The Universe in Brief

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Here's how to think about the universe. It's a skein, fabric, or—better—tangle, like rough twine tied and twisted together back and forth in snarls. It's a mess, not a grid. There are many strings, or perhaps there is a single string, forming something like a fabric at a distance, consisting of myriad knots closer up. Each knot is an individual and each individual a knot; it has a distinct form and location and physical composition. Each knot consists, without remainder, of string connecting it to other nodes of the skein; each individual is itself only as and in relation. Different points of view on the skein produce different perspectives, so that at a wider angle larger structures emerge; nevertheless, the skein itself does not depend from any point of view, interpretation, or description, though such things as these are actually themselves part of the skein. The tangle is continually being deformed, as though one person were holding it on each side and each was performing a random set of up-and-down and side-to-side motions, so knots keep coming undone, new tangles emerge, and so on. And the whole thing is fraying and disintegrating.

It's true that "the fabric of reality" is an old saw or the merest cliché; you keep running into it everywhere, from Confucius to the Greeks to the latest popularization of string theory or what I am calling knot theory: the theory of entanglements; universe as macramé or crochet. From one point of view, the fact that I am harping on a cliché is a drawback. From another, it suggests that we've latched on to some fundamental insight. It would not be surprising if the true nature of the universe were surprising. But it would not be surprising if the true nature of the universe were not surprising; maybe it's something we're fundamentally acquainted with every day. On the other hand, a lot of metaphors might be worth playing with, and you're always trying to decide what is and what is not a mere metaphor.

With regard to the science or everyday experience of the knotscape, we could pick out indefinitely many structures or introduce various ontological ordering principles for various purposes: taxonomies of knots or of subknot elements that show the structure of particular knots (precisely the function of skein analysis in knot theory) or a table of elements. In some sense, what counts as a knot has to be fixed and is a question: the question of whether that tangle is a single knot or a stack of knots or not even a knot always implicates a particular standpoint that is being taken up, or the rough conventional ontology. You could pick out indefinitely many structures or introduce various ontological ordering principles for various purposes. But for a given claim to be true, the skein has really to be as the claim says it is. There are multiple correct systems of representation of the skein, but there are also incorrect ones. And though the system by which knots are individuated can yield to convention and circumstance, there are often perfectly definite answers to questions within such a system: no, that one can't be part of that one.

The way we order the array into individuals is not whimsical or merely conventional, however. Indeed, if we did not order our experience of the world more or less the way the world actually is, we would long ago have been extinguished. We order the world from within the world, as part of the world. If we didn't distinguish lions from various portions of their and our shared environment, we'd merely be prey. Nevertheless, of course, the body of the lion or the human being is not fully distinct from its surroundings, and as the lion is breathing, seeing, smelling, eating, excreting, growing, aging, it is in interchange. We are actual creatures functioning in an actual environment; we are, of necessity, continuously responsive to actual features of it in their emergence through us. We have to "mirror" reality, we might say, but I see attention and perception as much more intimate than that, as an actual taking-in of external objects: perception and description are entanglements, in which the knot that is oneself gets snagged on something or snarled up in a different order.

2.

Though I hope that many of the positions advocated in this book are radical or at least provocative, I take a classical approach to the matter of what philosophy is. As I understand it, philosophy is concerned with questions about ultimate values, each of which stands at the apex of a dimension of value: truth, knowledge, goodness, justice, and beauty. And as the above passage suggests, I take philosophy also to be concerned with characterizing or describing the world at the most general or fundamental level (the traditional task of "metaphysics" or "the question of truth"). I talk about these matters directly here, or at least I intend to. The goal is not a factual characterization of the world's ultimate constituents or figuring out what are the basic subatomic particles, for instance (though a true metaphysics must be consistent with accurate

scientific theories), but the aesthetic project of creating a picture of what there is and how it all hangs together, in all senses of "hang."

That is, I regard philosophy as, among other things, the collection of its sub-disciplines, including metaphysics, logic, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, and political philosophy. Mine, we might say—or you might say—is a painfully reactionary conception of the field; I love the traditional philosophical questions, actually. Now the idea of philosophy as the attempt to characterize the ultimate nature of reality, truth, goodness, beauty, and so on sounds both woolly and grandiose, and it is. Many people, including many philosophers, would reject or have actually rejected such a project as ill-defined, impossible, or without use or results and any particular realization of it as unjustifiable, rationally arbitrary, and purposeless. These are serious objections.

But though I am not necessarily compelled to write books, I am compelled to address myself to philosophy as a project, whether it is a defensible or wholesome project or not. One might call this impulse morbid abstraction: I have a tendency to try to draw the most general conclusions from any set of data; I always gravitate to the widest possible generalization. This might be problematic or even pathological. But it is my problem and pathology, and of course I am not completely alone in having that impulse. I suppose I could say that the question of whether it is a profitable enterprise can only be answered by examining the upshot of actual attempts. But I could also merely say that whatever the profit to be derived or costs undertaken, it is not a project I have ever felt I could actually avoid. One could think of it as an inquiry, with whatever results an inquiry might have—increased knowledge, control of the environment, personal prestige, wisdom, and so on—or not. One could think of it more as an art project or as a form of play, an amusement or distraction. In fact, I think it is all of those.

It is occasionally held that philosophy is a fundamental human need or impulse. We are creatures that reflect, it is said, and we want to know why we are what we are and where we are. But though philosophy is my profession, or my hobby, or my derangement, I don't think it's everybody's. This seems evident from the fact that sales of philosophy books are miniscule or the fact that most folks cannot name a single living philosopher. I don't necessarily decry this situation, any more than I think most people have to collect stamps or skateboard. I've hung around with many people who seemed to get on quite well without philosophy—or who found the whole way of thinking profoundly alien—including many of the people to whom I've tried to teach it and many people whose intellects I respect. No doubt in more or less all human lives questions arise that edge into philosophical territory, questions like whether it's ok to do things like x, or whether they should expect anything to answer their prayers. But for most folks, a quick rationalization is as good as a well-worked theory, or better, or what most people say is a good enough guide to what it is reasonable to believe. I've known many such people who seemed happy and also some deeply reflective people

who seemed miserable. But some people are drawn inexorably toward joyful, or compulsive, or morbid reflection on what the whole world is and what they are within it. Some people find in such reflection a source of pleasure, possibly perverse, as well as a source of puzzlement or a job. I am such a person, and I suppose I am directing this book at such people, though I welcome sales to any demographic segment, including stamp collectors and skateboarders.

My characterization of philosophy makes it the pursuit of answers to "the eternal questions." Even the possibility of questions or values that persist in the same form across ages or cultures would be widely rejected today, or perhaps we have reached the point where it doesn't have to be rejected, so obvious to everyone is it that the whole approach is baldly ridiculous. You can't come out of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Dewey, Wittgenstein, cultural anthropology, Freud, and Foucault talking about ultimate objective eternal values with a good conscience, and if we know anything, we know that conceptions of truth, or of the good life, or of God, emerge only within practices, cultures, languages, forms of life, relations of power, and so on.

Indeed, Nietzsche and Foucault, among others, make us see that the claim of access to such values—the claim to know what they are—is often an assertion of power. An old girlfriend of mine used to say, "When I hear the word 'truth,' I reach for my pistol." That is, if people were telling her what the truth was, they were disqualifying her, seeking to oppress her. She actually had a pistol in her underwear drawer. Priests tell you what the truth is, and the truth enriches and empowers the Church. The people who write the standardized tests tell you what the truth is, and your life will be circumscribed if you don't all fill in the same little circles.

It is not only a political suspicion. The ultimate values have been exploded—exploded thoroughly and repeatedly—intraphilosophically, as we might say. Starting at latest with Hume, arguments were put forward to the effect that insofar as such values were conceived to transcend ordinary sensible experience, the words by which we try to refer to them are meaningless; Hume retrenched to practice, custom, and rules commonly agreed on. Indeed, the critique is ancient: in the first century B.C., Lucretius was busy setting in dactylic hexameter a raw materialism admitting no overarching purpose and trying to give ethics a feet-on-the-ground origin in actual pleasures and pains. On such grounds the logical positivists proclaimed all the so-called eternal questions either trivial or meaningless and sentences expressing or explaining them mere grunts of pleasure or displeasure. Justice doesn't change the color of that solution in your beaker, and though our telescopes have peered deeply into the universe, they haven't suddenly come across Truth out there glowing like a nebula.

Not only that, but many philosophers have argued that we get on quite well day to day without eternal truths or a universal conception of flawless Beauty, and it is a fact that thousands of years of inquiry into these ideas has not produced a consensus of opinion on such matters or even very widely held standards by which good

answers could be distinguished from bad ones. The pragmatists asked what "goodness" or "knowledge" or "God" actually do to guide us in our experience; that, they held, was the entire content of these concepts. The values shift with the needs we are trying to address and the projects we are trying to bring to completion. They are our values, developed in relation to our purposes. William James said that truth was what worked in our experience and that an assertion or theory was true for as long as it worked, or true to the extent that it worked; every assertion or theory that was true was true provisionally, locally, and true in relation to specific people's actual problems, situations, or conventions.

Now probably ultimately my position on these matters is indeed reactionary, and with a slight dose of irony or self-consciousness I do hold that there is something we are trying to grasp in these basic questions, some substance or subject matter that they actually do indicate, and some tasks to which they are indispensable even in their apparently transcultural or transhistorical forms. Different cultures and different eras and different individuals might approach these matters from different angles or reveal them from different perspectives, but the questions are real questions, in my view.

3.

Many of these strands of critique have concluded from the alleged fact that the ultimate values are illusions that philosophy is over. Indeed, there is no matter on which a greater proportion of important philosophers of the last 150 years have agreed than that philosophy is finished, or just about to be. Nietzsche thought so. Heidegger thought so. Perhaps James and Dewey thought so, at least in the sense in which philosophy was going to yield generally or cross-temporally viable answers to its big questions. Carnap thought so. Wittgenstein. Derrida. Rorty. Now this represents something of a back-handed concession to, though also a slap at, the sort of characterization of philosophy I have been urging. These figures do, in fact, regard philosophy as being, or as having been, engaged in the attempt to elucidate the Big Questions, even if they thought that they had shown that there were no answers to such questions or even any questions. More significantly, perhaps, and more relevantly to the present project, the critiques that attack or dismiss the questions are, of course, also attempts to address them. The question of what truth is might be answered by saying it's like an eternal sun glowing in an infinite sky. Or it might be answered by saying that there's no such thing as truth, or that the concept of truth is trivial, or even that we should cease asking the question of truth. Each of those is, equally, philosophy.

I am willing, in other words, to count any engagement with these questions—including giving reasons why they should be abandoned or why they never actually arose in the first place—as philosophy, and as a matter of fact, the rejection of philosophy has historically been part of philosophy. Now, the rejection of science can-

not, itself, be part of science, and the rejection of religion cannot be part of religion, exactly. Art, however, has included the rejection of art at least since early in the twentieth century, which is perhaps a kind of analogy here. It is strictly possible that philosophy or metaphysics could cease to exist, as philosophers from Carnap to Heidegger to Wittgenstein to Rorty have proclaimed that it has or will. But it certainly does not cease to exist in the works of these figures themselves, as they brutalize previous conceptions of truth or goodness or throw doubt on the legitimacy of such concepts altogether. Honestly, I don't think they can do without at least some of these notions even in their attack on them, but whether they can or not, they are just as engaged in the philosophical questions as were the rank metaphysicians they historicize or deconstruct. To end philosophy, you'd have to leave it, cease doing it, go do something else, shut up and play badminton. Rejecting it, with arguments, for the length of a book or career, *is* it.

I have my own ways of trying to brutalize various moments, movements, figures in the philosophical tradition, my own set of objections to values as glittering eternal abstract objects, and so on. But I would like my objections to be direct: I think Plato was wrong about what justice is. I have a more or less materialist ontology, for example, and when I assert that everything that exists is a physical object, I realize that there are many difficulties with or obscurities in my position, and there are many cultural resonances and local reasons that I have the position I do. I would like to be reflective about these to whatever extent that is possible. But I also want to be taken as flatly asserting that the only things that exist are physical objects. When Aristotle, for example, said to Plato that his ontology of Forms was wrong, he was raising related objections to the same position. Well, that would take some care, and whatever modern materialism is, it is not precisely the same as, for example, ancient atomism. But that, too, is still subject to elucidation, and we have not lost the ability to ask and to try to answer some of the very same questions raised by the Greeks.

It is easy to regard this in a hypersimplistic and entirely dehistoricized way, to think you can be in a direct dialogue with Plato and ignore the innumerable, extremely complex developments of understanding and vocabulary—the long series of translations—that come between ourselves and Plato and account for both the illusion of our proximity to him and for the real distance between us. One has to engage in these complexities as responsibly as possible or, at any rate, as best one can. But I would be lying if I said that I don't regard the project of this book as being the same project assayed by Plato, by Descartes, by Hume, by Kant, by Hegel. My understanding of these problems, and the solutions I affirm, are different than theirs for many reasons, among others that they come from a different time and place. But they are also located in the same history. That there is continuity in the questions through all the innumerable transformations is something I will also insist on. Well, there is continuity in the human organism, and in its environment, and in social systems,

and in texts, even as there are also profound transformations. I hope that readers who are inclined to regard the project as reactionary or misguided will be relieved at the radicalness or weirdness of some of the answers and at my suspicion of my own foundations—or of any foundations.

And if—and I will argue for this—the truth of the claims I make, or the truth of metaphysical (or ethical, or aesthetic) claims in general, is not subject to scientific test, or even ultimately to any clear or specific form of empirical confirmation or refutation, I do not think it would follow that the question of their truth or falsity does not arise or that we have no equipment to assess it. Even if the answers to questions like this do not transform one's life or one's world, it would not follow, I believe, that they are not real questions or that any answer is just as good as any other. After all, we share this world in which we live. We are embedded in it utterly; we are some of its parts or regions or processes. We have some sense of where and what we are, though of course we often disagree about such matters. The truth, for me, about such claims begins with their truth to my person and my situation. Or, I might say that I am seeking answers that feel right or feel true. That is not a merely subjective test— vague though it is—insofar as I am not merely a subject but also an object and also a portion of a whole to which I am more than connected, which constitutes me and is partly constituted by me. The results of such a procedure cannot have the certainty of a mathematical demonstration or of a series of carefully performed experiments. But they can have the sort of certainty and the degree of certainty of ordinary claims we make in ordinary life: that I love you, for example; that that's the Conewago Creek. And those are truths that are certain enough for ordinary purposes. They are things about which it is possible to be right or wrong.

I regard philosophy with tremendous affection, and I would hate to see it be over. As I say, I don't think that more philosophers saying it's over will particularly threaten its continued existence, so I'm not necessarily that worried. And I could never see the urgency of ending it; surely, it is relatively harmless. Really, I don't ask for culture-wide sway—though I think sciencey types and literary people could use more philosophy than they have, often—but I do ask for continued tolerance of our existence in some little corner of the culture and the academy.

4.

Philosophy has, at least since Hegel, and ultimately as a strategy for self-destruction, been historicized. That is, it has been held that philosophical terms, concepts, styles, and arguments emerge only in particular contexts and are sensible only within those contexts. This is an "anti-Platonic" move, among other things. We do wrong, according to it, to think of the Greek term *dike* as picking out, in Platonic heaven, our concept of justice (if we have a shared concept of justice). We can translate the *Analects*

of Confucius into modern English; that does not mean we understand it. Concepts have histories: look at the meanings through the centuries or across cultures of various terms that might be translated as "beauty," for instance. Translation, famously, is indeterminate, and the full-fledged conceptuality of, say, the medieval period is inaccessible or always only seen through the lenses we actually do have. And if you don't worry about "beauty" or "justice" in this regard, well surely you ought to worry about "race" or "democracy." A famous case is Foucault on taxonomies of what we term *sexual orientation*: he holds that there were no homosexuals and also no heterosexuals before (if I'm recalling this correctly) 1878, and he shows in detail that the basic conception of sexuality as a dyadic selection between identities is something that developed at a certain time for certain purposes. He shows the same about "punishment," "guilt," "responsibility," and even "truth."

I think we need to take such claims seriously. But even if the basic concepts of philosophy develop or even reverse valence historically, even if the ways that analogous concepts developed historically are to some extent inaccessible, it does not follow that there's nothing we're doing when we try to elucidate these concepts. First of all, of course, there is a way, or there are ways, that the present emerges from the past. And, to some extent, these ways can be traced through careful translation, etymologies, immersive reading, and examination of as many features of historical context as possible. Even if such procedures are limited, they are also not entirely futile. Thomas Kuhn famously argued that science proceeds by shifts between "incommensurable" paradigms, though he ended up denying—as well he should have—that this lands you in total relativism, or that previous paradigms are entirely inaccessible, or that truth is only a feature of sentences or observations or theories within a paradigm. But also, the paradigms of science emerge out of one another, by elaboration, rejection, development, and reversal. There are continuities as well as discontinuities. We can't assure ourselves that we can think outside our own paradigms, and every claim to truth takes place within a certain moment, a certain set of conceptual structures, a certain linguistic situation. But our moments, structures, and languages emerge in an incredibly complex history out of others and in dialogue with others and with the world.

And even if some things that might be evident to the Greeks, or to the Hopi, are impossible to see from our perspective, certain things are also available to us that weren't to them. "Standpoint epistemology" argues that, for example, there are things that women can know that men can't, or that black people can know that white people can't. This, and vice versa, may well be true. But that itself presupposes that there is something that can be known about the world and about our social practices in the world. Seeing across standpoints is not fully possible. Seeing as broadly as possible from our own standpoint is important, and in fact every person occupies myriad standpoints over time. And putting various standpoints into dialogue is important as well. The standpoints, after all, are constituted in relation to one another. These

relations are fraught with complexity, with powers and projects, prejudices and blinders, communications and failures of communication. It does not follow that there is nothing we can do, only that we'd better do it with as much self-awareness as we can muster. And we ought to try, to whatever extent this is possible, to achieve awareness of the limitations and humility before them. We have to acknowledge that our point of view is our point of view. And then we have to try to see what we can see.

Some of these possibilities might include rather insouciant appropriations or crossings, or grabbing what we can use from here or there, or enriching our concepts with other concepts (though, of course, not merely dumping out our concepts and grabbing somebody else's, which is, I am admitting, a mere delusion). Even if we need care and humility and scholarship, we also need curiosity and courage and even carelessness. You can't know what works until you try. And one thing about treating philosophy in what we might term a nonpragmatic way, or about admitting that it does not necessarily have a lot of consequences and that most people couldn't care less, is that it is liberating. Truly, even if I am wrong about absolutely everything, that won't make millions of people starve or contribute significantly to climate change. More or less, philosophy is action without consequence (unless you get extremely lucky or unfortunate, like Locke or Confucius or Marx), and that is liberating. There is no point in being frozen by historicism or in other ways into inaction. Let's plow ahead and see what happens. Not much, I suspect, of any serious consequence (and I am provisionally grateful for that) but maybe much of intrinsic and fundamental interest to folks like us.

5.

If my conception of the subject matter of philosophy is untoward in its conservative rigidity, my conception of philosophical methodology is rather flexible. Philosophy is often enough associated with "reason," which ironically is one the most elastic concepts in the pantheon of concepts. Philosophy is sometimes said to have emerged in the Greeks with reason and to be characterized, at minimum, as the rational exploration of questions such as the nature of goodness, truth, beauty, and reality. Though "reason" and "rationality" are often deployed without a clear sense of the complexity and richness of those terms, I regard them as only part of the range of philosophical techniques. Various forms of emotional expression and persuasion, various dimensions of artistic construction or inspiration, and the asseveration of various forms of faith have also been employed, and when they are employed well, in my opinion, they are potentially just as legitimate as reason—whatever exactly that may be—as philosophical methods.

One might date philosophy from Plato's rational dialectic or from Aristotle's codification of the principles of logic. But one might also date it from the poetry of

Heraclitus or Parmenides: elusive, suggestive, aesthetic, though also argumentative and intended to be persuasive. Or one might associate it with Plato's myths. One might associate it with Descartes' method of systematic skepticism, but one might also associate it with the scholasticism Descartes rejected or a crisis of unbelief in the man himself: the attempt to reconcile reason and faith or dogma and argumentation. One might associate it with the attempt of Kant to put all the ultimate philosophical questions on a purely rational basis, or one might associate it with Kierkegaard's ecstatic and ironic affirmation of faith and the limits of knowledge and his creation of fictional scenarios and fictional authors. One might associate it with Hume's bold but meticulous reasoning or with Emerson's ecstatic essays constructed out of a series of ringing, unjustified aphorisms. One might associate it with the magnificent universal scope of the logic of Frege and Russell; or with the humble investigation of ordinary language of J. L. Austin; or with the oracular profundities of Heidegger; the grand speculative systems of Schelling, Fichte, Hegel; or the detailed archival examinations of Foucault. It can be sermon, poem, novel, painting, pudding. I think we should associate philosophy with all these things, all these texts, all these strategies, all these styles of prose and poetry, all these objects, and many others.

I started with the universe as a tangle of string. It's a metaphor, of course, though perhaps not only a metaphor, even if the string isn't actually hardware store twine. It is intended to have various effects. It was an attempt by me to clarify for myself what I actually did believe or could say about the way I see the universe at the most general level; I felt (somewhat) clearer about what I believed after I developed it than before. It is intended to persuade you, or rather to make you more sympathetic to, a certain (still quite obscure, of course) way of seeing the world; it is a rhetorical strategy or flourish. It is something I felt I could play with, like a kitten with a ball of twine, something that got and kept me writing for a while with some pleasure. And underneath it all, it was also an attempt to state the truth. These are not separable in the actual process of coming up with and setting out the figure.

As a matter of fact, philosophy as its history is actually told—to students, for example—does encompass all these styles, all these strategies, all these dimensions of formulation, and I would think that we should note that many of them might, in some sense, be expressed and exploited from the beginning, for example, in the dialogues of Plato: full of fictions, metaphors, myths, and mystical faiths as well as bulging with arguments and precise definitions. That is, I think philosophy has a coherent subject matter, elusive and beset with complexities as it is, but I do not think it has a single method or style or voice. I will not usually abandon reason (unless I can develop reasons to do so) or celebrate sheer irrationality for its own sake. But I do intend to broaden our sense of how philosophy has been done and how it might continue to be done.

I do not intend to conflate philosophy with poetry, or comedy, or science, and I do not intend to dismiss its claims to have a distinctive subject matter or to be con-

cerned with arriving at the truth. Only I think that there are many ways of arriving at the truth. Science can be a way—or many ways—of arriving at the truth, but so can certain forms of play, or certain forms of art, or sudden unaccountable flashes of intuition, or sudden direct illuminations from God, if there is a God (which I do not think there is). And if you ask me, any way of arriving at the truth is a good way, and we should try—at least provisionally—to open up as many as possible. There is no telling in advance what might shed light, or be persuasive, or clarify ourselves to ourselves, or what might hook on how to reality.

6.

Now if "philosophy" gives some people (especially some philosophers) the willies, the idea of "system" gives them to me. It is true, I think, that the great systems of philosophy—above all those of the German idealists: Kant, Hegel, Schelling, Fichte, and Schopenhauer, for instance—are among the most impressive achievements in the history of the human intellect. If my project were to do what Hegel did, or thought he did—explain all of the universe and the human relation to it from the ground up in a way that led to perfect self-consciousness—then I would have regarded the project as too intimidating to set out on. The project is intimidating enough, conceived as I conceive it.

Impressive as these systems are, they are, I believe, fantastic. Even if each hangs together within itself (which seems unlikely), it has abandoned what I might term *the weirdness of the real:* its recalcitrance to our categories; its unpredictability; its contingency; its arbitrariness; its excess to human experience. And each such system, to the extent it is successful in achieving its own goals, leaves behind also our strangeness to ourselves, our excess to ourselves, the ways we elude our own grasp. Fortunately and necessarily, there is deep obscurity at their heart: the unplumbed mystery that comes from trying to parse the syntax.

I will construct a system in the sense that I will try to take up the outstanding issues—many of them, at any rate—in the history of philosophy and formulate a set of answers that will, I hope, hang together fairly well with one another. But I will not seek certainty at the foundations, or I will deny that it is forthcoming. I will argue that at the heart of any picture of the universe is a faith, a commitment, that is ultimately personal: any philosophical system must rest on an inchoate and ultimately unjustified sense of where and what one is. There is no escaping this situation, I believe, and it is not entirely unsatisfactory. So the status of the claims I put forward is to try to capture and make compelling my own fundamental commitments and my own fundamental sense of where and what I am. Whether the stuff is true or not is, I believe, a genuine question. But for me it is of equal importance—and connected to the question of truth—that it is an honest representation of my real experience and thinking.

So if what follows is a system of philosophy, it is an antisystematic system: the goal is to open up to a world around and outside and running through us, not to constrain the world to the conditions of human reason or even consciousness. It is not a system that could give you the assurance that you now understand all that was before concealed in shadow. Even with these qualifications, however, I must remark that the idea of system remains problematic, and one is constantly in danger of being seduced away from the world by the niftiness of some notion or of the way a whole bunch of stuff hangs together. That is a danger to which philosophy has succumbed again and again, and though I cannot claim to have avoided it, I can at least say that I have been alert to the problem.

I am not sure there has ever been a more ponderous, less human, or more humorless discourse than systematic philosophy, though the first great systematizer—Plato, of course—had various semicomic and ironic moves at his disposal. Now humorlessness is, I believe, a problem. It's a failure of character. But it is also a symptom of the real problems of systematic philosophy: its lack of a sense of the limitations of the mind of the thinker. Even a Kant or Schelling made mistakes, harbored prejudices, had to start where he actually was, however he portrayed himself or whatever authorial voice he took up. The groping, confusion, and doubt are erased. There is not a hint of the actual comedy continually being enacted: a finite, merely human intellect, suffering as it may be from a head cold, speaking in a voice and with a knowledge the model of which is God, slipping continuously on banana peels that it is itself strewing around itself. We might call it Satanic. It is an infinite ambition carried on by a finite creature. In its incredible ambition, systematic philosophy is touching, noble, and redolent of tragic, excessive pride and the comical inability to pay off on the promises made in the preface.

My teacher Richard Rorty famously argued that philosophy is merely a genre of literature, and whether that's exactly true or not, philosophy is surely a way, or several ways, of writing, along with whatever else it is (an attempt to generate truths at the highest level of generality, for example). One of these modes or styles of writing is the style of the German system makers: huge, immensely complex sentences chock full of clauses; a new jargon of technical terms for each system; passive voice; absence of the first person. And where the problems become intractable or transhuman, obscurity fills the gap between the knowledge that can be possessed by an actual human subject and omniscience; you feel that if you could fully grasp the vocabulary, you'd see that the problem was solved or the darkness illuminated after all, even as you continue to sit there in the dark. That, indeed, is the seductive power of system: the very idea that someone has seen everything, that there are answers, even if you could spend a lifetime trying to figure out what the author actually meant. This leads philosophers toward the temptation to become acolytes: of Plato, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Wittgenstein.

In part, the material demands a very elaborate and difficult expression. And, in part, the elaborate and difficult expression is a rhetorical strategy. One thing it certainly accomplishes: it makes it a badge of extreme cultivation and intelligence to have read these books; the prestige of the books varies with their difficulty. To have read and understood Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* or Heidegger's *Being and Time* (or to be able plausibly to claim to have read and understood them) shows that you are a very smart person. To have written them, of course, is to show an intelligence (and an industry) that is apparently more than human, which is why reading them confers this prestige.

But there are, in fact, many styles in philosophy. The great contrast to the German system is the sort of extreme clarity first assayed by Aristotle and shown in different forms, for example, in Hume or Quine. The differences between Hume and Kant on the issues of philosophy have been formulated many times, but the difference is as easily captured in their ways of writing as in their actual positions. And the ways of writing also reflect this: Hume was satisfied with, or even gloried in, the limitations of the intellect that he identified and experienced; Hegel, for example, was dedicated to overcoming such limitations, and he advanced a discourse that eventually took no limitations seriously. So Hume wants you to understand what he's saying as precisely as possible. Hegel needs to give you a sense that he's not quite saying absolutely everything, but he just might.

At any rate, if we think of philosophy as a literary genre—which I would not, exactly—we need to think of some of its eccentrics, poets, ironists, comedians. Pascal, for example, with his humility and seemingly infinite irony; Nietzsche with his whip-like aphorisms; Diderot with his forays of wit and refusal of system; James, showing the extent to which interminable difficult arguments can be cast into everyday language; Austin happily wandering about in the funny ways people actually talk; Wittgenstein with his artful deflection of philosophical questions; and so on.

Looking at the table of contents for this book, it will seem pretty ponderous: a good doorstop; a brick of human thought suitable for use as a weapon if still shrink-wrapped. But I hope I can inscribe in this writing not only a sense of ambition but an awareness of limitation, not only solutions but a sense of the provisionality of all solutions, and the sense of a limited and eccentric voice even amidst the resolution to tackle the whole damn thing from top to bottom.

7.

So I hope that this book does not represent a system in quite the traditional sense. Indeed, if I can proceed by paradox, my system rests on the thought that reality is bristling with complexities or is infinitely rich and largely uncontrollable, or as H. L. Mencken put it: *Truth shifts and changes like a cataract of diamonds*.[1] It's precisely the

reality of the real or the volatility and hardness of truth that I want to emphasize and embrace, in the face of all systems that make the world our fantasy or our construction or our narrative. We do not make reality. Reality makes us. And here I turn from metaphilosophy to a bit of actual philosophy and history of philosophy by trying to say what I will be rejecting, or objecting to, in this book.

As Berkeley argued, some form of idealism is a gravitational result of empiricism, but it is also the pull of rationalism as historically constituted. The view that Descartes and Locke have in common is that we are immediately acquainted not with objects external to the mind but with ideas or sense impressions or, at any rate, representations. In my opinion, this is where Western philosophy went extremely, radically wrong; it is the place where philosophers—empiricists, rationalists, transcendental and absolute idealists, positivists, narrativists, and postmodernists—lost faith with the experience of which they were trying to give an account and with the world in which they were embedded. The idea that we are directly acquainted not with a world or with each other but with ideas or impressions or vocabularies or stories immediately suggests that one could dispense with the world that is represented entirely; the world appears to do no work. Berkeley shows the result as clearly as anyone: he simply razors the physical universe off and makes do with "ideas."

> The table I write on I say exists; that is, I see and feel it: and if I were out of my study I should say it existed; meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does. . . . For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things, without any relation to their being perceived, that is to me perfectly unintelligible. Their *esse* is *percipi*; nor is it possible they should have any existence out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them.[2]

Here is a typical presentation of this most fundamental error in Western philosophy, from Schopenhauer:

> The world is my representation: this is a truth valid with reference to every living and knowing being, although man alone can bring it into reflective, abstract consciousness. If he really does so, philosophical discernment has dawned on him. It then becomes clear and certain to him that he does not know a sun and an earth, but only an eye that sees a sun, a hand that feels an earth; that the world around him is there only as a representation, in other words, only in reference to another thing, namely that which represents, and this is himself. If any truth can be expressed a priori, it is this; for it is a statement of the form of all possible and conceivable experience . . . Therefore no truth is more certain, more independent of

all others, and less in need of proof than this, namely that everything that exists for knowledge, and hence the whole of this world, is only an object in relation to the subject, perception of a perceiver, in a word, representation.[3]

The idealists began with human consciousness, from which they created or inferred a universe: the Kantian "Copernican revolution" is precisely to turn from outward inward. In the famous preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant writes,

> Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them a priori, by means of concepts, have, on this assumption, ended in failure. We must therefore make trial of whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge.[4]

For my money, it's precisely at that foundational moment that Western philosophy becomes entirely fictional, more or less intentionally: it yields an invented rather than a discovered and explored universe.

If nothing else, Darwinism should have been the downfall of this movement: it must surely follow from natural selection that we, by and large, respond to, rather than make or manufacture, an environment. Kant held that space, time, and causation were (merely) necessary forms of consciousness or transcendental conditions of any possible experience. On a Darwinian conception, our perceptual apparatus and attendant representational systems are as they are because of their power to help the organism adapt to an external world, and that means, among other things, their ability to experience what is actually there. Perception is not the essence of being; it's a responsive process of an organism in a physical world. I hold that space, time, and causation are forms of our consciousness precisely because they are external aspects of the real world. This is not something that I feel can be demonstrated, but even on Kant's view, we must all more or less act as though it were true.

Near the beginning of Hume's *Treatise*, he says that "all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent."[5] Here we have multiplying layers of representation without a physical thing or a worldly situation making any sort of appearance: there's the flow of sensory experience—impressions, pictures—and then a faculty for copying or representing those pictures in turn in memory, and so on. Or through the surface grammar we express the deep grammar, through which we express. . . . We enter layers of subjectivity, trying to tease real objects out of impressions, impressions of impressions, impressions of those, words for words, and so on.

It is worth pausing, I believe, to meditate on the strangeness of a Carnap, who proposed to build the universe from "auto-psychological objects," just as though this were the most natural idea in the world.[6] It is certainly one of the most familiar moves in philosophy (e.g., Jerry Fodor calls it "methodological solipsism"), and Carnap himself invokes Husserl's "bracketing." He starts by constructing objects from the immediate contents of consciousness and then goes on from there. Indeed, he proposes that talk of auto-psychological objects and talk of physical objects are interchangeable, and he says that he could have started the other way round. However, he also calls the sense impressions or whatever they may be "the given." He insists that the whole exercise is "scientific," and on the empiricist side, thinkers were always presenting one or another version of phenomenalism as an elucidation of, or foundation of, or propaedeutic to science. But the idea of retreating completely to interior states has to do with absolutely anything but science, which is hardly ever concerned with anyone's mental imagery.

As late as the arch-antipositivist Quine, we are building worlds out of mental phenomena: "Our talk of external things, our very notion of things, is just a conceptual apparatus that helps us foresee and control the triggering of our sensory receptors in the light of previous triggering of our sensory receptors. The triggering, first and last, is all we have to go on."[7] Berkeley almost word for word, mutatis mutandis. Now Quine's formulation is carefully agnostic about whether "the triggering of receptors" is a physical world process of actual cones and rods, or whatever it may be, or an array of images in one's sensorium, and Quine's view is preferable to that extent.

But I suggest that *we help ourselves to the world*. Belly up to the smorgasbord. At any rate, no scientist worth her salt is investigating the triggering of her own sensory receptors; she is investigating some portion of the world. If we were trying to get down to the foundational epistemological level, and trying to produce "observation sentences," they would be actual observations—what we actually saw happen out there. And of course, for the most part, they are. Or perhaps you should add a layer to the double-blind placebo procedure: one in which the researchers reduce the data to the immediate contents of their own consciousnesses, or describe the series of sense impressions they are having before they describe what actually happened, or eliminate problems such as that they might have only dreamed they were performing the study. No scientist would describe the observations on which his paper is based in terms of his auto-psychological states, for extremely good reasons.

Making representational or syntactic/semantic systems into worlds is the characteristic derangement of modern philosophy. We could start with Descartes's ideas, or further back than that (I will explore this history), and continue with the empiricists and their sense impressions, and the idealists and their categories and forms of perception. The pragmatists, positivists, phenomenologists, poststructuralists, and narrativists emerged in a rejection of idealism and reinscribed it. In various ways, they overcame

idealist individualism of the sort that has Schopenhauer locating the world in each person's head, whatever in the world that could possibly mean, and brought out the social element of semantic systems. Heidegger, Derrida, Husserl; Ayer, Quine; Dewey, Mead, Rorty; vastly different, emerging out of idealism in various ways to various effects, extending Hegel or rejecting him; all anti-Cartesians, and so on. But the fundamental idealist or representationalist derangement runs ever at the flood.

Idealism is antinaturalistic, of course, and its rise with modern science, its attempts to make peace or provide phenomenalistic underpinnings for it and so on is a wild story, a battle between science and philosophy and between philosophy and experience that is wondrous in its extreme tensions and provisional reconciliations. One might compare it to the tensions between dogma and logic in Aquinas, for example. It is shocking how far apart from each other, how completely incompatible with one another, Enlightenment science and Enlightenment philosophy are. The logical positivists held that the purpose of philosophy was to describe the underpinnings of science, and they were phenomenalists; they held that all meaningful discourse must eventually reduce to "sensible contents," by which they meant representations in someone's mind. But you never seem to find actual scientists actually working from sense impressions; they report events: illnesses or chemical reactions, supernovas or the behavior of microparticles. The idea that one looks at the beaker as or through one's own impressions would be at best a completely otiose doctrine even if it were true in every case: that much wouldn't distinguish any experiment from any other, or any of them from any experience of any kind, even if the positivists were right in their phenomenalism. The idea that in scientific inquiry I'm really investigating my own sensations would be useless even if it were true. Also, it's not true. And if such an approach of breaking down objects into sensible experiences or representations ever actually pushed forward any particular investigation into some empirical subject matter, that would surprise me.

All kinds of uncanny mysteries arise with regard to auto-psychological objects, whether in my sensorium or my idiolect. Withdrawing to the level of representation, or explaining perception as representation, does not make us as lucid to ourselves as we would like; it just raises a host of new problems. In its positivist form, I think the doctrine was deftly destroyed by Austin in *Sense and Sensibilia*, which is one of the great artillery bombardments in the history of military philosophy. But Thomas Reid made the same point in relation to Hume's skepticism, which, said Reid, "leans with its whole weight upon a hypothesis which is ancient indeed, and hath been very generally received by philosophers, but of which I could find no solid proof," namely that there is a screen of ideas interposed between person and object.[8] We face, in idealism, positivism, phenomenology, linguistic constructivism, not only questions about the world externally to representation but about the representational system itself, which collapses into a system of differences, a pure syntax. Pretty soon you

can unleash the deconstructionists and let them undermine the pillars on which the whole world appears to stand.

<center>8.</center>

I might adduce an ally in Emerson:

> Along with the civil and metaphysical history of man, another history goes daily forward,—that of the external world,—in which he is not less strictly implicated. He is the compend of time; he is also the correlative of nature. His power consists in the multitude of his affinities, in the fact that his life is intertwined with the whole chain of organic and inorganic being. . . . A man is a bundle of relations, a knot of roots, whose flower and fruitage is the world. His faculties refer to natures out of him, and predict the world he is to inhabit, as the fins of the fish foreshow that water exists, or the wings of an eagle in the egg presuppose air. He cannot live without a world. . . . Does not the eye of the human embryo predict the light? the ear of Handel predict the witchcraft of harmonic sound? Do not the constructive fingers of Watt, Fulton, Whittemore, Arkwright, predict the fusible, hard, and temperable textures of metals, the properties of stone, water, and wood? Do not the lovely attributes of the maiden child predict the refinements and decorations of civil society? Here also we are reminded of the actions of man on man. A mind might ponder its thought for ages, and not gain so much self-knowledge as the passion of love shall teach it in a day. Who knows himself before he has been thrilled with indignation at an outrage, or has heard an eloquent tongue, or has shared the throb of thousands in a national exultation or alarm? No man can antedate his experience, or guess what faculty or feeling a new object shall unlock, any more than he can draw today the face of a person that he shall see tomorrow for the first time.[9]

Emerson's idea is that we are constituted as unique individuals by our real-world relations. In other moods and moments, Emerson is an idealist; in this one he characteristically reverses valence. And this might suggest, in turn, that we go right ahead and avail ourselves of the real word in explanation, both as something to be explained and a means for doing the explaining. That idea might stand as a summary of the philosophy of Emerson's protégé Thoreau.

And consider this, from Pascal:

> The parts of the world are all so related and so linked to one another, that I believe it impossible to know one without the other and without the whole.

Man, for example, is related to everything he knows. He needs place to hold him, time to endure, motion to live, elements to constitute him, warmth and food to nourish him, air to breathe. He sees light; he feels bodies. In short he is in a dependent alliance with everything. To know man, then, we must know why he needs air to live, and to understand air, we must know that it is related to man's life, etc.

Flame cannot exist without air; therefore to understand the one, one must understand the other.

All things, then, are caused and causing, supporting and dependent, mediate and immediate; and all support one another in a natural, though imperceptible chain linking things most distant and different.[10]

For Pascal, this was part of a battery of arguments to the effect that knowledge was more or less impossible for creatures such as we are except through a miracle. But the right conclusion is that knowledge is always rummaging in connections, focusing in on something in its situations: muddling through with objects and their contexts. That's the dilemma of a little mind in a replete universe. The point to be going on with is that everything is related to everything in infinitely many ways, and everything is what it is in virtue of its relations, or is what it is in its situations.

You have to start somewhere, as I will be arguing. I don't think it helps to start with our own consciousnesses, which are little embedded bits of a big old world. If you need a given, then start with things in the world. Some of these things could be vague as things, or problematic postulates, and so on. Mostly they're just exactly what we're acquainted with all the time, what we are actually trying to explore or investigate. Surely the natural direction of explanation is quite the reverse: the funny thing is not that our sense experience leads us right or is us in contact with a world but that it sometimes goes strange or wrong and produces illusions. Surely we are better acquainted with persons, trees, and roller-coasters than with the immediate contents of our own consciousness, and surely consciousness arises in the world, not the world in consciousness, and consciousness responds to the world continuously.

The same is true after the transposition from impressions to words, though this at least seems to presuppose the reality of other people, with whom we enter into linguistic practices or conventions. But the idea that in gazing through a telescope at a supernova, or in gazing through bifocals at a sparrow, I am gazing at words, or living out a narrative, is a very strange idea. Indeed, it's not even in keeping with the linguistic practices it celebrates or privileges as the source and nature of reality. These are cases, I think, of an endemic problem in philosophy. Philosophers often try to find the one thing that explains everything, the key that unlocks it all simultaneously. The idea that one has found such a an item has tremendous seductive or addictive power: the power to make smart people continue until they have lost everything, including the thing they were trying to realize or explain. The move toward "ideas"

or "language"—the move to see all experience by analogy to pictures, for example (or stories, for another)—is an optional move, one of many possibilities. Once made it could well lead by its seductive pseudoexplanatory power, and the power of the intellect and writing of the great figures who take it up, to hundreds of years of ever–more elaborate or bewildering mistakes. The idea of "Form" in Plato, Platonism, and Neoplatonism is another example. It doesn't actually explain anything. But it feels profound; at a certain moment or in a certain region it feels inevitable. Plotinus starts there; he no longer has to try to argue for Forms at all.

A person of a sort now forgotten, Hans Vaihinger, solved all problems with the phrase "als ob": as if.[11] We live in a world of fictions or objects of our own construction and systems for their distribution. But we must behave as if we were living in a world of external objects, hard facts, and so on. It's as if there are red things, as if it's raining, as if I see a truck bearing down on me. It's just as if, almost as though, we're sitting on this couch, watching *American Idol*. This appears to me overly cautious.

There are signs of something else trying to get out of the idealist straitjacket: Austin's ordinary language philosophy, moments in Merleau-Ponty's ambiguous phenomenology. In Dewey, one gets the fundamental conception of experience as the organism moving through the environment as the environment moves through the organism, a basic metaphysics and epistemology of the situation as opposed to the subject or syntactic engine:

> The first great consideration is that life goes on in an environment; not merely in it but because of it, through interaction with it. No creature lives merely under its skin; its subcutaneous organs are means of connection with what lies beyond its bodily frame, and to which, in order to live, it must adjust itself, by accommodation and defense, but also by conquest. At every moment, the living creature is exposed to dangers from its surroundings, and at every moment, it must draw upon something in its surroundings to satisfy its needs. The career and destiny of a living being are bound up with its interchanges with its environment, not externally but in the most intimate way.[12]

Nevertheless, Dewey, like the phenomenologists, seems to waffle on the world outside consciousness. He should have maintained his thought that the "creature" is continuously constituted out of the world as the bedrock principle. Many figures, like Dewey or the whole of phenomenology, give a slippery or overly refined flavor to this question, while also yielding resources for a realist reading. In Heidegger, being might be de-concealed in language, but in his mystical moments language really is a route to the unknowable heart: language contains it or is contained by it, rather than serving as a sign of it. The same might be said of the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*. Foucault

gets that you can't do political theory without bodies. Deleuze's rhizomes and nomads show real sources of philosophy in landscapes and the bodies traversing them together.

If in Rorty or in Derrida one feels trapped, perhaps that's because textualism of that stripe is a dead end, idealism's last moment. Language is not, any more than pictorial representation, the mode of our being-in-the-world; it is massively embedded in the world, not a field of force à la Quine, the inner bits remote from sense irritations, but in a constant interchange with, among other things, cultural practices, which in turn implicate technologies, which employ and respond massively to the physical surround. The vocabulary as a whole is always a register of the environment, and the social practices are a register of the environment and contributions to it, every inscription and utterance a thing, every one emerging from and into other things. Language has an origin, even: it is a piece of superstitious mumbo jumbo that makes it the always-already à la Gadamer, and it constantly alters that out of which it emerges, actually grinds up trees and so on.

9.

Consider a shadow as an object. It is best conceived as a situation, or an aspect, feature, or portion of a situation. We might say that the shadow is caused by the light source, object, and so on, but in truth it is a mercurial chunk of that situation: the shadow is not called into being by the light, and so on: it is the light in its differential flow, implicating an environment and certain sorts of sensory apparatus. The "modern" account of human consciousness as a "sensorium" or an arena of "ideas" reifies the shadow, isolates it, severs its connections, or actually deletes the situation that makes it possible and the material of which it consists.

We ought to think of human perception as a penetration of the body by the world: a strand going in and helping to compose the knot and then emerging again and on to the next. Perception makes use of holes in our bodies. When I see something, light literally enters my body and works its way through it in a series of transformations: my act of perception encompasses an external world situation or is itself an external/internal world situation. My consciousness is composed of stuff appropriated from the environment; it is not distinct from the environment. My consciousness is a trace or shadow in—or better, a knot of—physical reality.

The same is true of the social both ways round. So first of all, all these individual events/situations of perception are parts of the social. My consciousness is a portion of the social—or rather, of many social contexts and connections—as a knot is part of a larger section of a skein or indefinitely many larger sections. But social vocabularies, narratives, descriptions, and so on are massively constrained by a physical universe. That social systems in some sense emerge from physical environments is a commonplace, though no doubt controversial in the sense that a linguistic idealist

such as Rorty would not even give me the term *physical environment* or would regard it as itself an artifact of social practices, language games, and the like. Well, it is an artifact of social practice, but no more than social practices are artifacts of it. Bruno Latour's work is exemplary here, and he shows minute by minute, detail by detail, how social practices are continuously embedded and reembedded in physical objects, as they transform those objects around their recalcitrances, are transformed by those objects around our own recalcitrances, and so on.

The inheritors of German idealism in this regard are various forms of "linguistic idealism," which have a relativist undertow. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, for example, has been interpreted in anthropology as declaring that we construct our worlds linguistically. But even here, anthropology has also most often held to the thought that the culture embodied in languages and practices is a response to the environment: the differences in environing conditions are used to explain some, at any rate, of the differences in cultural systems. My view is that there is much insight in linguistic idealism, though in another moment you may find me ridiculing the whole idea: there are various ways to structure experience through the use of language and other cultural/syntactical systems such as pictures. But I assert also that the differences take place against massive commonalities. The cultural systems in question have an external world context and act under massive external world constraints. We are in touch not only with our own representational or linguistic systems but with the material that they are used to represent and which they, in turn, alter. The representational system is always breaking on the real.

That is, I favor some sort of "direct realism," though that phrase has been used to stand for a number of different positions. Roughly, I will use the term to pick out two linked positions: in ontology, that there is a world in excess to (though in my version also encompassing) consciousness and in epistemology, the position that there is in normal experience no semantic screen interposed between the experiencing human being and the world she experiences.

10.

Among the Big Ones, I listed truth, beauty, goodness, justice; I'm not necessarily trying to set out an exhaustive list. The book is divided between ontological and axiological, or between fact and value, and I go on from ontology, alethiology, and epistemology to ethics, aesthetics, and political theory. This is not, as you'll see, because I think there is a hard and fast distinction between facts and values—though the distinction is important in certain contexts. In particular, I take aesthetics as providing a relatively revealing way into a conception of values as entanglements, as things that emerge in a human individual and a human community participating in a more than human world. Arts require physical media. The universe might be

replete with all sorts of values that could be detected rather than invented or partly invented and partly detected.

I urge that we rethink conceptions of agency and responsibility in response to seeing more clearly the reality of ourselves. One result might be that we should think of responsibility as distributed through the elements of a situation, as we often already do. An individual's decision may or may not be a causal or other factor in a given case; responsibility is a matter of taking certain sorts of roles in an array or unfolding fact. Or, it is the mode of embeddedness or participation in a world of real persons and creatures and things that articulates responsible agents: not merely the subjective experience of the agent, not merely the conventions or customs of a people (though those, too) but the objectual context and the context of that context. I would like to be able to indicate that this will be clarified; it will be elaborated, anyway.

The political philosophy of the final chapter is a version of anarchism, which will surprise no one who is familiar with my work. This, in an instantiation of the overall conceptual structure, does not follow directly from the metaphysics or the aesthetics or even the ethics, but they are connected by many strands. In particular I'll say this: the idea that we are here to seize control of and transform and improve the world reflects from and onto the idea that we are here to seize control of and improve each other. This is not only a false and dangerous doctrine, it is a formula for the sort of statist misery we inflicted on one another throughout the twentieth century. Many actual monsters took up this point of view, and even the decent ones created oppression, whereas the indecent ones tried to kill everybody in the service of their inspiring vision. My political utopia goes like this: let people go and see what happens. And that, in a nutshell, is the beating heart of this whole project: I'm trying to let go, affirm, and I'm trying to work my way out of the self-enclosure of my pitiful little self and experience the genuine externality of the world and other people to me. Perhaps I'm doing that as a treatment for my own disease, my own moments of megalomania, certainty, my own impulse to oppress, foreclose, vitiate, destroy, or even to create what I think ought to be created. It's hard to doubt the sincerity of a Mussolini or a Mao: what I'd criticize is their extremely flawed self-reflection, their amazing idiotic disastrous attempts to realize their own vision. I'm trying to figure out how to let each thing and person realize itself or herself.

11.

One thing that stitches together the various pieces of this book (though I hope and expect not perfectly) is the heroes I keep returning to, the figures in the tradition with whom for one reason or another I feel a deep affiliation. Here are some figures who have articulated or overturned my thinking over the decades, who might appear here as relevant to almost any issue and are frequently lurking somewhere in the

background: Søren Kierkegaard, J. L. Austin, Blaise Pascal, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, Epictetus, Michel Foucault, Diogenes of Sinope, Bruno Latour (a later addition to my canon), Heinrich Wölfflin, G. E. Moore, Chuang Tzu, and Rembrandt. I will let you contemplate what these figures have in common as I try to figure that out myself. There are, at any rate, strands that run through them: individualism, affirmation of reality in various respects, intense self-reflection, and a suspicion of science and even of reason. I will express such suspicions too, while also providing heaping helpings of what I hope is rational argumentation.

And I might likewise, in a semiautobiographical vein, say that the positions in the book arose in response to the postmodern reality crisis. I was a graduate student in the 1980s, and I studied with Stanley Fish and Richard Rorty. I tried to defend a hard-nosed realism against the extraordinarily sophisticated critique of my teachers, who annexed many resources to their position that talk of reality or truth was exhausted, useless, over: Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Sellars, Davidson, Derrida. I was obliged to try to find a constructive project in the face of philosophy that said that philosophy was over. Back then, I was probably defending varieties of essentialism and representative realism against the Rortyan onslaught; if he was against it, I must be for it.

What I've come out with all these decades later tries to take the postmodern critique—including postmodern feminism, critical race theory, queer theory, genealogy, and so on—seriously. I accept a great deal of it. I'm insisting on a real world external to our consciousness and languages, but I am ditching the representational theory of mind. I ditch objectivity but retain truth. I ditch reductionism but hold on to materialism. I abandon scientism but keep naturalism. I pay respects to social construction-ism, but I keep on pointing at nonhuman things. I am advocating a careful or gentle antiessentialism: like Rorty, I think of the universe as a web of relations (unlike him, I do not make us or our purposes or our languages central to that web) rather than as an array of fully discrete objects. But I also want to emphasize the way individual things and persons and persistent objects emerge in the welter. One thing I'm doing is trying to display many ways in which Rorty, and more generally postmodernism, were terribly wrong and, at the same time, take on board many of the fundamental insights.

12.

(1)   The world is a system of physical things constituted in relation. Individuals are constituted by their relations to other things, in an accumulation over time. But each such set of accumulated relations (each individual) is massively unique precisely by virtue of its relations.

(2)   The world is not a product of the human mind; the human mind is a product of the world.

(3) Direct realism: perception is not representation; it is a process in which human bodies are penetrated by the world, by which we ingest or inhale the world or are impaled on it.

(4) But there are representations, such as pictures, some sentences, or maps. With regard to such systems ("science," for example), it is false to say that there is a single privileged or "objective" representational system. There are bad ones, however.

(5) Truth = the world. "True" and "real" are, more or less, synonymous. True propositions, sentences, and pictures emerge from a reality-preserving relationship between world and consciousness, mediated by public language and pictorial systems and private character.

(6) Propositional knowledge is true belief: you know it just in case you believe it and it's true.

(7) Content-externalism or "extended mind": the mind actually encompasses external situations. The content of human mental states is not merely in the head.

(8) Attributions of value are true only under conditions which implicate "the natural," "the social," and "the subjective" in every case.

(9) Ethics concerns relations among persons, animals, and things that compromise their distinctness from one another or is a form of perception/communication understood as mutual permeation. This is captured in basic experiences/principles such as empathy and the golden rule: extensions of the self into the other and of the other into the self.

(10) The moral agent is not to be conceived as a rational deliberator, and a plausible conception of freedom would not connect it to such notions at all. Moral responsibility does not require free will and is distributed through the elements of a situation.

(11) Pleasure and happiness are not central to accounting for ethical, aesthetic, or political values. In general, teleological conceptions of values or human life are extremely impoverished or empty.

(12) Beauty ("the object of longing") is neither in the eye of the beholder nor (merely) a feature in the things beheld; it is a feature of the situation in which object is juxtaposed with perceiver, in which the integrity of each is cherished and compromised. In this it is exemplary of the ontological status of values.

(13) Art is characterized by intensities of relation between persons, materials, and audiences. Arts are to be broadly construed to include styles of movement, dress, self-ornamentation and transformation, distribution of elements in an environment, music, scent, writing, and so on.

(14) Social identities such as race, gender, and sexual orientation are profitably conceived as aesthetic repertoires expressed in all these ways, and they are always in volatile ways shifting as configurations of persons and materials.

(15) I refer to the emerging system of government in various parts of the world as "squishy totalitarianism." The left-right political spectrum must die, as shown by the great American reformers of the early 19th century, such as Lucretia Mott and William Lloyd Garrison. Anarchist non-utopia beckons: let people go and see what happens.