characteristics of philosophy, one of the most conspicuous is the special way it studies concepts. This chapter and the next are devoted to this mode. Kierkegaard (Kierkegaard 1854) offered a clever metaphor. In a shop window you see a sign: “Shoes Repaired Here.” You go in, to have your shoes mended, only to discover that this is not a cobbler’s workshop - it is the sign that is for sale.

This is called "deflection". A discrepancy between the ostensible object of the discussion and the real one. A if you look at the world through light-deflecting lenses. You think you are looking at an object, while in reality you are looking at another. In the Kierkegaard fable - thinking you are looking at the object of a concept (the shoes) while in fact you are looking at the concept (the sign).

This maneuver is so common in philosophy, that a whole school, "linguistic analysis", views it as the origin of all philosophical problems. Their claim is that philosophical questions are characterized by an optical illusion - their true object is the concepts they use, not what the concepts point at. The problem, posits this school, arises from using the concepts, instead of examining their use. See, e.g., (Strawson 1992) and (Austin 1975). The role of philosophy is not to look at the objects of the concepts, but to put order in the concepts themselves.

> The philosopher’s treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness *(Wittgenstein,* Philosophical Investigations, §255).

On this view philosophy is engaged in the patient work of releasing thought from the knots into which it has tied itself—knots produced by misunderstanding and by the employment of conceptual forms ill-suited to their supposed tasks. In Karl Popper's words:

> Philosophy is the critical discussion of the critical discussion itself.
> — *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (Popper 1934, Preface to the English edition)

A famous example of rectifying mistakes is Kant's observation regarding the notion of `existence'. The sentence *“the cat exists”* formally resembles *“the cat is black,”* misleading to think that `existence' predicates a property of the cat. That this is not the case, so observed Kant, is evident in negation: *“The cat is not black”* is a statement about the cat; *“the cat does not exist”* is not about the cat, for there is no cat to be spoken of. Existence, therefore, is not a predicate of the object but of the concept. It says whether there is something corresponding to it in reality or not.

En passant

In another type of move, we study the concept via pondering its object. In particular, this is common in definitions. Think how you go about defining `cat'. The question is about the notion, not about cats. But to study the concept we do not look at people using it – we look at cats, to describe them - `four legged furry mammal that meows'. This makes sense: the concept is easily available in our brain, why not use it? You operate it and then watch how it works. Borrowing a term from chess, this is inquiry "*en passant*" – in passing (in chess it is capturing a pawn on its way, when it jumps two squares in its first move).

Here is a classic:

> Does the number 3 exist, in the same sense that your cat exists?

The assumption that numbers exist is called "Platonism". Whichever way you try to answer, you end up at the same place: you look at numbers, but study the concept of "existence". As an example, here is what ChatGPT has to say about this issue.

> Platonism: Numbers really exist (but not like houses). According to mathematical Platonists, numbers do not depend on human minds; they would exist even if no one thought about them.

From this discussion you deduce that the notion of "existence" presumes objectivity - independence of who thinks about it. This is a property of the notion of existence, not of numbers. But you got to it through studying numbers, and their existence. Another claim CHAT makes is

> Mathematical entities are needed to make science work (e.g., Maxwell's equations, general relativity).

The message is `usefulness implies existence'. Again, you discuss numbers, and understand something about "existence".

Part 3: Fear of circularity

All epistemology is nothing more than an exercise in skepticism.
(Alfred Ayer, English philosopher (1910 – 1989), from "Men of Ideas", edited by Bryan Magee)

Basophobia: Inability to walk or stand erect, due to fear of falling. (Wiktionary)

Childishness

> Philosophy is a lot of grown men arguing about what doesn't exist.
> (Bertrand Russell, A History of Western Philosophy)

> Philosophy means to be on the way. Its questions are more essential than its answers.
> (Karl Jaspers, Philosophy is for every man)

> In philosophy it is always good to put a question instead of an answer to a question.
> (Wittgenstein, Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics)

This is going to be a controversial chapter, even more than the rest. It did not exist in the 2009 version. It is the result of an insight gradually acquired during the present round of writing. There is no way around it: the stance of philosophers vis-à-vis the world is childish. "Our profession is totally inconsequential, it is a play. We have no commitment to results. But look how smart we are! Look, Ma, how I play in the playground of the big children!" (biggest, whenever possible). There is something childish about being always 'on the way', wallowing in the same ancient problems with only one commitment – never to solve them. In the game of questions-answers the asker is at the receiving end, the answerer is the provider. And as Jaspers and Wittgenstein testify, the philosopher is always an asker.

Philosophy offers grownups an opportunity to play. Who will refuse extending their childhood? Of course, there is nothing wrong with play.

> Wherever they go, and whatever happens to them on the way, in that Enchanted Place on the top of the forest a little boy and his Bear will always be playing. (A.A. Milne, Winnie the Pooh)

Just do not present it as a gate to wisdom.

Caves, prisons and nets

The ultimate roller coaster, the generator of the sensation of sinking stomach, is skepticism. It offers the thrill of weightlessness, of being suspended in midair. "Look, Ma, no hands". And just as bungee is enjoyable because the risk is not real (not supposed to be, anyway), so skepticism is not a real fright.

Remember Ayer's claim that epistemology is nothing but an exercise in skepticism? I would go even further: most of philosophy is an exercise in skepticism. In epistemology it is "How do you know for sure?", in the theories of values and decisions it is "on what are you basing your choice?" Both are searching for an Archimedean leverage point. And both are mistaken: the fear is unbased. There is always a leverage point. Skepticism is based on a faulty assumption, of non-separation. In a proper conceptual structure, we watch somebody watching the world, and our own perception of the world is an anchor. In the theories of values separation means that we are not deciders (deciding is fun, but it is not the task of the philosopher), we are observers. As observers, our values are not put to doubt.

Skepticism is an art of shifting blame. It starts with a circular (hence faulty) structure, which does not possess an object. It as if defines a number as "itself +1", and then mocks you like Rumpelstiltskin– "Hah, you will never capture this number!", or even worse, it may pretend the number exists, which leads to a paradox. In any case, the crime is his, but he blames it on others.

Then, there is the jail version. Mushkile, my beloved dog, will never know the name of the capital of Venezuela, she will never solve integrals, and will never distinguish red from green. On the other hand, there are sound pitches that she can hear and I cannot. We are both captives of our sensory and thinking abilities. A triviality? Of course. Once you look at both of us from a firm conceptual base, there is nothing to it. No more than the fact that she likes dog food and I don't (I never tried). But it leaves room for a game of skepticism – perhaps my entire world is based on an error? Am I not captive to my sensory tools and my concepts?

The best-known formulation of this claim was offered by Plato, in his famous cave allegory. Prisoners live in a dark cave, bound so that they can only face the cave wall. Behind them, a fire burns, and people pass between the fire and the prisoners, casting shadows on the wall. For the prisoners, these shadows are the entirety of their reality. They have no way of knowing there is anything beyond, not even their own existence.

Gottlob Frege, and following him Wittgenstein, suggested that the real prison is language, that dictates the way we think.

> Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.
> (Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §109)

> A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.
> (ibid, §115)

Can we be sure we are not such prisoners? Yes, we can. If it is another person we are watching, we have a firm grasp of reality, which we can compare with the guy's report. And separating object from subject is the only way to look, also at ourselves. Skepticism is a master at erecting a faulty conceptual structure and then blaming the results on others. Don't fall for it.

Another prison metaphor was offered by the English physicist, astronomer, and philosopher Arthur Eddington (1882–1944). A fisherman casts a net into a lake, and finds that all fish he catches are of length at least 5 cm. Suppose he cannot see his net. What can he conclude? Either that all the fish in the lake are longer than five centimeters, or that the net’s mesh size is at least five centimeters.

This is a repeated theme in philosophy: in me or in the world? Do I see the world in a certain way because so is my conceptual system built, or because it is really so? Of course, "in me or in the world melts down once it is not "me" but "he" – is it in Smith's brain or in the world? - this is an easy question. Just check.

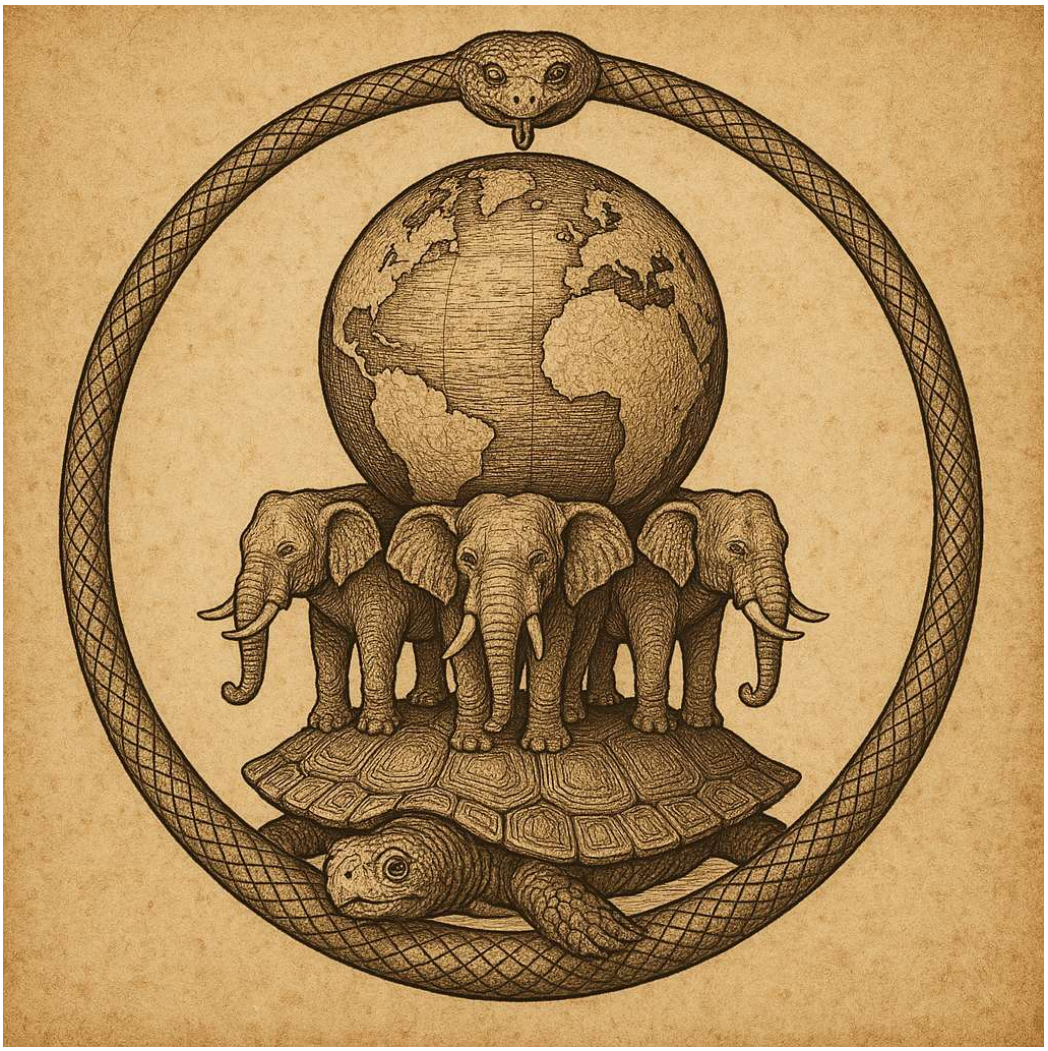
> When I read a philosophical essay, I feel like I'm eating something that isn't in my mouth.
> (Albert Einstein)

> Every accusation is a confession. (common wisdom)

Alarmists vs. self-lifters

Two types of philosophers keep recurring - the skeptic and the know-all. Sometimes they appear in pairs – Socrates was a skeptic, asking for the meaning of everything. His academic grandson, Aristotle, had an answer for every question – how many teeth do women have? (two fewer than men), what is the function of the brain? (to cool the blood), how fast do bodies fall? (proportionate to their weight). And there were pairs embodied in the same person – Descartes is the first example that comes to mind. Another was Wittgenstein, who went into extreme skepticism, and then bit his own tail by declaring that even his doubts were meaningless.

An industrious skeptic looks for the turtle upon which the four elephants stand, and upon them — Earth. But a real skeptic realizes that the turtle must stand on something, too, and here comes an ingenious idea (or rather, so stupid it sounds clever) – a snake will hold the turtle, while holding with its mouth its own tail, thereby suspending the whole structure.



Descartes posed the usual, solipsistic skeptical argument – what if it is all in my head. He just added as a spice a demon, that generates the knowledge in my brain. And then came his self-proving solution: I asked the question? Therefore I am. And if I am, there is a real world. In fact, his argument did more

harm. He claimed that my knowledge of my thoughts is different from my knowledge of the rest of the world – it is direct. I know that I think directly from the action of thinking. There is no need for the mediation of observed physical responses. This is precisely the non-separation, the direct knowledge, described in the "legend" introductory chapter.

The best-known pair was Hume (1711 – 1776) – Kant (1724 – 1804). Kant's motto was *"What is, must be."* Hume's was the opposite: *You cannot be assured that the world will continue obeying the same rules.* Neither present motives nor present observations can dictate how things *should* be. *Is does not imply should.*

Hume specialized in sniffing out snake-eating-its-own-tail arguments. Until today, so he argued, whenever I dropped a stone, it fell to the ground. How do I know that this will happen next time? The rule of physical induction ("the rules that have reigned so far will continue") may itself fail as of now. What guarantees that the laws governing the past will persist? There is no rational basis for believing in induction. "It has worked, so far" is circular reasoning.

Hume presented skeptical ideas also in ethics. Kant, the ultimate self-lifter, responded to both.

> The remembrance of David Hume interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave my investigations in the field of speculative philosophy a completely different direction.
> (Kant, Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics, 1783.)

If only he slept on, Earth would spin a lot faster. Kant believed he resolved this skepticism with what he called the *"transcendental deduction."* What a name. Skeptical questions, he argued, are asked by a thinking, perceiving being. Therefore, the existence of a thinking consciousness is undeniable. This consciousness, Kant reasoned, must be structured and organized. The organization of time necessitates causality, and Kant concluded that he had demonstrated the necessity of causality *a priori*, without reference to empirical evidence. Another formulation – the sensations that impinge on our brain act by causal rules, so there is causality.

Kant counted 11 necessary conditions for the existence of a thinking entity (which he assumed we are), and thus claimed to have proved their necessity, since the existence of a thinking entity is proved (it is not clear what would have happened if humans were not to appear in the universe). He called his 'discoveries' a Copernican revolution, with man replacing the sun at the center of the universe. Man as the measure of all things. How reactionary, compared with Darwin's Copernican revolution in the opposite direction, namely removing man from the center of the universe (Freud called Darwin's worldview a Copernican revolution, and modestly he also tagged this way his own theory). Kant called philosophy the queen of science (thus dethroning mathematics, which Kant's contemporary, Euler, enthroned). He claimed that philosophy delineates the boundaries of science – not an uncommon bragging on behalf of philosophy.

Descartes' argument is not different from "The cat sits on the mat, hence there are cats, so there is an external world". Similarly, Kant's argument is the same as "The cat sits on the mat, which requires causality. Gravitation prevents it from flying and the solid floor prevents it from sinking to the center of the planet, so there is causality." Descartes' addition is just the assumption that we know our consciousness in a different way from that by which we know cats.

From a third person's vantage point there is no problem at all, we watch Smith watching sequences of events, he discovers causality, and chooses to believe it will last. Who are you to tell him otherwise?

Hume also applied skepticism to values. On what firm ground do you base your values? No such ground exists, said Hume. Whatever your current values are, they are no indication as to what your future values should be. Whatever anchor value you are using I can ask for its justification. Importantly - this applies

also to scientific values, the choice of theories. Kant formulated a seemingly self-lifting principle– the "golden rule", or *categorical imperative* (wow, the names):

> Do whatever you would like everybody to do.

It has the air of inevitability (though few adhere to it, so it is not unavoidable, it is as arbitrary as any other rule). Indeed, it is wise to have values that are generally accepted – but proof?

Another self-lifter is Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism:

> Do whatever is beneficial for as many people as possible.

"The greatest good for the greatest number" - doesn't it sound compelling? The originator of this theory, Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), claimed that "good" is not necessarily about protecting the rights of individuals, but about maximizing happiness. "Utility," according to Bentham, is expressed by a formula: the amount of pleasure minus the amount of pain. Whose pleasure and pain? Bentham, as a highly pragmatic person, did not differentiate. He considered the total sum of pleasures and pains for all individuals in the world. "Maximum utility," therefore, means the greatest net pleasure (pleasures minus pains) across all people. If, for example, I derive more pleasure from an action than the pain it causes another person, then my action is justified.

This intellectual adventure accompanied two real-world revolutions: the French Revolution and the American War of Independence. Bentham and friends wanted to refute the revolutionaries` claims about "rights". While France and America fought battles, the English wisely turned to philosophy. Of course, the utilitarian rule is simplistic, and easy to attack (which has been happening a lot). But we are not here to question its validity. We want to know how, though being a recommendation, it sounds philosophical.

The answer is that it has the air of self-evidence. Not a recommendation but an axiom. It is a self-lifter. Can you challenge the idea of a maximal good? Well, you can and you should. Many philosophers do. The utilitarianism's trick just disguises the recommendation as a general veracity.

Turtles and Snakes

> It’s turtles. Turtles all the way down.
> (A response by an old woman to Bertrand Russell's question about what supports the turtle that holds up the world.)

All epistemology is merely an exercise in skepticism, I quoted Alfred Ayer earlier. Its story is the search for the turtles and snakes that uphold the world. Turtle-holders, those who believe they’ve found a firm foundation on which knowledge can be supported, are called "foundationalists", and snake-holders, "anti-foundationalists". Let us start with the first, the "foundationalists". Somewhere below the rainbow there is something to lean against, so they claim. This something can be sensory data, or pure reason. Those who revert to external data are called "empiricists". Those who base their foundation on reason are called "rationalists". The early empiricists included Locke, Hume, and Berkeley. Hume took empiricism to an extreme: besides mathematics, any human knowledge is empirical. Books that contain neither numbers nor experimentally-based facts, deserve the flames. In the 20th century, the Logical Positivists embraced this view with glee. Anything irreducible to sensory experience is meaningless. The prominent rationalists were Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz.

If not on empirical data, how can rationalists justify claims about the world? We already met two approaches – coherence (if all data fits together it is deemed as true) and pragmatism (true=useful). If you observe the way physicists, or other scientists, construct their image of the world, you will not find any of those. Most people, definitely most scientists, construct their theories painstakingly, through observation and attempts at fitting concepts to the world.

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Popper's principle of refutation

Ask a philosopher for a contribution of philosophy to science, and more likely than not he will mention Karl Popper's refutation principle (Popper, 1902 – 1994, was an Austrian – NZ philosopher). It is a way to circumvent Hume's skeptical challenge – "How can you base your theories on firm ground". You just don't, says Popper. You will never be able to conclusively prove a theory. Just as in Wittgenstein's paradox – finite evidence does not suffice. The rules of causality may change. But you can refute – suffices it to find one counterexample to throw the theory to the garbage bin.

This is a Darwinian view of science: theories appear by some random "mutations", and the fittest survive. "Fittest" means not (yet) refuted by experiment. Popper deduced a rule which is supposed to aid physicists in their work: formulate your theory so that it is refutable. At long last, something useful.

Or, really? Tell that to a physicist and you risk being thrown down the stairs. As a description of the physicist's work, it is totally off. Scientists do not focus on falsifiability when formulating their theories. They develop concepts, and ply them to fit reality. Scientific discoveries are usually announced by illumination, a sudden "click" of the concepts with reality. A totally different process to that suggested by Popper. Scientists do not work through negation, but through delicate adjustment of ideas to patterns.

Being down the staircase, the philosopher will go back to his department, blind to the humiliation, and continue playing the game there, undisturbed. As usual, their suggestion is an over-simplification. In science, just as in life, thoughts of grandeur – "We look at things from high above" - are always a recipe for a simplistic worldview.

Where does the philosophical aura stem from? As usual, from the confusion of the two vantage points. Popper's rule seems like self-evident and self-supporting. In fact it is false as a description, and worthless as a guide.

Phenomenalism and Phenomenology

The chapter in the history of philosophy I am getting to now is so stupid, that I hesitated to mention it at all. Sophistry at its worst. You are welcome to skip it. I eventually chose in favor of a brief mention, since the reader is entitled to some familiarity with such trends. It is the story of two theories - phenomenalism and phenomenology. Phenomenalism is associated with the English school of linguistic philosophy, while phenomenology was cultivated in Europe, notably by Edmund Husserl (1859 - 1938). Both are tricks meant to circumvent skepticism. They break the cycle of circular argument at an unexpected link – reality. Both say "OK, you insist on doubting whether my sensations reflect reality? Let me trick you. I will cut out the reality part. All that matters is my sensations." The phenomenalist thinks that a cat does not exist independently of our sensory experiences. The phenomenologist goes one step further. He uses epoche, the Greek word for "restraint". He completely refrains from forming the concept of the cat. He will only speak about his own sensations.

I haven't worked hard to explain why skepticism is based on faulty premises, to go into this quagmire. I will let the reader cope with this nonsense on his own. About a century after Husserl, the Dutch-born philosopher Bas van Fraassen (1940 –) introduced a similar idea in the philosophy of science. Science, he argued, does not provide firm knowledge about the world. Its aim is not to investigate the nature of reality, but only to explain the outcomes of experiments.

This approach, known as constructive empiricism, is another attempt to escape circularity by discarding one link in the chain. It is a reminder of how philosophy tends to revisit the same ideas repeatedly, like a cat chasing its tail.

Never take a philosopher seriously. He is taking himself seriously enough. I wonder – don't philosophers see the inanity of these ideas? Do they really believe that a physicist championing these ideas would be allowed into a physics department?

Part 4 - Direct cognition

The mother of all non-separations

> Descartes (through his 'cogito') is the true founder of modern philosophy.
> (Hegel)

> Modern philosophy begins with Descartes, whose fundamental certainty is the existence of himself and his thoughts… This was insanity, and, from this extreme, philosophy has been attempting to escape into common sense. (Bertrand Russell)

> To represent the self as inspecting its own thoughts is to postulate a ghost in the machine.
> The supposition that every mental act were its own witness — is the cardinal error of Cartesianism.
> — *Ryle, The Concept of Mind*, ch. 1–2.

The terse formulation of Descartes' *cogito* has helped make it the best-known dictum in philosophy. It is also the most detrimental. It is a distilled formulation of direct cognition, equating mental events with their knowledge. 'I know my pain directly from the pain'. The pain is its own cognition. This is the source of endless tangles. Russell's insanity charge is not too harsh.

Paradoxically, the *cogito* argument was originally devised not to generate a paradox, but to settle one - to answer solipsism. Descartes' solution is that there are entities whose existence he cannot doubt – his own mental events, because the doubt is cast by them. This is the epitome of non-separation. Sensing pain and knowing about it are identified. Another ingredient is private access to one's mental events. Nobody but the bearer of pain has direct access to the pain.

Lewis Carroll, the sober critic of philosophy, goofed at this point. He supported the assumption of direct cognition. Alice and the gryphon watch the mock turtle sighing and shedding tears. The mock turtle is mock (the expression comes from "mock turtle soup", where the "mock' relates to the soup, not the turtle), so his sadness, too, is not real. The gryphon explains to Alice that the mock turtle is not really sad. He is just imagining that he is.

> It's all his fancy, that: he hasn't got no sorrow, you know.

This is a sequel to what he says about the Queen of Hearts – "It's all her fancy, that: they never executes nobody". Of course, Carroll puts his tongue firmly in his cheek, as he always does. He assumes that it is impossible to err in ascribing sadness (or any other sensation) to oneself. You have private access to it. Among the philosophers who addressed this question, many see it more correctly than Carroll. In principle it is possible – just as when viewing another person. Ryle (1949) calls it 'pretense', Shoemaker (1963) speaks of 'self-blindness', Davidson (1982) speaks of splitting your mind into observer and observed – the right way to look at yourself.

Qualia

Lots of folks I'm glad I ain't, but mostly Captain Hook.
(Shel Silverstein, Where the sidewalk ends)

I want to look inside your head (Where Do You Go To? Peter Sarstedt)

There is no such thing as direct cognition, but its mistaken assumption is a rich source of puzzles. Three and a half centuries after the inauguration of the *Cogito*, a new term was coined, *qualia* (plural of *quale*), referring to the experience, only privately accessible, of being something or somebody. To challenge the reductionist approach (reduction of the mental to the physical), Nagel gave direct cognition an attire that quickly gained fame, *'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?'* (Nagel 1974). He argued that while one can describe a bat's behavior, one cannot experience *being* it. No physical description can capture the experience of being captain Hook, or a bat.

There are two parts to Nagel's claim. One is a tautology - nobody else can have the experience of Captain Hook, just as nobody has his nose or gait. So, the claim is not about having the experience, but about knowing it. The mind-body analysis is valid also here. You cannot experience the bat's sensations for the same reason you cannot wave its wings. The deceptive profoundness of the argument stems from the usual error of conflating the experience with its awareness.

Another 'qualia' argument: is it possible that what I sense as green you sense as red, and vice versa? X and Y were trained from childhood to identify red blotches as 'red'. Is it possible that as babies they had different 'qualia'? For example, that Y experienced it as green? From a third-person perspective point of view – no. Their seeing red is nothing but the reaction 'I see red'. This was the same since their babyhood. Or think of two machines that identify colors – could it be that one of them senses in fact green? No, because the meaning of 'sensing green' for detached observers is just the machine's reactions.

Frank Jackson concocted another amusing *qualia* story - *Mary the Scientist*. Mary is a brilliant scientist who knows everything about the physics and physiology of color perception but has lived her entire life in a black-and-white room. One day, she steps outside and sees green for the first time. Jackson argues she learns something new at that moment, proving that the experience of color cannot be reduced to physical facts. A related thought experiment involves Fred, a person who can see a color no one else can. Observers can infer Fred's unique perception from his behavior and brain activity, but they cannot truly 'know' what it's like for Fred to see that color.

Again, the same error: conflating sensation with its knowledge. Viewing herself from the outside, Mary would experience her reactions to the green color, just as others would. Her seeing green and her awareness of seeing green are different things. And the second is not special to her. It is in the public domain - this is the basic message of this paper (and the many texts quoted in it).

As for Fred, his unique perception is analogous to machines detecting ultraviolet light — a capability humans lack but which doesn't imply any metaphysical mystery. Replace Mary, Fred and bats by machines, and it all falls apart. Machines do not know their actions by the mere existence of the actions. And of course, we are machines.

The most natural assumption in the world

> A person cannot perceive something without perceiving that they perceive it. (John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding)

Direct knowledge is an impossibility, so why does it feel so self-evident? For an answer we must examine its seeds in early infancy, the construction of the concept 'I'. In a paradoxical twist, the notion of 'I' is borrowed from others (see Mead 1934). External figures, often the mother, speak to and about the infant and treat it as a separate being. In this way, self-recognition begins externally and indirectly—far from 'direct awareness.'

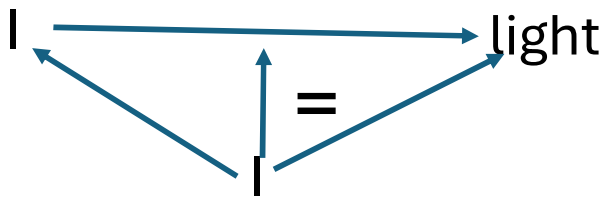
Later, the infant recognizes her own body through sight and touch. At this stage, the concept of self is no different from other concepts about the world. Then something peculiar emerges: a shortcut. A direct connection between 'Here is light' and 'I see light.' These two notions are now identified, and logically they are indeed equivalent. Wittgenstein deduces that there is no 'I' in the world, just sensations.

> The thinking, [the self] - there is no such thing... It is not part of the world but a boundary of the world... (Philosophical Investigations)

But in reality there is an 'I', refuting by its mere existence the 'direct cognition' assumption. It had to be constructed at some point, and this was done by inspection from the lines.

An image may render direct knowledge more accessible. We have used the example of pain, let me now refer to a sensation with an external object, say light. Let us represent the relation of seeing between me and the light by an arrow. I ---->light.

Next suppose that I watch myself seeing the light.



The middle, vertical arrow, representing knowledge of the sensation, is equated with the right arrow, representing the sensation. Its real object, the relationship between "I" and the light, that involves physical manifestations, is thus absorbed by the light. They are assumed to be the same. The middle arrow lost its true object. This is how the sensation of light ceases to be a physical object. That's where the mind-body problem is born.

The mind-body problem

Western philosophy revolves around the mind-body problem.
(Karl Popper)

The mind-body problem is the greatest mystery confronting human beings (Colin McGinn, 'Can We Solve The mind-body problem?' Mind, 98,1989)

Every mental phenomenon is accompanied by its knowledge.
(Brentano 1874)

The expression ‘I am in pain’ is not a report of knowledge but a cry.
— *(Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations*, §246).

Since I have proved that the body of humans and animals are of one kind, it is almost redundant to examine their souls.
(Charles Darwin)

He who understands the baboon would do more towards metaphysics than Locke.
(Charles Darwin, Notebook M)

How many lives have been cut short in the name of ideas? How many fates have been sealed by words? *'Death and life are in the power of the tongue'* (Proverbs 18:21). How can abstract ideas, lacking physical attributes, influence the material world, and vice versa? This is the mind-body problem. It is a true enigma: how can abstract ideas, lacking any physical attributes, influence the material world? How can two people playing in different arenas interact and affect one another? Mustn't the cause of a physical event belong to the physical realm?

We live in two distinct realms: the physical and the mental, or spiritual. Seemingly, they are entirely separate. Mental entities have no physical properties - pain has no mass or temperature, and it cannot be measured. Abstract ideas have no color and cannot be touched. Yet, astonishingly, these two worlds interact. A pinprick, a physical event, causes pain, a wholly mental phenomenon. Conversely, the experience of pain prompts a physical reaction—wincing. Love, an emotion, might drive a person to travel from one place to another. Abstract ideas can shape the destiny of nations and transform the lives of millions. Thought, bound intricately to the physical world, both influences and is influenced by it every moment.

The origins of this problem trace back to the dawn of philosophy. It was posed by the ancient Greeks, some of whom were unaware (or disagreed) that thought was governed by the brain (Aristotle, for example, believed the brain’s primary purpose was to cool the body). The role of the brain in thinking was discovered not long after by Herophilos (335–280 BCE), regarded as the father of anatomy.

Today, we understand that the mind resides in the brain and that mental phenomena correspond to neural processes. Yet this knowledge deepens the mystery rather than resolves it. Even if there is some correspondence between mental events and neural processes, the two are not identical—if only because mental events do not involve the transfer of matter or energy.

As Nagel claims, viewed from the outside, the problem does not take off. Ryle (1954) put it succinctly: mental concepts are formed from physical ingredients. We watch Smith recoiling from a pricking needle, hear his yell 'it hurts', and as physiologists we may trace the pain signals traversing his nerves. All these are physical events, that we combine to form the concept 'Smith's pain'. There is no ghost (of pain) in the

machine. Looking for Smith's `pain' beyond all those, so goes a famous metaphor of Ryle, is complete misunderstanding of the concept.

This should have settled the problem once and for all, but Mcginn, cited at the heading of this chapter, is not convinced and with him most of the philosophical community. They remonstrate: Smith's pain may be indeed his reactions, but only from our point of view. From his stance, he also *feels* the pain, directly. It will be hard to convince him that his pain is just his reactions. This is precisely Nagel's claim: The mind-body problem exists just when viewed from the outside.

Smith will not agree that his pain is just a bunch of reactions, yet it is true. Nothing is the knowing of itself. There is no direct knowledge. Smith does not know about his pain directly from the pain. His sentence "I am in pain" includes the "I", and to learn about the "I" he had to watch himself - his body and his reactions. His acquaintance with his mind should be the same as others' acquaintance with it, and the same as his acquaintance with the mind of others. It is not the infinite depth of the mind-body problem that prevents us from solving it. It is our gullibility, which makes us fall for a simple deception.

In the real world there are no contradictions. So, the paradoxality feeling stems from some hidden deception. We know what it is – non-separation, and we also know how to demonstrate its presence – by observing from the outside. Let us observe any mental event from a third-person perspective. Say, Smith being in pain. How do we learn about it? By his reactions: shrieks, wincing, his report – "I am in pain". Physiologists can also track the signals going through his nerves. All are phenomena in the physical world – including the verbal report, that finds a detector in other people's brains that reacts to the words. The concept of pain is the outcome of integration of all these pieces of information. Assuming there is something beyond those is the "category mistake" mentioned above.

In 1949, when Ryle wrote *The Concept of Mind,* computers were still in their infancy and far from displaying any real capacity for thought. Today, with the advent of AI, Ryle's argument gains new traction. A computer's "thinking" is undeniably a physical process, involving the movement of electrons in circuits. We interpret its "thoughts" through tangible outputs: printed text or on-screen data, all of which are physical events. By this logic, human thinking should not be fundamentally different. It also occurs within a fully physical device—the brain—and ultimately manifests as physical behaviors.

So, from a third-person perspective the pain and the thinking are the physical reactions. This is true for every mental event. Smith's understanding of an idea is his verbal and motional reactions, his hunger is the contractions of his stomach, which drive him to say "I am hungry".

Nagel is right. From the outside, the mind-body problem just does not exist.

Private World, Public World

What makes the concept of mind susceptible to a category mistake? After all, no one believes that a university exists as something beyond its buildings and people. Why does the confusion arise regarding the mind? In the university analogue, the mistake does not occur, why does it arise in the case of the mind? Indeed, Ryle misses the core of the problem, which lies in self-perception. Reductionism raises no issues when applied to understanding the minds of others. Indeed, in the concept of minds of others is constructed from observations of the physical world. If we were only familiar with the mental states of others, the mind-body problem would not emerge. To recognize our own will, or pain - so we erroneously assume - we don't need to observe our actions—we know them directly. This is the *direct cognition argument***.**

Imagine a creature from another galaxy observing humans through an impenetrable glass barrier. Uninvolved in human lives, it could build all the familiar concepts about human behavior - desires (inferred consistent actions aimed at achieving something,) pain, sensations. Yet this alien would not be able to articulate the mind-body problem because no gap exists between physical and mental concepts.

How can a problem that exists from one perspective vanish from another? The core is the direct cognition argument. The assumption that we know our mental events just from their existence. As Wittgenstein noted, there is no private world. A person does not have private access to his or her mental world. He knows his pain the same way he knows somebody else's pain. In short – the *Cogito* is at the core of the philosophical perplexion.

Wittgenstein chose to give this argument a linguistic attire. "There is no private language", he claimed, substituting language for "mental events". When you address your mental events, you do it by a language that is publicly accessible . Since the posthumous publication of his *Philosophical Investigations (1953)* the philosophical world has been raging over this formulation of the anti-*cogito* principle. And justly so.

Turing and Searle

There is a famous generation-crossing argument, between Turing and the American philosopher John Searle. It gives Wittgenstein's dichotomy "from the inside (the point of view of the thinker) vs. from the outside" a concrete attire. Turing looks from outside a room, Searle from the inside. Guess who is right.

Alan Turing (1912–1954) had major contributions to the invention of the computer. In his twenties he came up with an abstract model of the computer, that is the main model used to this very day. Then he joined the Bletchley Park project of breaking the ENIGMA code the Germans used for communication with their submarines, for which purpose actual computing machines were designed. Turing met Wittgenstein in Cambridge, and attended his lectures. It is not clear that he was directly influenced, but he adopted Wittgenstein's approach of "look at the use". To look at meanings, do not put yourself in the position of the understander, but that of the observer of actions. He concocted a thought experiment: a computer is put in a room, and in another room sits a human being, you do not know in which room sits who. You ask them questions, and solely by the answers you must decide which is which. Can the computer fool you?

Turing meant, of course, that in principle it can. Others claim that the computer does not think, it is just reacting. One such contender was the American John Searle. He published another thought experiment, also involving a room. Imagine you are inside a room full of Chinese characters, none of which you know. You also have a rulebook written in your own language, explaining how to manipulate these symbols. When presented with certain input symbols, you use the rulebook to determine the correct output symbols to return. To an outside observer your responses appear perfectly coherent, as if you understand the language. But from inside the room, you know that you do not understand a word. This is what computers do, says Searle.

Searle's argument is nothing but a reiteration of the direct knowledge argument: for him, the Chinese-speaker has some mysterious, direct access to "understanding". Of course, he also operates by a program. He *is* a program. Turing looks at his actions from the outside, and deciphers the code of that program. Searle lives inside the Chinese speaker, for him "understanding Chinese" is an objectless mysterious capacity. "Private world". The same old mistake with which the book opens. It is time for it to be outlawed.

Yet another "empty reactions" story was offered by the Physicist-philosopher James Jeans (1877–1946). Imagine a farmer in Central Europe who has never seen or heard of the ocean or of ships. He possesses a sophisticated radio that receives ship position announcements. Though clueless about their meaning, he is a capable mathematician and detects patterns in the numbers. He predicts subsequent values but remains unaware of the numbers' true significance. We would say "if the ship is in place x and then in x+y, it will next be in x+2y". The farmer just predicts the numbers, not knowing they relate to ships. Jeans' metaphor applies to science as a whole: while we observe and understand phenomena, we lack access to their ultimate meaning. Like the farmer, we discern patterns and build theories, but we remain ignorant of what lies beyond. "External manifestations miss the real meaning", so says Jeans. You can describe them, not knowing what it is all about. Of course, looking from aside there is no problem. The farmer does so and so, possibly being ignorant of what we, the observers, know. So what. Jeans' real argument is from the inside – "Oy Vey. We do not understand reality". But there is no such thing, looking from the inside. To view ourselves we establish a separate entity, the observing one.

The name of the poem and the poem itself – Lewis Carroll strikes again

A by-now retired Jerusalem philosophy professor used to open his introductory course by placing a tomato on the table and asking: "What is this?" "A tomato," the students replied. "No," he declared. "It's a red spot on your retina." Instead of running to the office to demand their tuition back, the students sat hypnotized. A testimony to how natural the confusion between an object and its perception is (and how gullible young minds are). Of course, only when applied to oneself — "It's a red spot on *your* retina." It makes no sense to say "it's a red spot on Smith's retina." That sounds ridiculous, much like Tweedledum's claim that Alice exists only in the Red King's dream.

Lewis Carroll has a wonderful eye, and little respect, for the core mechanisms of philosophy. In *Through the Looking-Glass*, he addresses the confusion between pointer and pointed-at. Throughout the book Alice stirs a poetic spirit in everyone she meets. One such encounter is with an old knight. Seeing her sadness, he offers to recite a poem, which, he assures her, moves its listeners to tears—or… "Or what?" Alice asks. "Or not," replies the knight. sneer

> "The title of the poem," he began, "is 'The Eyes of Fishes.'" - "Oh, that's the name of the poem?" Alice asked, trying to show interest.
> - "No, no, you don't understand," said the knight, slightly annoyed. "That's what the name of the poem is called. The poem is really titled 'The Aged Man Returns.' " "So, I should have said, 'That's what the poem is called,'" Alice corrected herself.
> "No, not at all. That's something else entirely. The poem is called 'Ways and Means.' But of course, that's just what it's called!" "Then what is the poem?" asked Alice, thoroughly confused. "Just about to get to that," replies the knight. "The poem really is 'Sitting on the Gate.' And the tune is my own invention."

This is a parody of the red blotch on the retina, only that, befitting a parody, it repeats four times.

Mary and Fred

Qualia is a good breeding ground for amusing stories. Frank Jackson concocted a story about *Mary the Scientist*. Mary is a brilliant scientist who knows everything about the physics and physiology of color perception but has lived her entire life in a black-and-white room. One day, she steps outside and sees green for the first time. Jackson argues she learns something new at that moment, proving that the experience of color cannot be reduced to physical facts. A related thought experiment involves Fred, a person who can see a color no one else can. Observers can infer Fred's unique perception from his behavior and brain activity, but they cannot truly "know" what it's like for Fred to see that color.

Of course, it is the usual error: conflating the sensation with its knowledge. Mary's reaction to seeing green for the first time is not fundamentally different from her experiencing asphalt for the first time outside the room. As for Fred, his unique perception is analogous to machines detecting ultraviolet light — a capability humans lack but which doesn't imply any metaphysical mystery. Mary learns a new behavioral reaction to green, and her awareness of that reaction is as mundane as encountering someone speaking a language she hasn't heard before.

I wonder how grownups are persuaded to participate in this game. But then, I have the same perplexity about religion.

Philosophical zombies

Philosophers will never tire of the theme of exclusive access to one's mind. The philosophers who claim that it is the crux of philosophy are right. It summarizes nicely the philosophical folly. One variation is zombies, the brainchildren of the Australian philosopher David Chalmers (Chalmers 1995). A zombie is a being that behaves exactly like a human but lacks inner experience. When pricked with a needle, the zombie reacts as though in pain but feels nothing. We do not have access to his non-sensations, he is the only one with this privilege.

The conclusion? Mental events cannot be reduced to physical ones. Physical interpretation alone does not distinguish between a zombie and a real person.

The argument is the same as that of private access, and has the same answer. As with physical behaviors, self-awareness stems from interpreting responses — yours or others'. Thus, even regarding one's own mental events, one is effectively a "zombie" to oneself.

The mind–body problem is not just another paradox; it is the central confusion, the ultimate summary of a fundamental misidentification. Other conflations occur in specific domains: the problem of free will stems from conflating observer and observed regarding future actions; epistemological skepticism stems from conflating sensations and their objects; philosophical questions about values conflate description with decision-making. The mind-body problem, however, involves conflation at the most basic level, across all domains, making other philosophical issues mere branches.

Part 5: Time, the great watershed

The present is never our end. The past and the present are our means; the future alone is our end. Thus we never live, but we hope to live; and, as we are always preparing to be happy, it is inevitable we should never be so. (Blaise Pascal, Pensées)

Now they punish him, and he sits in jail. The trial does not begin until next Wednesday. And last, of course, comes the crime. (The White Queen, Through the Looking-Glass, Lewis Carroll)

Two temporal asymmetries

Philosophy can seem like a behemoth body of discourse, with little structure. It deals with every aspect of human existence, with no guiding theme. A huge ocean with fish of all sorts. The truth is just the opposite. When sorted by the right parameters, a strict order emerges. There are two major divisions. One is pure vs. impure problems – this we have discussed. The other split is with regard to time. Famous twin problems lead the way.

(a) Why can't we affect (determine, decide on, change) the past?

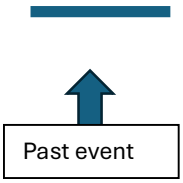
(b) Why can we know past events, and only predict future events? Prediction is very different from knowledge.

Both are not philosophical, and not at all deep. They are a matter of definition. 'Knowledge' is our relationship with the past, what it imprints on our brain. 'Deciding', or 'determining', or 'affecting' is a link of our brains, mediated by actions, with the future.

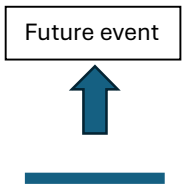
So, asking 'Why don't we know the future?', or 'Why don't we remember tomorrow?' is like asking 'Why don't footprints appear before someone walks?' To 'know' is to *bear traces*. (a) and (b) are not philosophical statements. They are obtained by inspection of the use of the terms 'know' and 'decide'.

Our asymmetrical attitude to time is deeply ingrained in our minds and in our bodies. It was imprinted by natural selection. Natural selection is, by its definition, future-oriented. We act to procure the existence and welfare of our descendants, in the future. Hence it is hard for us to see the symmetry, to understand that knowledge and decision are mirror images of one another, with respect to the present moment. The two pictures below show it.

Brain process - memory



Knowledge: effect of past events on the brain



Brain process - deliberation

Decision: effect of the brain on future events

This is reflected in philosophy: there is philosophy of man's relation to the past – epistemology (the theory of knowledge); and there is philosophy of the future, which is about decisions and values. The latter include ethics, aesthetics, philosophy of law, and even philosophy of science, that investigates the values of scientific inquiry, what is right and what is wrong in doing science. For example, what constitutes proof of a theory.

"Why can't we change the past" is akin to "Why does a cause always precede its effect?" The latter, too, is a matter of definition. This is the way we dub the members of pairs of causally linked events. The earlier we call "cause", the later we call "effect". This is not to say that time is symmetrical – the increase of entropy introduces an asymmetry. It is (circuitously) the source of the other major asymmetry – the bias of living and vegetating creatures towards the future. We are interested more in where we shall be in a minute than where we come from. This is the result of being formed by natural selection. Darwinian selection is the way life fights the increase of entropy. Indeed, entropy in the entire world increases, but there are very specific structures that duplicate themselves, thereby increasing order locally, in separate systems. Once formed, by chance, they will continue to multiply. These are the living organisms. The way we are constructed – aiming to survive and reproduce in the future – introduces asymmetry into time's perception. It is hard to see the symmetry between knowing and deciding. But this is only because of our utterly asymmetric perception of the arrow of time, shared by all living and vegetating creatures.

What is philosophical about theories of values?

Philosophy of the future deals with decisions, but not any. It does not consider specific decisions, like a choice between chocolate and vanilla ice cream. Philosophy deals with general decisions, namely with values. One exception is the free will problem – it deals with any decision, not necessarily general.

The two vantage points in this case are evident: the insider is the decider (chooser of the value), and the outsider is the observer, or describer. Prescription vs. description. When separated, there is no philosophy. Deciding is never philosophical, and neither is pure description. Wittgenstein concluded that philosophy has nothing to do with theories of values, in particular with ethics.

And yet, it moves. People feel that there are meaningful ethical philosophical problems. The secret, as always, is confusing the two standpoints. To illustrate this, let us give the podium to Socrates. He walked the streets of Athens and nagged his fellow citizens with his question – what is "good", or what is the right way to live your life. In other words, what are the right moral values. Eventually he got on their nerves and they killed him, but on the way he established ethics. Suppose an Athenian came to him and showed him the result of his latest poll – what are the moral values of the average Athenian. Would Socrates be content? Of course not, he is not interested in the existing values. He wants to know what the values should be. He describes, but at the same time decides. Description is confused with prescription.

From "is" you cannot deduce "ought", taught David Hume 2200 years later. This is "moral skepticism", the claim that you cannot base your values on any firm bedrock. No poll will tell you how you should behave. The epistemological skeptic says, *"I have no foundation for trusting my knowledge,"* Hume's principle declares: *"I have no foundation for trusting my values. I can always choose otherwise."*

It can be also called "the decider's protest" – protest on his description. He could always choose otherwise, he claims. This protest is also an essential part of the free will problem – you can pin butterflies to a spreading board only when they are dead. As long as you are alive you are free to choose. (Later we shall find still another, more profound component of the free will conundrum.)

Description is not philosophical, but neither is choice. An Athenian replying to Socrates' question "what is good" with "I have found my vocation – winning a laurel wreath in the Olympic games", will be met with disdain – an arbitrary choice is not what we are looking for. To do philosophy, you must mix the two, decision and description.

Nietzche's psychology of the future

As definers of 'philosophy' we need to address a known question - was Nietzche a philosopher, or a literary figure? Most people's answer is – the first. Remember – we are describers, not deciders. so our task is not to dispute it, but to explain why.

Let us look at one of the best-known ingredients of Nietzche's teaching – the "superman", who is beyond judgment of morality. "Beyond good and evil". His strong will puts him above ordinary morality. This part of Nietzche's creed has gained notoriety after being adopted by fascism. To modern ears it may sound shocking, but this is not our point here. The question is what is it? A description? A recommendation for a way to live your life? Admiration for those who do not care for `slaves morality'? Or fantasies of grandeur?

Probably none of the above. None of them is philosophical. Neither the recommendations, nor fantasies, certainly not choices, like determination to be strong. Luckily, Nietzche himself gives a clue. He calls himself *a psychologist (=describer) of the future*. How is this possible? The future is given to decision, while a psychologist is a describer. The secret is that Nietzche assumes both positions. A possible (very Nietzchean) decision is not to succumb to the "slaves morality". To be bravely independent. As a description this is not philosophical, and does not deserve more than brow-raising. What makes it philosophical is that it is both descriptive and prescriptive. Philosophers are deciders, says Nietzche in *Genealogy of Morals* and *Will to Power*. But not simple deciders: they choose according to seemingly compelling principles. Compelling as far as Nietzche is concerned. They choose, but at the same time they observe their motives.

The strange story of emotivism

In 1920 Wittgenstein retired from philosophy for ten years, six of which he spent as an elementary school teacher in a small Alps village. In his absence, a group of admirers gathered to form the "Vienna circle". They used the mathematically fragrant title "logical positivists". Logical positivism declares most philosophical problems to be meaningless. In particular ethics, whose problems are not about facts.

The torch was carried across the British Channel by a then young man, Alfred Ayer (1910 – 1989). Like Wittgenstein, Ayer was born into a wealthy family. Wittgenstein's family were the steel magnates of Europe, the family of Ayer's mother's owned Citroën. Unlike Wittgenstein, he was a bon vivant. He traveled to Vienna and brought the gospel back home. His book, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, became a foundational text of the movement.

In response to the claim that moral discourse has nothing to do with philosophy, Ayer promoted an approach to ethics, which he named *emotivism*. It is not in ethics, but about ethics. It says that moral judgements are not about values, they express attitudes. "It is good to help old women cross streets" is not about old women and street-crossing, but about the speaker's feelings. It is like "Mmmm- good" uttered when tasting ice cream. Later the theory evolved to another view of ethics, the *universal prescriptivism* of R. M. Hare (1919 – 2002). This theory says that amoral judgement is a recommendation for a certain course of action (say, help the elderly) plus a commitment to personal action in accord.

All this is extremely strange. Where does the aura of depth come from? It is a person's prerogative whether to treat his moral judgements as description or as a recommendation. It is not the philosopher's decision how to use such sayings. As to commitment– it is not a governmental decree. It is up to the user whether he commits himself to the value he recommends.

What makes us feel that these two theories are philosophical? The passage, made by both Ayer and Hare, from users of ethical rules to observers. From insiders (deciders) Hare and Ayer switch to outsiders (describers of the moral judgements).

Since I do not sense philosophicality in all this, and since as far as I am concerned the feeling of depth is unfounded (frankly, I found both theories to be hodgepodge), let me leave the answer to the reader**.**

Free will

The free will problem is as famous and central as its sister, the mind-body problem. Both have paradox form, which accounts for their popularity – it is hard to remain unperturbed in the face of a contradiction. You feel compelled to restore order to your world. The argument goes back to Aristotle. It is a clash of two intuitions. Both look unassailable, yet we feel, for a reason that is not entirely clear, that they are contradictory. The first intuition is that we are free to choose, and the other is that events in the world, including human choice, are pre-determined, being subject to physical laws. The first step of a solution must be to render the contradiction explicit.

Another common feature of the free will and the mind-body problems is the repeated claims of "non-starter". We quoted Campbell, Nagel and Schopenhauer, three among many, who argued that there is no contradiction, because the two intuitions do not meet at the same battle ground. Determinism is assumed by an outside observer, free will by the decider himself. Nagel's analysis, quoted above, is so perceptive that it deserves a second mention –

> The problem of free will, like the problem of consciousness, arises because of the conflict between an internal and an external view of ourselves. From the outside we are just natural objects, subject to physical laws. From the inside, however, we view ourselves as agents.

There is a reason for the difference between the two stances. The decider cannot understand his pre-determination. His perspective isolates him from the causal chain behind the decision. He is like a surfer that cannot look back beyond the wave carrying him forward. He cannot fully know the causes of his decision – this would involve circularity. The knowledge of his motives would interfere with the motives. For the chooser, the decision feels as though it is created ex nihilo.

So, it seems that the problem arises from the usual error, of assuming both positions, that of the player (decider) and that of the observer, at once. But this is not the last word. This time there is a subtler circularity phenomenon at work. There is a reason for the stubborn feeling of contradiction. We are now getting to it.

The core of the problem

There is a formulation of the problem that cannot be pooh-pooh-ed. Like all circularity-based problems it disappear upon separation. But this is more delicate than even in the mind-body problem. Here it is.

A. Determinism means that a future event F can be equivalent to a past events P.

The equivalence can be via prediction or via laws of nature.

B. Being in the past, P cannot be changed. So, neither can F. The conclusion is that we are not free to choose F.

In other words, there is no free choice.

Put concisely: P cannot be changed, F can (by free choice). How can they be equivalent?

This argument has a famous formulation, called "the lazy argument". Suppose I have an exam tomorrow. A sage having all the data in the world and unlimited computation power at her hand, predicts my grade, writes it on paper, and deposits her prediction in a safe. My present actions are not going to change what is written in the note. So, my grade will not change. Why should I study?

Of course, if I do not prepare, this is what the sage predicted, and I will get my due low grade. But what is wrong with the argument that would let me save energy?

This is a circularity-based paradox. How can you tell? By its disappearance when stated on a separate person. It just cannot be stated regarding another person. The punch line, "let me laze around", cannot be stated, because I cannot decide for another person. I can only make my own decision. From a third-person perspective, there is no flaw.

The same, backwards

The American philosopher Robert Nozick published in 1969 an amusing version of the problem. It was first formulated by the physicist William Newcomb, hence it is known by the name "Newcomb's paradox". You are standing before a deep well, with a $100 note in your hand. You can choose to throw it into the well, or not. A sage S, who has infinite predicting power, predicted your choice. If she predicted you would throw, she deposited $1000 in your bank account. You do not know whether she did it or not. Should you throw? If you do, S predicted it (she never fails), and you will be $900 richer. On the other hand, the $1000 were put, if they were, a while ago. You are not going to change it. Throwing will plainly make you $100 poorer!

Of course, this is nothing but the problem of free will, formulated backwards. The prediction of S establishes an equivalence between your future action F (throwing or not) and a past event P (the deposition into your account). The free will problem says – since I cannot determine P, I cannot choose F. There is no free choice. Newcomb says – since I can choose F, I can determine P. The past can be changed.

It is the same argument, stated contra-positively. How come philosophers haven't noticed this equivalence? In philosophy, as I told you, anything can be.

A common solution

So, a solution to the free will problem will yield a solution to Newcomb's paradox, and vice versa. Before solving, note that Newcomb's paradox, and with it the problem of free will, involve circularity, as witnessed by the fact that both disappear upon separation. Watching from the sidelines we do not feel that the future choice F determines P. We just see a chain of events of which P and F are links. There is no feeling of 'determining the past'.

Between the free will problem and Newcomb's paradox I prefer to tackle the latter, it is more transparent. It is easy to understand why one cannot use the causal link between F and P to decide the fate of P. This is based on the following observation:

(@) To predict the choice, S must predict the deliberation leading to it.

Assuming (@), the argument for dropping the $100 note is 'I want my *deliberation* to be such and such (leading to the dropping of the diamond)'. You are deciding your deliberation. An impossible, circular task. You cannot choose your motives. The argument for dropping the $100 note is flawed. No way around it – you cannot change (decide on) past events.

(@) looks self-evident, but it needs justification. The equivalence between P and F means the existence of a causal link between them.

> Claim: In the presence of a causal link not going through the deliberation, we feel that the choice is not free.

An illustration: suppose a giant looked at your bank account, and if he saw there a deposit, he is going to force you to drop the bill. Concluding 'Great! So let me drop and I will be rich' is nonsensical, since your choice is not free.

When deliberating a choice F, we consider only the part of F having no other links with the past, apart from those deliberated. You should "peel away" all causal links acting from the side. If I deliberate going to work, I must put aside the constraints acting independently of my decision, like traffic conditions, or the availability of means of transportation. I decide on the parts whose only link from the past is with my decision. I isolate this part from the constraints. The isolation is essential for control over the choice, and for the efficacy of the decision. Thus the link exploited by S must go through the deliberation.

Accountability

If a person's choices are predetermined, how can he be held accountable? After all, the decision was not his. An amusing story from Roman times gives a solution. A slave misbehaved, and his master was preparing to whip him. The slave, knowing his master's philosophical tendencies, argued, "It's not my fault—it was written in the stars that I would sin." The master's answer that suggested itself was: "Yes, and it is also written in the stars that I will whip you.

Moritz Schlick (1882–1936) was a doctoral student of quantum theory pioneer Max Planck. When Wittgenstein disappeared from the Viennese scene, he became the leader of the "Viennese circle", that cultivated Wittgenstein's ideas. He wrote a book on ethics, including a chapter on the problem of free will. He called its perseverance "one of the greatest scandals of philosophy" (there were many, if you asked him). He lamented the wasted paper, ink, and intelligence that could have been applied to other problems, and did not forget to add "assuming it was sufficient for them". I wonder what he would have said if he knew the Newcomb paradox version.

Schlick reiterated the arguments of Hume and Mill but added his own observations about responsibility. Responsibility, he argued, is about rewards and punishment. It has nothing to do with whether actions are predetermined. Responsibility is simply a tool for promoting social behavior, and it is effective precisely because human decisions are governed by motives.

Hume's principle and Newcomb's sage

> Everything changes. You can make a fresh start with your final breath.
> (Bertot Brecht, *Everything changes*)

Hume's principle is that knowing your motives will not help you decide. You are free to choose otherwise. You can only truly understand your motives retrospectively. While you are in the process of deciding, you are not bound by the motives you detected in yourself, because, as Brecht noted, you are free to change, till the last moment.

An amusing illustration of Hume's principle is offered by Newcomb's sage. Newcomb uses the sage affect the past. But there is another use for her – sparing humans the torment of decision. Who doesn't loath making critical decisions? the agony of indecision, the burden of uncertainty and responsibility? Sagy offers a simple way of saving this agony. Instead of fretting over decisions, we could simply outsource them to her. The decision-maker could sit back and read the newspaper while Sagy works hard to predict what the decision will be. Once she communicates her prophecy, the decider can follow suit. Isn't this a wonderful way to avoid effort?

Of course, not really. The wise man would predict exactly this: that the indecisive person will read the newspaper and refrain from making a choice. Unfortunately for lazy decision-makers, observing one's motives and concluding, *"Ah, then I will decide this way,"* is not feasible. This is because such observation becomes part of the decision-making process itself. The reasoning *"I am the kind of person who chooses X"* is circular, as using this reasoning turns it into a factor within the decision-making process. Consequently, the reasoning must account for itself.

A person choosing a restaurant for dinner does not ask *"What kind of person am I—one who likes Chinese food or Italian?"* Instead, they weigh the merits of Chinese versus Italian food. If they did ask, *"What kind of person am I?"* the answer would be: *"You're the kind of person who wonders what kind of person you are"*.

Epilogue: What is it like, to be a philosopher?

> Philosophy is not a theory but an activity. (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 4.112)

> The president of the university is hosting the members of the math department. "You know", he tells them, "You are my favorites. All you need is pen, paper and a wastebasket". He then re-thinks, and adds "Only philosophers outdo you. They do not also need the wastebasket".

What is the philosophical experience? Philosophers are simpler than bats - it is not hard to step into their shoes. We mentioned one characteristic – snobbery. Who said is more important than what is said. Another was pointed by the president of the university – unlike in science, success is guaranteed. Something is bound to come out. Philosophers are fortunate — if, as the saying goes, every utterance is, in the final account, a baby's cry for help, then theirs is always heeded. This guarantees eternal bliss, or, for some, like Wittgenstein, eternal torment.

> Philosophy is a struggle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language. It is really like a sickness of thought.
> (Wittgenstein, Notebooks, 17.10.16, p. 53)

> The problems of philosophy torment me like the problems of a disease. (Wittgenstein, quoted by Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*. Oxford University Press, 1958, p. 93).

The guaranteed success was one motivation for my dabbling in philosophy. I studied mathematics, the most beautiful and at the same time hardest subject. Philosophy was an escape. Like others, I was attracted by its halo of depth, which now I know is deceptive. Completing my first degree, I wrote a preliminary (and much less damning) version of "The cat", sent it to a professor of philosophy, and considered writing a Ph.D thesis under his supervision. Luckily, this episode did not last long. He gave me a paper of Kripke, already mentioned above, on the Liar Paradox. Struck by its hollowness I ran for dear life back to mathematics.

Why do I continue? Why am I wooing people whom I don't respect? I think I know the answer, but for the time being let me keep it to myself. Do I regret the years I spent on the subject? I would have been better off if I didn't. But I couldn't have acted otherwise. And the loss for humanity is not great. The world did not lose, during those years, the work of a great mathematician. Another point is that while in mathematics I had no clear agenda, in meta-philosophy I did. What took me time to realize was the futility of trying to reach philosophers. Rewarding relationships, the part of life that counts most, I haven't found there. We think too differently to cooperate. The result was that I invested energy in negation – trying to prove to people that they are intellectually evasive. Not a gratifying occupation. It is hard to penetrate the exoskeleton of people, that chitin shell that consists of deeply ingrained beliefs, tenaciously held self-images, and the teaching of key figures in one's life. Just try to convince a believer that there is no god. Like believers, philosophers are cozily protected by tradition and by the society around them, and like believers they have an exemption from thinking. I allow myself to say this, because if the reader accepts the image of philosophy expounded in the book he or she knows it is the case. And if they don't accept, it is too late for me anyhow.

That's enough candor for one day. The reader should decide for himself or herself whether understanding the nature of philosophy is worth the effort. I suppose that those who reached these lines have already made up their minds.

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