

Introduction

The Need for Revisioning Philosophy

James Ogilvy

There's a good deal of talk these days about the death of philosophy. Though it may be hard to imagine humanity without at least a small minority intoxicated with the love of wisdom, I find it very easy to contemplate a world devoid of wise men and women. For wouldn't a truly wise person shine like a beacon for all the rest to see? And wouldn't the presence of such people put the rest of us so to shame that we would do everything possible to eliminate such people and erase their memory from the face of the earth? However much some of us may say we are in love with wisdom (*philo*=love, *sophia*=wisdom), we can nonetheless do without any wise guys in our own immediate neighborhoods.

Envy and shame are not the only retardants to the rooting and spreading of wisdom in our native soil. There is also the problem of whether the real thing is even possible. What is this thing called wisdom, after all? Maybe it is a mythical attribute, like the unicorn's horn: something we read about once, something certain men of old were supposed to have had, but didn't *really*. One hears of "the wisdom of Solomon," but he probably made his share of mistakes. Ask his mother.

What is this wisdom thing? Maybe it's overrated. But maybe not. Maybe now, just when grand theory looks terribly pretentious, and

hoary chestnuts like Justice and Virtue sound slightly embarrassing in hip company, the love of wisdom is due for a revival, or better, a burst of fresh energy—a new exuberance to replace the stale old fossils of academic argumentation.

1. Historical Background

Philosophy-as-we-know-it has become fossilized. Plato's Heaven of ideal Forms, those "eternal ideas" that were to be the unchanging sources and standards of perfection in all things, have suffered the ravages of time and change. The invention of historical time and the discovery of evolution were unknown in Plato's day. Kant's "architectonic"—his architectural blueprint for a perfectly orderly flowchart for reason—has been replaced by a postmodern architectonic which, like postmodern architecture, makes reference to the balance and harmony of classical order only with a sense of irony. Hegel's System has fallen under the criticism of Kierkegaard and his heirs in the existentialist tradition. And as if that weren't enough, a line of Marxists begat by Karl and running through Lenin, Stalin, Mao and Deng Zhao Ping have shown us in ghastly and unmistakable detail just how horrible a systematically regimented, centrally planned life can be.

A whole generation of European intellectuals has finally woken up. After living through the decades between the 1930's and the 1960's, when to be an intellectual was to be a Marxist (and therefore to know just enough Hegel in order to be able to refute him), these same intellectuals and their students have come to the realization that the whole Hegelo-Marxist dialectical juggernaut was a vast clattering structure of abstractions bearing little relation to reality. It might be made to clunk along a little longer but, even less productive than Eli Whitney's original cotton gin, whose quaint antiquity Marxism bore like a museum piece, this dynamically structured mechanism, inspiring pride over all its moving parts, would never issue forth with anything more substantial than a seedless bole of cotton.

So deconstruction set in. The deconstruction crew—Heidegger, Derrida, deMan, Deleuze, all those big and little *De's* and *de's*—destroyed the edifice constructed over centuries of European philosophy. They argued, quite convincingly in my opinion, that the world wasn't put together in such a way that *any* elegant system of thought—static or dynamic, Platonic or Hegelian, ancient or modern—could represent the true nature of things. They demonstrated in different ways that "the true nature of things" was not a phrase that denoted

some small and elegant set of principles from which all of the fine-grained detail of earthly experience would follow. No first principles are sufficient to define, articulate and guarantee every feature of the universe, from those regularities representable as laws right down to the contingencies we sometimes dismiss as mere details, but whose accretions finally determine the shape and texture of everything and everyone.

No first principles will determine the precise shape of such last things: the irregularities so evident in the shape of a shoreline, for example. No first principles can determine the shapes of such last things unless you consider so-called *chaos theory* such a set of first principles. But I find the wonder of chaos theory to lie, first, in the fact that its formulae determine certain curves in a most indeterministic manner, and, second, in the way that at each level of magnification, the same structures are revealed, all the way up and all the way down, in an endless circle of "self-sameness" such that the very distinction between *first* principles and *last* things ceases to have the significance it once had in a more hierarchical environment. Chaos theory thus implicitly deconstructs its own claim to be a meta-theory, for the principles of architecture that it shows us are principles that deny the determinism of meta-principles—first by denying determinism, and second by destroying the neat hierarchy that would distinguish the highest from the lowest, the first from the last, the meta- from the sub-

To the extent that chaos theory is paradigmatic of new developments in twentieth century thought, philosophy *is* in trouble. For philosophy used to be the meta-narrative *par excellence*. It was the science of first principles, the queen of the sciences, next to theology as king, and thus related by marriage to the Godhead at the very top of the old Greco-Christian ontological hierarchy.

Philosophy has always vied for a place at the head of the line of disciplines, whether as top-dog on a hierarchy, or as *first* in the order of presupposition. Both metaphysics and epistemology make claims about *priority*. After Descartes and Kant, after the subjective turn away from a metaphysical order of being toward an epistemological order of knowing, philosophy's claim to priority shifted from aspirations toward access to the *highest* to an attention to what comes *first* in the order of knowing. Philosophers shifted their attention from the transcendent to the transcendental, from that which lies beyond objectivity to that which lies this side of subjectivity. What, in the structure of rational consciousness, is necessarily the case in order that knowledge and experience should be possible? This is the question posed by the transcendental-subjective turn that dominated philosophy from Descartes to Kant.

Then, with Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche, the task of philosophy took another turn. Philosophy fell into time. Kant's categories of understanding shared with Plato's Ideas an immunity to time. Kantian categories, too, were put forward as eternally necessary structures. Hegel doubted their permanence. He became preoccupied with the *history* of forms of consciousness. Marx recast the Hegelian dialectic in terms of the historical succession of different means of material production. Nietzsche inquired into the *genealogy* of morals. The focus of philosophy had shifted not only from transcendent objects to immanent subjects, but, during the nineteenth century, from a subjectivity that was ahistorical to a subjectivity that was intensely historical. Things change, and so does the structure of subjectivity.

To continue this high-speed historical setting of the stage for the current crisis of philosophy, let us follow Richard Rorty in speaking of the *linguistic turn* as the twentieth century's successor to the *historical turn* in the nineteenth century, and the *subjective turn* taken by Descartes and Kant in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The linguistic turn has not *solved* all the problems that plagued philosophers of a more metaphysical or epistemological bent. Instead it has *dissolved* or relocated many of the old puzzles. In its Anglo-American version, with Wittgenstein and his followers, many of the old puzzles are dismissed as "language gone on holiday"—merely semantic confusions that could be cleared up once we get more careful about what we say and how we say it. In its continental version, with Heidegger and his followers, language, not subjectivity, is recognized as "the house of Being," but there is much less attention to keeping a tidy house. Poetry is permitted. Still, there is an equally vehement will to destroy the tradition of Western metaphysics. God is dead, and we will not let him live on as a stowaway in words and concepts that carry the baggage of eternity.

Where the Anglo-American tradition tends to trivialize the great questions that preoccupied philosophers of old by subjecting them to increasingly technical analyses of the language in which they are cast, the continental tradition has steered itself clear of the trivial only to end up in the box canyon of nihilism. Thus philosophy in the twentieth century, following the subjective, the historical, and the linguistic turns, has ended up in a double dead-end. Take your choice: technical trivialization or poetic nihilism. Neither is terribly appealing to the poor person in the street who, if interested in philosophy at all, is more likely to turn to Plato than to Donald Davidson or Derrida.

I don't want to dismiss the achievements of twentieth century philosophers. The forked path of twentieth century philosophy had to be played out, in English and in European. It was a dirty job and some

people had to do it. But now it's done, and the rest of us are left with a need...and nothing to fulfill or satisfy that need.

2. The Need

What is the need? Quite simple, really. We want to make some sense of our lives. We want to be able to believe that what we do each day is neither trivial nor nothing worth doing. We want to have a sense of direction, and a way of distinguishing good from evil. We would like to have something to tell our children. We would like to think we are building a better tomorrow, and not just squandering the last of the wine before leaving a devastated earth in our industrial wake...And somehow, in our naivete, we thought that philosophy might help us with such questions. We don't like to hear that philosophers have proven that such questions are meaningless or unanswerable. We are not likely to cease asking such questions. And if philosophers refuse to help us in answering these questions, then too many people are likely to take them elsewhere: to the astrologers, or to the psychoanalysts, or to the mystics, or to the investment bankers. There are people out there with answers...for a price.

Academic philosophers have, for the most part, abdicated the field. It is not just a question of living after the linguistic turn. There is also the politics and sociology of knowledge in the contemporary academy to consider. Tenure was once a means toward the end of protecting non-conformity; now it has become an end in itself, to which the means are conformity—conformity to the confines of disciplinary specialization. But philosophers of old sought a synoptic vision. Even a technician as rigorous as Wilfred Sellars insists that philosophy is a matter of “seeing how things, in the largest sense of the term, fit together, in the largest sense of the term.” This task of making sense of things, in a very large sense of the term, very few academic philosophers attempt. Academic deans are responsible for awarding promotions, but they are not usually students of philosophy. Because they need clear proof of incremental progress in an assistant professor's chosen field, there are far more rewards for finite steps than for valiant attempts to grapple with the infinite and ineffable. Better to build a career by figuring out how adverbs work than by seeking something as elusive as wisdom. Philosophy as the love of wisdom is as ridiculous in the academy as romantic love in a bordello. Which is not to condemn either academies or bordellos, but just to put philosophy in its proper place. But where, if not the academy, is philosophy's proper place?

3. The Setting

What about Esalen Institute? Founded in the early 1960's by Michael Murphy and the late Richard Price, Esalen occupies an Edenic site overlooking the Pacific Ocean in Big Sur, California. Esalen is a place of learning, but there are no professors and no students, no curriculum, no grades and no graduation ceremony. Instead there are workshops and conferences lasting sometimes a weekend, sometimes a week, some open to the public, some by invitation only. Some of the invitational conferences go on for years, gathering the same group of people together again and again to probe one question or another in an idyllic setting where it is hard to get a hold of a copy of *The New York Times* that is less than a couple of days old.

The contents of this volume are the result of a series of conferences held over a three year period, mostly at Esalen. With the aid of a generous three-year grant from Laurance Rockefeller, the Esalen Institute Program on Revisioning Philosophy was initiated in 1986. Michael Murphy, who majored in philosophy as an undergraduate at Harvard, but then fled from the technicians in the graduate program at Stanford, decided to initiate a series of conferences that would gather together a group of philosophers to entertain the great questions. He asked me to serve as director of the program, and, together with Huston Smith, we sought out a gradually increasing circle of searchers who were not embarrassed to wade in where more cautious inquirers might fear to tread. The discussions gained momentum, and in August, 1989, we gathered close to a hundred philosophers from around the world for a five-day meeting at St. John's College, Cambridge, under the conference title, "Philosophy and the Human Future." This volume contains a number of papers that were presented in a similar form at Cambridge, though several have been written, modified and reworked in light of what was heard during that memorable week.

Even a cursory look at the table of contents will reveal the fact that not all of the contributors are registered members of departments of philosophy. This is not the place to single out individuals or name names. Readers are encouraged to refer to the "Notes on Contributors" section at the end of the volume. This is the place to pause on the questions that brought this remarkable group of professionals and non-professionals together in dialogue, and to orient the reader toward what he or she will encounter in the pages that follow.

4. A Framework

At our first conference early in 1986 we found ourselves reaching for Aristotle's four causes as a framework for understanding the ways that contemporary philosophy has become constricted. In the *Metaphysics* Aristotle distinguished material causes from formal causes, and efficient causes from final causes. Let us take each in turn.

Material Cause

With a few notable exceptions such as the pre-Socratics, Marx, and John Dewey's rarely acknowledged fascination with the work of F. Mathias Alexander, philosophers have had very little interest in or patience with the material or bodily dimension of existence. Ever since Plato set philosophy on an upward course that shunned the body, philosophers have been much more preoccupied with Being rather than becoming, with mind rather than matter, with ideas rather than feelings, with form rather than content, with the necessary rather than the merely contingent. Physical existence, whether in the form of the human body, or the lowly means of physical production and reproduction, or the merely contingent contents of formal structures, has exercised far less attraction to philosophers than lofty concepts like Truth, Justice and Eternal Law. But the lowly contents of time and existence is where we live each day. And the body, as is nowhere more clearly the case than at Esalen, is more than a mere chassis to be steered by autonomous mind. Emotions and passions are not just ideas that have gone wrong by getting mired in the body. But philosophers, with only a few exceptions, have done little to sort out the roles of body, matter and passion in the affairs of mind. This shortcoming of philosophy we were committed to set right. Esalen is a place noted for its attention to bodies. Sulphur hot springs that were sacred to the Esalen Indians, and a tradition of massage, have attracted the world's leading practitioners of somatics to Esalen. What better place to integrate an attention to the body into the love of wisdom? What better place to revision philosophy in a way that would add the flesh and blood so palpably missing at meetings of the American Philosophical Association?

Nor were we constrained by literalism in the pursuit of flesh and blood. Among the material causes of contemporary life are the lowly mechanics and plumbing of life we call business and commerce. On the fringes of the academy one can find philosophers engaged in philoso-

phy of law, philosophy of medicine, philosophy of religion, philosophy of art, philosophy of just about every dimension of life except for business. True, one can find the occasional "business ethics" course being ridiculed as based on an oxymoron. But aside from trying to operate as a conscience to greedy investors, very few philosophers have anything to do with the business world. Few ask questions about the ontology of information, even as we shift from an industrial to an information-based economy. Few inquire into the relationship between business and politics, even as corporations take over from governments in the driver's seat of history. Without becoming a Marxist or a materialist, a philosopher could do worse than inquire into the material causes of contemporary life to get a sense, in the largest sense of the term, of its direction, in the largest sense of that term. So this volume begins with a section entitled "Philosophy Incarnate." This section includes essays on the earth, the environment, the emotions, and the body.

Formal Cause

If the earth, the emotions and the body can be taken to represent a realm of material causes too profane to hold the interest of respectable philosophers, then mystical experience has been taken as too close to the sacred for philosophers to discuss. As Sellars succinctly put it, "You can't eff the ineffable." But surely there *is* more to say about the unsayable: how it fits into the rest of our loquacious lives; what role it does or does not play in the rest of existence; whether there is or is not some shadow of eternity that escapes the ravages of time; whether, in short, there is any content to a perennial philosophy? Such questions, which threaten to draw one onto the turf of theology, are generally relegated to the fringe of philosophy of religion. But if anything remains of *formal cause*, then a preoccupation with this northern point on the Aristotelian compass of causes calls for a bracketing of the questions of divinity. Whether God is dead or not, *something* may still retain the necessity of eternal forms. *Something* may transcend the historical relativism of different ages, the cultural relativism of different traditions, the linguistic relativism of different nations. But what? And how would we know it if we saw it? In what language would we describe it? Might our only access be through some mystic experience? In this overture I can do no more than sound a few notes that anticipate a leitmotif that will return in several of the essays that follow, a leitmotif I prefer to think of under a rubric as philosophical and a-theological as possible: *formal cause*. Taken together, Aristotle's formal cause and material cause represent the poles of a vertical dimension variously referred to as the 'ontological hierarchy,' or as the map of the 'hylomorphic tradition'

(*hyle*=matter, *morphe*=form). For the moment let us not prejudge whether this map represents a territory. Let us admit that there is a danger of reifying words into Concepts, ideas into Ideas, talk of a material, physical aspect of things into Prime Matter. But let us also admit that in its eagerness to avoid these premature reifications, recent philosophy has outlawed inquiry into certain *experiences* that nevertheless remain an important part of human life. Somewhere between the neo-Platonist's insistence on eternal Ideas and the mystic's experience of the sacred, there is still a job for philosophy that is not theology. Somewhere between the businessman's talk of strategy and the masseuse's silent manipulations, there is room for a philosophical discourse that risks sounding too profane for the scholarly journals. Whether or not the hylomorphic dimension represents any real territory, its vertical reach from the sacred to the profane can serve at least as a way of referring to the sorry fact that philosophy in this century has been truncated to the safety of a middle realm where the risks of sacred form and profane matter are studiously avoided. This volume ends with a section devoted to the place of spirituality in experience, and to the question of the content of a perennial philosophy.

Efficient and Final Causes: Past and Future

If formal cause is the north pole and material cause the south pole on Aristotle's compass, then let efficient cause lie to the west and final cause to the east. Then the temporal dimension, from past to future, will point in the conventional direction, from left to right, and will serve as a horizon orthogonal to the vertical arrow towards eternity. Remember: it's just a map. But again it will serve as an orderly way of referring to what is too often ruled out of court in the middle realm of contemporary philosophy: the whence and whither of past and future.

The past is dismissed with several distinct but related arguments. Let us count the ways. First there is the fear of the *genetic fallacy*: just because you know something's origins—its efficient cause—it does not follow that you know its true nature or value, which may be a function of its formal, material or final cause. Second, there is in some quarters a disdain for a kind of philosophizing that smacks of mere history of ideas—a survey of what was said by The Greats, but without sufficient analysis of the truth value of their utterances. Third, in roughly the same quarters there lurks a related belief that *real* philosophy began with Bertrand Russell, and that everything before him, with the possible exception of Frege, represents a hopeless muddle of metaphysics, theology, and the sloppy use of language. Fourth, in very different circles, where poetry is preferred to logic, there is nevertheless a will to

deconstruct or destroy the tradition of western metaphysics. Fifth, there is simple forgetfulness, a kind of cultural amnesia bred of bad education, leaving treasures of contemplation lost in libraries only rarely visited. Sixth, in still other circles, there is an explicit rejection of so-called 'historicism,' which can mean too many different things to discuss in detail in this purposely cursory context. Suffice it to say that, consciously or unconsciously, philosophers often pride themselves precisely for the *ahistorical* nature of our discipline, as if philosophy, almost uniquely among other disciplines, were not meant to make progress through time, but only to offer alternative routes toward the eternal, necessary nature of things...in the largest possible sense. Perish the thought that we should become preoccupied with yesterday's headlines. But no less a philosopher than Hegel is said to have regarded the daily newspaper as his bible. The ebb and flow of daily events cannot be irrelevant to the nature of things; the contingent cannot be completely unrelated to the necessary. Nor is the more distant past without interest to those of us trying to make sure of the present. Whether or not philosophy makes progress in a cumulative way like some other disciplines, surely we still have a lot to learn both from the remembrance of the past and from the writings of past philosophers. Our whence gives a momentum to our whither. Despite the usual arguments and amnesia that remove history from the purview of contemporary philosophy, we need to overcome the truncation of tradition.

To listen to Allan Bloom (*The Closing of the American Mind*) or his teacher, Leo Strauss, *only* the reclaiming of tradition will save us. While agreeing with the lament for the loss of the past, I find their writings lacking in a recognition of the eastern point on the Aristotelian compass of causes: the future. To read Bloom and Strauss, it sounds as if the Western tradition has gone straight downhill since Plato, and that nothing will save us short of a Platonist philosopher-king who could, by rational argument rather than the use of force, restore the eternal order of things. But top-down restorations of order have a funny way of turning totalitarian. Philosophers have to watch their step when they claim to discern the pattern that everyone else must follow. Yet who else speaks for humanity when it comes to charting a path into the future?

Here we come to the thorny question that gave rise to the title of our conference at Cambridge, Philosophy and the Human Future. Once one begins to entertain the possibility that the human condition is not determined by some Platonic Form, once one has taken the historical turn and acknowledged that, at least since Hegel, we have fallen into time, then *final* causes—*teloi*, goals—become intensely interesting as constitutive of the meaning of the present. But what *are* these final causes, and how are they to be determined? Does any sophisticated

thinker in modern and postmodern times seriously believe in anything like *destiny*? Can anyone since Spinoza seriously engage in the kind of teleological reasoning that explains anything by saying, "It is as it is because it was *meant* to be so," or "So it must be because it is for the best"? Shades of Voltaire's *Candide*!

No, today we do not believe in destiny. But we do believe in evolution, not only in the evolution of species, but also in the evolution of consciousness. And once one grants that human history's arrow may be headed *somewhere*, then it behooves one to do more than monitor the momentum of the past. It behooves one to ask, in short, "Where are we going and do we want to go there?"

A moment's attention to some of our global crises will be sufficient to raise a whole host of questions about the current momentum of history. Do we *really* want industrial development to lay waste the environment? Are we content to witness the extinction of countless species? Are we satisfied with a growing separation between the rich and the poor? Can we afford our current rates of population expansion for our own species? This litany of vexing questions is all too familiar, and one cannot quickly gainsay a Richard Rorty when he objects that, as far as he can see, philosophers are no better equipped than anyone else to deal with these issues. To the extent that contemporary philosophers *have* ignored the nitty-gritty content of the material and efficient causes of our current condition, we *are* ill-equipped to engage in useful discourse with technicians who know much more than we do about how the world around us actually works. But that doesn't mean we should give up on setting right what is out of joint. It only means that we should overcome our preference for formal causes to the exclusion of material and efficient causes, do some homework, and equip ourselves to engage the technicians without making fools of ourselves.

Someone ought to be asking these questions about where we are going as a species. If not philosophers, then who? Politicians? Heaven help us! Futurists? Having spent the last ten years working very closely with some of the foremost futurists, first at Stanford Research Institute and more recently with a wider network spread around the globe, I can report with confidence that the whole field of future studies is almost entirely preoccupied with descriptive scenarios, not normative scenarios—how the world is *likely* to be, not how it *ought* to be. When it comes to saying how the world *ought to be*, futurists—myself included when I don that hat—retreat to the specialization of the expert technician and mutter words to the effect of, "That's not our business, how the world *ought* to be. We leave that to the philosophers."

So, alas, we are back to where we started, at our own doorstep, and the buck stops here. Ill-equipped or not, philosophers have a job to do,

and it has something to do with helping the rest of humanity frame the issues on which humanity as a whole—not only philosophers—must decide. This is an intensely democratic project. It is not philosophy's job to *tell* everyone else where they should be going and how to get there. That, I believe, is the dangerous delusion under which Platonists like Leo Strauss and Alan Bloom labor. Nor is it sufficient to lapse into relativism, let a thousand flowers bloom, and retreat into the university while self-seeking anarchy reigns in the marketplace. To a truly alarming degree, our collective future is now being determined by twenty-six-year-old investment bankers who could care less about what *ought* to be.

Philosophy can neither yield to the babel of countless individual preferences, nor announce some collective destiny by descending, like Moses, with tablets that were taken in dictation from some formal and eternal blueprint in the sky. Time is real. History happens. It is our responsibility as philosophers to see that history doesn't just happen to us, but that we human beings have a hand in shaping a future that is better than the past, not worse.

This business of *shaping the future* is what human freedom is all about. It's not easy. It can be left neither to overt tyrants, nor to the subtler tyranny of technical expertise. If either the tyrants or the technicians take over, the freedom of the many is sacrificed to the shaping ability of a few.

Shaping the future has been the preoccupation of Marxists and existentialists more than most other schools of philosophy. Marxism lies discredited by its historical consequences. Existentialism, as a philosophy, remains too caught up with the freedom and future of isolated individuals. What is needed, if you will, is a *social existentialism*—a philosophy that takes freedom more seriously than Marxism does, but also takes the needs of society more seriously than existentialism does. So far, the philosophy that seems closest to filling this bill is the philosophy—if such it may be called—of democracy. So this volume contains a debate over the demands made upon us by true democracy, and a discussion of the conflicting demands of the individual and the collective. What with the remarkable events of late 1989 and 1990 in Eastern Europe, it would seem that our discussions leading up to Cambridge in August, 1989, could not have been more timely.

Though the contributors to this volume may be in agreement on the need to revision philosophy—to push out the envelope of contemporary philosophy from its academic constriction toward the sacred and profane, toward the past and the future—this spirit of agreement does not extend to a tidy description of what is to be found in those wider reaches. Important differences divide the approaches taken by the participants in these discussions. Raised voices and furrowed brows were

frequent in our discussions. Deeply held beliefs were contested. The principles on which lives are based were put up for debate and rendered vulnerable to critique.

Among the issues that divide the contributors to this volume are the following. Some see the history of human consciousness as a path toward eternal truths that can be glimpsed through spiritual practice. Others are devoutly secular, and see the evolution of consciousness as more like biological evolution, branching off into many directions, not converging toward some pre-destined *telos*. Some see cultural diversity as a veneer over a deeper unity, others see cultural differences as more fundamental and less amenable to translation. Some see philosophy as a handmaid to onto-theology; others see philosophy as the best we can do after the irredeemable death of god. Some see the profession of teaching in colleges and universities as the proper calling for philosophers; others have left academia altogether. But the contributors to this volume are all very much alike in pursuing the love of wisdom with a combination of seriousness and playfulness, boldness and integrity. For their willingness to debate basic issues, and for their courage in deviating from the professional straight and narrow, I want to salute the contributors to this volume.