

# The Doctor of Philosophy Will See You Now

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## 1. Put not Your Trust in Philosophical Advice

Papers about philosophy, as distinct from papers within it, are like homeopathic medicines – thin in content. We can only hope to provide some substance if we confine ourselves to some particular aspect. The aspect I have chosen to discuss is this. What hope should we have of finding from within this rather curious and academic subject of ours a help in the affairs of life? Could we expect a doctor of philosophy to give practical advice, rather like a medical doctor?

As we all know, many philosophers in recent decades have fostered the expectation that the knowledge and understanding gained by themselves and their colleagues in the course of their studies can be put to work, helping us to resolve many the great controversies of the day. Often these issues have been “ethical”, and countless courses in what has come to be known as practical or applied ethics have been devised. A certain pride has been taken in this practical turn. Philosophers have rediscovered their role! And to be sure, these courses have not been a waste of time. They have done wonders for student recruitment and brought in funding from corporations and charities.

Practical philosophy in an academic context naturally tends to offer its findings in general terms and to the world at large. But philosophical services are also available on an individual basis. Recent years have seen the rise of the philosophical counsellor, a professional who ‘listens carefully to the person’s problems before applying the insights and methods of any number of great philosophers’. (I quote from a report in *The Independent*, Oct 2, 2005.) In the United States such counsellors are established enough to have a professional body ‘The American Philosophical Practitioners Association’, or APPA, with its headquarters at City College, New York. As we would expect, there is a professional code of conduct: fees must be announced before the consultation begins; and one is not supposed to have sexual relations with one’s clients. A similar

association can be found in England, with a similar hands-off code.<sup>1</sup> No doubt there are such things in other countries. There will be conferences, learned journals, accreditation.

What attitude then should we have to all this industry? In a nutshell, my answer is as follows:

Anyone who expects practical guidance from philosophers can't be serious. Philosophy if anything simply makes things more difficult. If it saves us from some errors it puts us in danger of others. 'Making things more difficult' might almost be a definition of our subject. I must however make one exception. For there is one sound item of practical advice philosophers can always give: *Look elsewhere*.

This at any rate is what some of us would spontaneously be inclined to suggest. The answer is, no doubt, a bit abrupt. I want to argue, however, that it is nearer the truth than one might at first suppose. One of the reasons for studying our subject is to come to appreciate that this is so. The very limited help a philosopher can hope to give will usually take the form of undoing the "help" already supplied by practitioners. Not so much practical as remedial ethics.

Not wishing to pretend to novelty, I will start by offering several supportive opinions. First, as to the thought that philosophy simply makes things more difficult, Philippa Foot puts the point succinctly: 'You ask a philosopher a question and after he or she has talked for a bit, you don't understand your question any more.'<sup>2</sup> With respect to the hope of finding in metaphysics a guide to morals, McTaggart was pleased to think that people would have more sense: 'What is the practical utility of Metaphysic? Does it give us guidance? I do not think that a man's views are much affected by his views on metaphysical problems. This is fortunate, since there is so very little agreement about metaphysic that, if it were otherwise, our moral life would...'<sup>3</sup> Russell, our next witness, remarks with admirable brevity: 'Science is what you more or less know and

<sup>1</sup> A glossy leaflet put out by my own university, offering ethics to the public, promises 'an exceptional client experience', but sadly gives no further details.

<sup>2</sup> From Steven Pyke, *Philosophers* (Manchester: Corner House Publications, 1993) In this book, the photographer Steven Pyke presented a collection of striking portraits, each philosopher being asked to make a brief remark to epitomise their conception of the subject. This was Philippa Foot's contribution.

<sup>3</sup> 'Introduction to the Study of Philosophy', *Philosophical Studies*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1934) 184.

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philosophy is what you do not know'.<sup>4</sup> From this perspective applied philosophy can be little more than applied ignorance. And lastly, and somewhat to the same effect, we have the estimate of Peter van Inwagen: 'If you are not a philosopher, you would be crazy to go to the philosophers to find anything out – other than what it is that the philosophers say.'<sup>5</sup> In this talk I will argue that the drift of these various opinions, gathered from philosophers of rather differing outlooks, is about right. A guide, philosopher and friend, if one is fortunate enough to have one, had better be wearing more than one hat.

### 2. What is to Count Here as an Application of Philosophical Understanding?

We need first to determine, roughly, what is to count as philosophy and as an application of philosophical findings. As to philosophy itself I propose to define our subject for purposes of this discussion quite casually. It is what goes on in these various universities under this name, a subject that is obviously akin to what we find in the *Theaetetus* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*. It would be tedious to attempt to spell things out further. Should we confine ourselves to *analytic* philosophy for example? Let us by all means agree to confine ourselves in this way, though I am not sure that this honorific description still amounts to much, apart from indicating a vague commitment to be moderately clear, plain, careful and unpretentious. What I shall take to be philosophy for the purposes of this lecture is at any rate what someone who talks about 'applying philosophy' will most likely have in mind.

Although it makes sense to define philosophy with a wave of the hand in this way, it is necessary, if our discussion is to have any interest, not to be too lax in what we are to count as an application of it. Michael Dummett, recalling a controversy he had had on the interpretation of the New Testament, remarked: 'I was struck how greatly many of the participants would have benefited from a short course in philosophy'.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism", *Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 8, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986) 243.

<sup>5</sup> *God, Knowledge and Mystery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995) 189–190. See also 186, fn. 17, as to the peculiar difficulty in philosophy of passing on what one has learned.

<sup>6</sup> *The Philosophy of Michael Dummett*, R. E. Auxier and L. E. Hahn, (eds.) (Chicago: Open Court, 2007) 29. The controversy itself is in *New Blackfriars*, 1987–8.

That might well have been so. I am naturally not proposing to argue that in deciding what to do about this and that issue no one should ever take thought, or consider arguments, or make distinctions, or try to be clear and orderly. If merely taking thought, etc. is to be counted as an application of philosophy, then no doubt philosophy can help. Our question is rather different: whether it would be useful in the discussion of practical affairs to draw on hoped-for insights gained from the study of metaphysics, philosophy of mind, personal identity, moral theory, etc.? We can hardly count every academic discussion going on in the name of philosophy to be a philosophical discussion by this standard. The difference would not of course turn on the absence of professional jargon – an entirely superficial matter. What we are here regarding as an application of philosophical understanding need not employ terminology of this kind. But we must surely have in mind something more than what one might read in a well-argued leader column in a newspaper.

Philosophy teachers will sometimes find themselves discussing with medical students the proper limits of medical confidentiality, probing these boundaries with the help of case studies. Though the class might be conducted under the umbrella of a department of philosophy the students might have little or no background in the subject, and the discussion could well be entirely on the level of ordinary good sense without anything more or less distinctive of philosophy getting a look in. It might indeed be all the better for that. (I only say ‘might’ because nothing that I say in this talk should be taken as an endorsement of the judgment of the common man.) But, good or bad, it would not count as an application of philosophy, at least as I am here regarding it. The fact that discussion can often proceed on the level of ordinary good sense, with perhaps some philosophical decorations, no doubt explains how H. Tristram Engelhardt, who has first-hand knowledge about what is going on in this area, can report that in his experience ‘no particular educational background is necessary . . . for succeeding as a bioethics consultant’. According to Professor Engelhardt people have often been accepted as consultants ‘after a one-week “total immersion” course at the Kennedy Institute of Ethics at Georgetown University’.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> ‘The Bioethics Consultant’, *HEC Forum*, 2003, 378, 367. (The initials ‘HEC’ stand for ‘Healthcare Ethics Committee’.) Professor Engelhardt is surely here reporting without endorsing. Anyone who knows his work will know just how pessimistic he is that much by way of truth or wisdom will emerge from courses in practical ethics.

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It might be suggested that there are clear examples from the history of our subject which illustrate how eminent philosophers have been able to help the public deal with practical questions. Think for example of Hume on suicide, Kant on perpetual peace, or Mill on capital punishment. These might be thought to be classic examples of *applied philosophy before its time*, that is to say before anyone began to think of 'applied philosophy' as a category. But if we examine each of these offerings, it is not at all clear whether philosophical insights are being put to work at all. Hume indeed starts with a reference to the benefits of taking a philosophical approach. But by this he evidently means no more than an orderly consideration of argument.<sup>8</sup> Kant's essay has the subtitle 'a philosophical sketch', and there is even a reference to the categorical imperative. But does it play any role? It is mentioned *in an appendix*.<sup>9</sup> And we should remember here that none of these writers were exclusively philosophers by present day standards. Hume was also celebrated as a historian, Mill as an economist. And both were prepared to write essays on a great variety of topics. Aristotle attempted to answer a surprising range of practical questions in his *Problems* – whether cabbage might cure a hangover, etc – but not we would judge *as* a philosopher, at least as we nowadays conceive of this subject. Leibniz would offer advice to newly-weds, as amusingly recorded in Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*. Given a piece of writing which presents a case for action we can always ask whether the substance of what is said could have been put together by an intelligent academic in some other discipline, medicine, social policy or economics. Could it have been written by someone with little or no familiarity with epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of mind, or moral theory? In our day Michael Dummett has written a book about a pressing practical issue, *On Immigration and Refugees*. He recently said of it: 'I consider that Part 1 of that book is a work of philosophy.' However he immediately went on to say: 'From what I can judge, few professional philosophers have treated it as such'.<sup>10</sup> I am not surprised at this reaction. This material, interesting as it is, seems to me to fail our admittedly rough-and-ready test.

<sup>8</sup> I notice that Mossner, after quoting a passage from 'On Suicide' remarks: 'This is eloquence, no doubt – but is it philosophy?'. E. C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954) 333.

<sup>9</sup> It is of course a very 'Kantian' essay. Thus there is a passing characterisation of conscription as 'mere using,' and of the state as a 'a moral person' which is not to be reduced to the status of a thing.

<sup>10</sup> *The Philosophy of Michael Dummett*, 844.

There is indeed a passing reference to Rawls and to Nozick. But that is surely not enough. I recently re-read an old article of my own, strictly in the line of duty; that is to say with just this question in mind. The article was on justice in employment, and published as it happens in the *Journal of Applied Philosophy*. Was this an example, I asked, of what the journal purported to be about? I had to say, quite frankly, no.

Someone might suppose that Mill in particular *must* have been writing philosophy in his speech in defence of capital punishment, since what are called “utilitarian considerations” were invoked. A “utilitarian argument” was on offer. And if this is not an application of philosophy what is? But, if I may put it epigrammatically, there is nothing particularly utilitarian about an appeal to utilitarian considerations. The simple wisdom in fire precautions turns on what are called utilitarian considerations and is intelligible quite apart from any philosopher’s doctrine about good states of affairs and our alleged obligations to “maximise them” or to produce a positive balance of good states over bad.<sup>11</sup>

With this rough division in hand between philosophy and methodical but untheoretical writing on practical issues generally, let us return to our main topic. If we think, as I am sure we do, that there is something comical in the very idea of a philosophical practitioner, sitting in a consulting room with a polished brass plate on his door, we still need to ask *why* it is comical, *why* we are right to think it so. Is it because there cannot be such a thing as philosophical authority? Or is it because particular philosophical views or doctrines are incompatible with the enterprise of advice? Or is it simply because the subject happens to be too difficult? Or too difficult in a special way? (for medicine and law are difficult enough, and we expect to find advice *there*). We must in particular distinguish the thought that the project of practical philosophy is *impossible* from the thought that it is so very *unpromising*. I will spend some time arguing against the first suggestion, that is to say the impossibility, before turning to argue in favour of the second.

<sup>11</sup> Compare Elizabeth Anscombe’s remark in “Contraception and Chastity”, that temperance in regard to eating and drinking, or honesty about property, “has a purely utilitarian justification” (*Faith in a Hard Ground*, Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2008, p. 188). No one could suppose that Anscombe was any kind of utilitarian or was invoking anything which deserved to be called a philosophical discovery.

### 3. Philosophical Authority

Advice presupposes authority. This is plainly so in regard to medical or legal advice, but is also the case even with the non-technical advice of a friend with 'experience of the world'. A friendly and perhaps useful chat among companions equally at sea is not consultancy. The possibility and the usefulness of advice depends on the evident truth that one is often better off trusting an authority, fallible though he be, than attempting to work things out for oneself. Aquinas's well-known opinion (well-known I suppose because unexpected) that 'an argument from authority founded on human reason is the weakest of arguments' (ST I Q1 Art 8 ad 2) is misleading here, and it is perhaps unfair to quote it outside of its context. Someone who boldly says 'I have thought it out all for myself, and have concluded that p' is often in a weaker epistemic position than the trusting man who says 'I consulted Robinson, and he told me that p'.

Now someone might say that there cannot be such a thing as authority *in philosophy*, that it is in the nature of the subject that everyone has to be his own judge.

This is in part something of a pretence, and in part a caricature of what authority here would look like. I talk about a pretence because I suspect the influence of a high and heroic ideal: that of thinking for oneself as much as possible, the ambition being: to achieve maximal independence of mind. This would be an aspect, these days, of a more comprehensive obsession, often to the fore in medical ethics, which I call *automania*. *Autonomaniacs* would for example burden patients with decisions they would rather not have to make, 'forcing them to be free'. Philosophy, it might be supposed, is somehow the guardian of this high do-it-yourself ideal. There is indeed something Cartesian about it. One works out everything on one's own, sitting snugly by one's very own stove. Nothing in philosophy is to be accepted without scrutiny and one's own reflective endorsement. Some of you learned in ancient philosophy will remember the immortal words of Socrates:

The unexamined thought is not worth thinking *Third Alcibiades*,  
541c

Despite the giddy attractiveness of this remark, however, it must be evident by now that such an ideal is deeply misguided.

The ideal of thinking for oneself is in fact a little difficult to describe. It would perhaps best be achieved by the student or enquirer being let loose in an *ideally anonymous and indiscriminating*



*library*. This would be an unusual library which collects every book, each of which is then edited to eliminate as far as possible the mere effects of prestige. The author's name and qualifications and place of employment would carefully be removed from every volume, together with the usual list of eminent names from the acknowledgments page. There would be no information about the press which published the item in question. Any phrases of puffery from the covers of the volume would carefully be blanked out. In the ideal case, the text would all be translated into a standardised English, and every humanising digression would be deleted. Articles would all appear as if they had been published in a single journal, *The Pure Reason Review*, and each would be accompanied with an official Government Diversity Warning, in bold at the top of the page: 'Caution. What follows might be an article by a well-known Harvard philosopher, but it is equally likely to be a student essay. You must judge the content for yourself'. Now I am not saying that there might not be certain advantages for those who are already philosophically educated having on occasion to read anonymised materials. I once read the first few pages of a print-out which I took to be from a student essay. It turned out to be by a well-known Harvard philosopher. This is an instructive experience we all need from time to time. But needless to say, as a way of finding one's way in this subject of ours, confinement to the anonymised library from the outset would, I believe, be quite hopeless.

There is to be sure a virtue of independent mindedness. It is a matter of 'sometimes', and is far too dull to go on about except at a school speech-day. Otherwise 'thinking for oneself' is I suspect a description with uncertain conditions of application, a mere flag to wave in the air. In practice it would mean: not believing one's priest but believing the *New York Review of Books* instead.

Authority has a fairly large place in philosophical enquiry, and it has a larger place the more complex the field becomes and the more people there are at work in it. This is a matter of vulgar necessity common to many human endeavours. If we are rational, we will want to know not just *what* is said but *who* has said it. One has, up to a point, to accept, with proper caution, what one hears from those with a different competence from one's own. Books are relegated to the philosophical stacks on the whole for good reason. The fact that mistakes in relegation are sometimes made makes us forget how much is justly laid aside.

A reluctance to admit the role of authority in part depends on a misconception of what authority would here look like. Teaching authority in philosophy would not, or not characteristically, be



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a matter of simply saying to the uninstructed – *this is how things are, take my word for it*. ‘Theirs not to reason why. Theirs but to say, Aye, Aye.’ Jumping-to is a response to authority of a different kind, rational in its place: that is to say, the right to demand obedience. Think of how a parent says to a young child ‘Fetch my slippers!’ The thing is just to be done. Sometimes indeed even in the case of teaching authority, something just has to be believed, to be taken in, as once again in the case of small children. But this case is special. Acceptance of philosophical authority will rarely if ever be blind acceptance. Still, someone can rationally believe *largely* on the basis of authority that, let us say, non-existence does not count as a defect, having discovered that this is a view rather generally endorsed by those who seem to know what’s what. It might even be sensible *wholly* to rely on authority, on the basis of a report that a proof of what one accepts exists somewhere among Saul Kripke’s unpublished manuscripts.

*Prima facie* then we must allow that the project of practical philosophy does not fail simply for the reason that there cannot be philosophical authority. But there is more to be said. Let us consider the implied rejection of practical philosophy we find in Wittgenstein.

### 4. . . . Only Saying What Everyone Admits

Wittgenstein, we can be sure, never embarked on a course of lectures in applied philosophy. And we could hardly imagine him setting up as a metaphysical agony aunt, despite the talk in his later writings of ‘therapy’. This is not because he lacked a practical bent. He had been educated as an engineer, and designed the house built for his sister down to the smallest detail. He was even willing to advise his friend John King to think twice before getting married: ‘Haven’t you enough troubles already. . .?’ Still, from his perspective, philosophy could not conceivably get itself involved in the advising business. Naturally, the study of philosophy might help one to think more clearly. But this would be a consequence of properly cautious habits; it would not take the form of putting philosophical discoveries to practical use. In 1939 Norman Malcolm deeply offended Wittgenstein by making a remark about the British national character. Later in 1944, Wittgenstein wrote to Malcolm, remembering the incident: ‘What is the use of studying philosophy if all that it does for you is to enable you to talk with some plausibility about some abstruse questions of logic, etc., and if it does not improve your thinking about the important questions of everyday life’.

But there seems no question here of the application of metaphysical insights.<sup>12</sup>

Now Wittgensteinian austerity in this matter is something for which we should have a certain respect. I leave aside here a superficial but not wholly inconsiderable reason: that philosophical advising would involve popularising the subject, with the thought that this could only offer the illusion of understanding. One thinks here of Wittgenstein's reaction to Russell's *Problems of Philosophy* or Eddington's *The Nature of the Physical World*. Wittgenstein would however have offered a more fundamental objection. There had been much discussion in those decades, no doubt stimulated by Wittgenstein's own work, about the character of philosophical enquiry: how there could be any place for an enquiry that wasn't scientific, historical, geographical, bibliographical, etc. This question, which seems always to have been in at least in the background of Wittgenstein thoughts, has a bearing on our present topic. This emerges in a somewhat different way in the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*.

In the view of the *Tractatus*, as is rather emphasised, there can be no 'ought' or 'must', no necessity, apart from logical necessity. This is simply a consequence of the ingeniously interwoven account of meaning, understanding, truth and the nature of logic presented in that book. That there was therefore no place for 'ethical' pronouncements in particular was seen by Wittgenstein not as an unwelcome or paradoxical consequence to be put up with for the sake of the whole. It was an advantage. As he explained to Ludwig von Fricker, the book's point was 'an ethical one'. 'My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have *not* written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one.' The second part contained, as it were, what *could not be* written: what was 'shown' but could not be 'said'.<sup>13</sup> Later in life Wittgenstein was to express himself more robustly: 'I think it is definitely important to put an end to the claptrap about ethics.'<sup>14</sup> It is hard these days, where ethics is everywhere, not to have a sympathy with that remark. When we turn to the *Investigations* however, it is not so obvious that

<sup>12</sup> *Ludwig Wittgenstein, a Memoir* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958) 32–3 and 39.

<sup>13</sup> Letter reproduced in G. H. von Wright, 'The origin of the *Tractatus*', *Wittgenstein*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982) 83, italics in text.

<sup>14</sup> Friedrich Waismann, *Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979) 68–9.

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we can put an end to the claptrap so easily. The idea that the only necessity is logical necessity is no longer emphasised.

We must here distinguish between the second order comments in the *Investigations* about philosophy and what might be called the philosophy itself. The impossibility of philosophical advice, ethical or otherwise, might indeed be settled once and for all by the remarks about philosophical method in the *Investigations*, remarks which catch the eye: such as the provocative aphorism ‘Philosophy only states what everyone admits’ (Sec. 599). As he explained to his students: ‘In philosophy we know already all that we want to know.’<sup>15</sup> In one of the manuscripts Wittgenstein contrasted his work with that of earlier philosophers (here writing in a style uncharacteristically close to the confident positivists of the day):

A common-sense person, when he reads earlier philosophers thinks – quite rightly – ‘Sheer nonsense’. When he listens to me, he thinks – rightly again – ‘Nothing but stale truisms’. That is how the image of philosophy has changed.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, the inability to say anything except what is admitted by everyone precludes advice and authority of any kind.

However, if we exclude the remarks about philosophy, this incapacity does *not* seem to be a consequence of the main philosophical ideas about language and mind in the *Investigations*, the ideas which have served (and still serve) to disentangle misunderstandings in these key areas going right back to Descartes, and which stand on their own. Elisabeth Anscombe began a class on the *Investigations* – which I attended, perhaps in 1963 – by pointing to these eye-catching passages about the limited scope of philosophy. She said, in her characteristically deliberate way, that if anyone thought that the interest of Wittgenstein’s book depended upon their truth, it would be hard to see how the rest of the book *could* have much interest at all.

Philosophy cannot *only* say what everyone admits, even if it has to start out from such a base. Some of the things it says will have logical consequences which *not* everyone will admit. It would seem to be a mere stipulation that the drawing of these consequences could not be counted as ‘philosophy’ as we would now understand it – as the *Investigations* seems indeed to stipulate, where in Sec. 599 it is laid down that ‘in philosophy we do not draw conclusions’. We are

<sup>15</sup> Desmond Lee (ed.) *Wittgenstein’s Lectures, Cambridge 1930–1932*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980) 35.

<sup>16</sup> MS 219, 6. Quoted by Anthony Kenny, *The Legacy of Wittgenstein*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984) 57.

right to think of this as a stipulation: it is simply a repetition of what is presented, rather as an axiom, in the very first sentence of what we can take to be Wittgenstein's first effort, the 'Notes on Logic' of 1913.

Apart from this point about consequence, beliefs about the world which *not* everyone will admit can still be reasonable even though they are not established by scientific testing – by conjecture and attempted refutation, let us say – and it would naturally fall to philosophy to point out such beliefs. Our belief in indeterminism – that not every change is determined by causes – would seem to be of this kind. Determinism is evidently not testable. And it is the sort of thesis which should only be believed if it *is* testable. In such circumstances, rational opinion rests with what nowadays would be called the folk belief in this regard – namely, the default taking-for-granted of variability in nature, which is indeed how things appear.

We find that Wittgenstein himself sometimes relies on what it is 'natural' to think, rather than on what everyone admits. We find this in his interesting remarks on thought and the brain, remarks which stand against a learned or half-learned assumption of our age: 'No supposition seems to me more natural than that there is no process in the brain correlated with associating or thinking...' etc.<sup>17</sup> Wittgenstein's actual practice here opens doors which his *theorising* about his practice had wished to close.

Rather generally it seems, it is as well to pay more attention to Wittgenstein's work and thought than to his comments about it. People like to remember his remark: 'A philosopher is not a citizen of any community of ideas. That's what makes him a philosopher'.<sup>18</sup> This is surely an attractive pronouncement – a declaration of independence. But how did Wittgenstein himself take it? Is it compatible with the Wittgenstein who said that he would be prepared to *combat* someone who believed in oracles:

I said I would 'combat' the other man, – but wouldn't I give him *reasons*? Certainly; but how far would they go? At the end of reasons comes *persuasion*. (Think of what happens when missionaries convert natives.)<sup>19</sup>

Is it compatible with the Wittgenstein who said that he was writing only for the small number of people who formed his cultural milieu?<sup>20</sup> We

<sup>17</sup> Zettel, Oxford: Blackwell, 1967, Sec. 608, a step beyond *Investigations* Sec. 158.

<sup>18</sup> Zettel, Sec. 455.

<sup>19</sup> *On Certainty*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1969, Sec. 612. Italics in text

<sup>20</sup> *Culture and Value*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1980, 10.

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might also remember the Wittgenstein who said to his friend Drury: 'Your religious ideas have always seemed to me more Greek than Biblical. Whereas my thoughts are one hundred percent Hebraic.'<sup>21</sup> Though Wittgenstein was constantly aware of his shortcomings, real or imagined, he was hardly going to conclude that as a citizen of a certain community of ideas he hardly counted as a philosopher.

### 5. Philosophical Findings Incompatible with Advice-Giving

Let us suppose that we are prepared to admit, abandoning the narrowness of Wittgenstein's remarks on philosophy, that philosophical investigation might come up with particular results. Now certain of these results would, if taken seriously – always assuming this to be possible – quite undermine the project of philosophical advice.

Think for example of the remarkable professions of ignorance so commonly found in the history of our subject. An ancient sceptic seems to have been expected to say 'I know nothing!' – rather in the manner of a certain waiter from Barcelona. What place could there be for a consultant who professed such ignorance? The APPA accredited consultant, made humble by sceptical argument, would have frankly to admit: 'This advice comes to you from one who knows absolutely nothing about anything.' It would presumably be part of his code of conduct to confess such a thing at the outset, along with the information about the fee to be charged. And he might well find himself adding *sotto voce* '... and who maintains that *you* know nothing too'. It is not often realised that one can only advise someone who already knows quite a bit. That is why one cannot advise a new-born baby.

Of course there are particular scepticisms too. It might be argued that although a philosophical consultant can of course know many things, one thing he cannot know, or even reasonably conjecture about, is *in what ways the future will resemble the past*: whether – to use Nelson Goodman's example – the next emerald discovered will strictly follow precedent in being green, or strictly follow precedent

<sup>21</sup> Rush Rhees (ed.), *Ludwig Wittgenstein, Personal Recollections*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981) 175. Wittgenstein was here reacting to the reassuring view, very prevalent as it happens among sophisticated Christians of the present day, that 'at the end of time' everything would turn out well for everyone, even the fallen angels being restored to glory, etc. This had been a teaching in Origen, perhaps influenced by Hellenistic thought, and was looked on with favour by Drury.

in being grue (so that it would appear, and would indeed be, blue). Such an incapacity would thoroughly undermine the consultant's role. Again he might suppose that he has to be forever agnostic as to the existence of other minds since all anyone can actually observe is bodily behaviour. In such a case, it might be argued, he would never know whether he had any clients. Here I must confess there might be minimal opportunities for him. It would be possible to offer advice *in the neighbourhood of a putative client* just in case the client *might* exist. And there is another kind of limited scepticism, which might as it happens correspond to the thought of the real-life sceptics of the ancient world. Michael Frede, in a pioneering article, argued that ancient sceptics were not as radical in their claims as had so often been supposed in the history of thought. The sceptic would not have wanted to suspend belief in regard to everything, but rather *in regard to anything which depended upon learned or philosophical study*.<sup>22</sup> Still, that would be much the same for our purposes here, for the philosophical consultant is hoping to apply these learned opinions.

Knowing nothing is incompatible with competence in advising. But the *second-order knowledge* that nothing first order can be known is quite another matter. That puts the advisor in an absurdly strong position. People are persistently taught that they have duties – to pay their bills let us say – and this thought can be burdensome. A first-order sceptic could helpfully apply his philosophical understanding to their plight, informing them with authority that no one could know that anything was owing. Indeed a more moderate sceptic confining his doubts as to the existence of the past could also offer such liberating advice. And sceptics of either kind might be helpful to those contemplating adultery. Again we all assume that we go in danger of culpable ignorance. A failure adequately to enquire will often put us in a state of bad faith, a fact which renders bad faith exceedingly common. A sceptical advisor could well earn his fee here by putting these gloomy anxieties to rest. Where

<sup>22</sup> Frede admitted that Pyrrho himself might have been a total sceptic. For, by report, the helpless Pyrrho would have faced all risks, 'carts, precipices, dogs,' were it not for his friends who always accompanied him. But on the whole ancient sceptics tended to lead normal lives without the need for a bodyguard. See 'The Sceptic's Beliefs,' in Myles Burneat and Michael Frede (eds.), *The Original Scepticism, A Controversy*, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997). These sceptics believed in the existence of dangerous dogs, but not say, in atoms – in this last respect being like Ernst Mach in more recent times. Modest in comparison to Pyrrho, they seem to have argued for an extreme version of the modest reserve defended in the present talk.

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nothing can be found out a failure to enquire is no defect. It is very striking that consultants in practical ethics do not appear to be handing out such helpful information – much more worthy to be called the fruits of philosophy than the advice offered by Charles Knowlton in his little volume of that name.

There are other startling theses thrown up by philosophy which would also make the advisor's task impossible. As everyone knows, philosophers in our time have often doubted the existence of God. It has rather been expected of them. What is less well known among the general public is that sober and learned philosophers have recently gone much further, doubting the existence quite generally of persons, people or intelligent agents. This is so to speak a doubt about *minds*, not merely and modestly about *other* minds or the divine mind.

A few brief examples. Russell once thought it arguable that a man, Socrates say, was 'a series of classes' and was hence a logical fiction.<sup>23</sup> In more recent times, Steven Stich has caused a certain amount of philosophical upset by arguing that we might need to 'renounce folk-psychology', where this would 'probably' mean giving up the idea of personhood and agency.<sup>24</sup> Advisors would have to give up believing in the existence of clients – just as they already believe that there are no witches. Peter Unger once undertook to show us *why there are no people* (in his article of that name). And again, if this were so there would obviously be no clients.<sup>25</sup>

Some philosophers deny the existence of consciousness, so that even if they had clients they wouldn't suppose that they had *conscious* ones. It is hopeless to attempt to advise an unconscious client. Galen Strawson has taken a less drastic view, being prepared to accept the existence both of persons and consciousness. But this concession brings little comfort. For according to his view of personal identity it is very likely that any one of us – that is to say 'a subject of experience that is a single mental thing' – will only last for a few seconds, to

<sup>23</sup> "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism", 171.

<sup>24</sup> *From Folk Psychology to Cognitive Science*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983) 242. The section in question is entitled: 'Could it turn out that there are no such things as beliefs?' and ends by suggesting that we might, in raising these doubts about belief, personhood, agency, etc. be on the very threshold of a new Copernican revolution. Not an unusual claim in philosophy of course. And far from representing a solitary voice from beyond the philosophical fringe, this sort of thing is by now a recognised 'position' in our subject, going by the name of eliminativism.

<sup>25</sup> P. French et al., (eds.) *Midwest Studies in Philosophy IV*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979). Peter Unger had earlier defended an even more extreme scepticism, see below.



be succeeded (in most instances) by another such subject.<sup>26</sup> Russell once argued rather more generally that ‘the things that are really real last a very short time . . . one tenth or half a second, or whatever it might be’ – though there *might* be longer lasting things of which we have no knowledge.<sup>27</sup> Minimal longevity will plainly place severe restrictions on the possibility of advice, particularly philosophical advice which we would naturally expect to be given at a somewhat deliberate pace. There would hardly be time for it. Even if there were clients there would be none stable enough to be helped.

But this is not the end of our troubles. The idea that people are really brains or bits of brains is really quite popular among more scientifically-minded philosophers. This would nowadays be the down-to-earth option. Indeed even those who do not make such claims at least purport to take them seriously. Yet if people were brains or bits of brains advice would of course be out of the question. No brain or bit of a brain could be said to offer advice, or to profit from such, any more than could a kidney or corpuscle. Nor would it be necessary to insist that an accredited brain in good standing eschew sexual relations with a client.

It must be admitted then that if any of these views were true, the impossibility of philosophical advising would be established straight away. But this is hardly very interesting as it is quite impossible to believe that any of these views *are* true (or are even clear enough to be considered<sup>28</sup>). Although those who call themselves sceptics may *say* that they or their clients can know nothing, or nothing about the past, or about other minds, or *say* that their clients are unconscious or are bits of brains, their actions will surely proclaim otherwise. They walk the walk all right; they just refuse to talk the talk. Others – pretty well everyone – will regard arguments in this area simply as a challenge perspicuously to say what is wrong with them. They (or we) follow the example of G. E. Moore. This is how people have reacted to Peter Unger’s book, *Ignorance*, which

<sup>26</sup> ‘What is the Relation Between and Experience, the Subject of the Experience, and the Content of the Experience’, *Philosophical Issues*, 2004, 289, 291. It can of course be hard to pin a philosopher down. According to Galen Strawson, Dennett not only persists in denying the existence of consciousness, but then persists in denying that he denies it. (‘Evolution Explains It All to You’, Review of Daniel Dennett’s *Freedom Evolves*, *New York Times*, March 2, 2003.)

<sup>27</sup> ‘The Philosophy of Logical Atomism’, 238.

<sup>28</sup> Thoughts of ‘applying’ a fancy philosophical suggestion can be important not because it can be expected to be of practical help, but rather to determine what the suggestion might actually mean.

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argued with much admired thoroughness and skill that ‘not only can nothing ever be known, but that no one can ever have any reason at all for anything’. If *following the argument where it leads* means trying to accept a conclusion of an apparently valid argument from apparently true premises, no philosopher thinks he ought always to follow the argument where it leads – despite the common rhetoric which advises heroism in this particular.<sup>29</sup> If necessary, ‘the most desperate contortions’ (in Russell’s phrase) will be called for.<sup>30</sup> An argument which purports to show or to suggest that no one knows anything, or nothing apart from *it*, will not be ‘followed’ even if no suitable remedy or contortion can be invented – though to be sure I am rather leaving aside what it would be to take such an argument seriously. Peter Unger himself, far from continuing to insist that we can know nothing, has since come to the (very reasonable) view that we have ‘epistemic responsibilities’ to find out certain things.<sup>31</sup>

So we can not say that the project of philosophical advice must founder *here*. Still, something emerges about philosophy from these brief remarks which is very relevant.

### 6. Waywardness

I have distinguished the thought that the project of practical philosophy is *impossible* – in particular that we can understand from within the discipline itself that this is so – from the thought that it is so very *unpromising*. It is here, I wish to argue, where the trouble lies. Our topic in this section is only in-a-way philosophical, being in part based on what we find by looking around at the academic scene.

<sup>29</sup> Ernest Sosa says, in praise of this book, that ‘Unger follows the argument ... wherever it may lead’. I think he must mean simply that consequences are drawn, not that they have had their natural effect on his conduct. After all, Peter Unger is still alive. (Both Professor Sosa’s remark and the description of the book’s message are taken from Oxford University Press’s website.)

<sup>30</sup> ‘... and [we] should arrive at solipsism but for the most desperate contortions’ *Mysticism and Logic* (London: Longmans, Green, 1918, 210. It is ironical that Russell should in later years have looked down his nose at Aquinas for not setting out ‘to follow the argument wherever it may lead,’ *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1946) 484.

<sup>31</sup> *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 32.

The real barrier to the project of philosophical consultancy is the extraordinary waywardness of this subject of ours. We are not here merely thinking in a general way about lack of sense among the bookish. On this broader theme people will remember Hazlitt: 'You will hear more good things on the outside of a stage-coach from London to Oxford, than if you were to pass a twelvemonth with the undergraduates, or heads of colleges, of that famous university'.<sup>32</sup> Our trouble arises from within the ranks of the remote and bookish: it has to do with philosophy in particular. The philosopher only says what no one can possibly admit. He will prove to you that nothing moves. He will swiftly demonstrate that everyone is tall. (Or short, if that is the conclusion you prefer.) 'The point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as not to seem worth stating, and to end with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it', as Russell said.<sup>33</sup> If writing today, he would surely have added: 'on the solid foundation of which helpful advice can then be offered'. A philosopher is a man who will tell you that it is always a waste of time and effort to take precautions (as to one's health etc.) seeing that what will be will be. That is almost a paradigm of practical philosophy.

Here I must re-emphasise that in all this I confine myself to the kind of philosophy where carefulness in argument is valued, philosophy on a fairly tight rein. I am thinking of something with at least a surface intelligibility. So we shall leave aside the suggestion that justice is the number four, let us say, or that marriage is the number five. That *religious* opinion across the board is so often farcically wayward is not at all to be wondered at. It is in fact a continual cause for wonder that people are always claiming to have a respect for 'faiths' of no matter what complexion. Perhaps it is the concealed expression of a certain contempt. Or perhaps it is thought a social grace to speak in this way. If the Christian Church, despite coming under the heading religious, is able authoritatively to teach, that in itself is as extraordinary as anything else it teaches.

Now we are in no position to say that the truth about the world cannot be strange. On the contrary, it is bound to be very strange. And what it is reasonable to believe for us, here and now, can sometimes be quite extraordinary. When I speak of waywardness I am thinking of a certain impression of folly that so often meets the eye. Not always: certain groundbreaking works in philosophy, often

<sup>32</sup> 'On the Ignorance of the Learned', *Table Talk: Essays on Men and Manners*, in *Works*, P. P. Howe (ed.), Vol. 8, (London: Dent, 1931) 75.

<sup>33</sup> 'The Philosophy of Logical Atomism', 172.

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regarded as paradigms, seem entirely free of it, Frege's *Foundations of Arithmetic* let us say, or Anscombe's *Intention*. But these examples are rather exceptional. Philosophy is so often simply awry – not so much fallacious as follacious. And in so many directions at once. 'The incredulous stare' is characteristic of philosophical to-and-fro in a way which is hardly matched elsewhere in the learned world. Philosophers rather expect to be laughed at, even – or should I say especially? – by other philosophers. It is a rather playful subject. A current journal displays an announcement of a forthcoming book by 'the maverick philosopher' so-and so. The adjective is about as individuating as *bald* or *bearded* or *bejacketed*. Would you accept advice from members of a profession who, though in good standing, are notoriously *both* so diverse *and* peculiar in opinion?<sup>34</sup> Some feel for the bewildering range of options offered by philosophers on what looks at first to be a rather tractable topic can be gained from reading the opening pages of Eric Olson's recent book *What Are We?* It might seem that when we find ourselves talking about this Tom, that Dick or yonder Harry we already know what *sort* of thing we are talking about. But this appears, on a closer examination, not to be so. What is so very striking here is the range of answers that a clear and painstaking philosopher feels obliged to take seriously. It includes the answer that we are simply talking about nothing at all, to which opinion a chapter is devoted. The book might have been called: *What Are We, If Anything?*<sup>35</sup>

Philosophy is the only subject where something can be tolerated and even praised under the description 'nonsense'. McTaggart wrote a Fellowship Thesis for Trinity College, Cambridge. Sidgwick said of it that it was certainly nonsense, but that it was the right kind of nonsense. A familiar response – so many examiners in philosophy must have thought the same about the material they have felt obliged to judge as satisfactory. Evidently 'the right kind of nonsense' is all that success requires. It may range I suppose from mere absurdity to actual senselessness. (And I am not talking here about a way of talking or hinting, unsatisfactory just as it

<sup>34</sup> Of course some *apparent* oddity is easily accommodated. The 'paradoxes of material implication' for example which can look startling are simply a liveable-with consequence of a minimal, truth functional, convention about 'if-then'.

<sup>35</sup> *What Are We?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) The possibility that we are not anything at all is the topic of Chapter 8. Another suggestion considered in this book and not just dismissed out of hand is that 'there is no such thing as thinking' (14).

stands, which we have to adopt in order to get a point across, an utterance which has to be taken, as Frege said when discussing the concept of a function, with a grain of salt.)

I have drawn attention at some length to this waywardness elsewhere, while discussing the range of current philosophical opinion about consciousness.<sup>36</sup> I offer just one further example from this fruitful area. Jerry Fodor recently published in *The London Review of Books* a clear-sighted review of Galen Strawson's *Consciousness and its Place in Nature*. The review was wittily and informatively entitled 'Headaches have themselves'. That, in just three words, well illustrates what I am on about. Incredulity is quite the expected reaction. Strawson himself, after presenting his account of the Self, commented that his account 'strikes nearly everyone as obviously – even hilariously – false'.<sup>37</sup> In turn Strawson finds hilarious falsehood in the views of others. Noting that respectable contemporary philosophers 'are prepared to deny the existence of experience' he comments: 'Next to this denial, every known religious belief is only a little less sensible than the belief that grass is green'.<sup>38</sup>

Philosophical eccentricity undoubtedly makes the subject more enjoyable. Only in philosophy could a serious and possibly important article be published in which the authors state that everything said in their article (perhaps just everything *else* said in it) is untrue.<sup>39</sup> Other philosophers will be overcome with envy. They would just love to have been the first to publish an article incorporating such a claim. The impression one gets as an observer is that philosophers *do not know their way about* – which is of course Wittgenstein's description of the plight of the individual philosopher, pondering his particular topic (*Investigations*, Sec. 123). The very word 'preposterous' seems to have been especially invented for philosophers to use in regard to one another. This marks our subject off from scientific enquiry, where preposterousness (chronicled with such persistence and care by Martin Gardner) remains exceptional and fringy. We remember Cicero's remark, much loved in the trade, and more relevant today

<sup>36</sup> Discussed in relation to the question, often rather curiously supposed to be of interest in connection with abortion, whether a foetus at *n* weeks is 'conscious'. *Worth and Welfare in the Controversy over Abortion*, (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2006) ch. 4.2.

<sup>37</sup> 'The Self and the SESMET', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 1999, No. 4, 100.

<sup>38</sup> *Consciousness and Its Place in Nature* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2006) 5–6.

<sup>39</sup> David Braun and Theodore Sider, 'Vague, so Untrue', *Nous*, 2007, 139, qualified later (everything *else*) 154.

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than ever before: that there is nothing too foolish to find its way into the writings of philosophers.<sup>40</sup> This melancholy fact indeed remarkably undermines the usefulness of *reductio*. Berkeley wrote in his notebooks 'If matter is once allowed to exist, clippings of beards and parings of nails may think for ought that Locke can tell ...'<sup>41</sup> That settles that! But such an argument is not going to embarrass a pan-psychist. He will already have taken just such a view of beard clippings, etc. I may remark here, incidentally, that the doctrine of pan-psychism, still taken seriously in the academy, shows us that philosophical waywardness is not always a matter of scepticism about this and that. A pan-psychist claims to have remarkably extensive knowledge.<sup>42</sup>

I have rather suggested that this waywardness can be rather prized. Perhaps it would not matter so much if applications remained inert. How usual it is for articulate philosophers all over the world to find themselves *proving* to their first year students that criminal punishment of all kinds is always unjust, since no one has a real choice to do other than what in fact they do (I mean that their arguments will look rather more like a proof than anything else on offer in philosophy). For all that, no one in the everyday world so much as begins to take the thought seriously. This must be, in part, because these philosophers themselves seem not to take it seriously. A *real* belief that severe and continual wronging is rife in the community has characteristic manifestations, here conspicuously missing. We

<sup>40</sup> Cicero, *De Divinatione*, 2, Sec 119. See also Montaigne, 'An Apology for Raymond Sebond', *Essays*, M. A. Screech (ed.) (Penguin, 1991) 613; Descartes, 'Discourse on Method', *Philosophical Works*, Haldane and Ross, Vol. I, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911) 90; and Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 'Reason and Science', M. Oakeshott (ed.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1960) 27. Cicero's particular example is that well-worn illustration of philosophical oddity, the Pythagorean objection to beans – an objection which, ironically, could have been perfectly rational, favism being an inherited condition prevalent in Mediterranean countries.

<sup>41</sup> Berkeley, *Philosophical Works*, M. R. Ayers (ed.) (Everyman, London: Dent, 1975) 321.

<sup>42</sup> There are not only sceptics in philosophy. There are also (what we might call) credulics. A credulic is someone who supposes that every truth can be known. An extreme credulic is someone who supposes that every truth *is* known. Fitch's thesis, that if there is an unknown truth then there is an unknowable truth, when combined with the 'knowability thesis', that no truth is unknowable, yields the conclusion that there is no unknown truth. (Someone who supposes that there must be truths unknown to human beings might find reason here to believe in at least one non-human intelligence.)

should be pleased to find that what might be called metaphysical advice is treated with such reserve. No one familiar with philosophy would be surprised to hear, to take another example, that students in their subject down the corridor are being taught that one cannot actually *harm* others simply by killing them.<sup>43</sup> It would however be quite alarming to think what people might do in the light of such a thought.

As I have said, philosophy is not entirely infected with waywardness. There is a faction among us which is somewhat less willing than the others to tolerate nonsense and absurdity. The very existence of such a faction is significant. The need to adopt 'a commonsense stance' is itself an acknowledgment of the waywardness to which our subject is prone. For the adoption of such a stance represents a determination of the will, not a finding. An innocent, looking over the wall, will surely be intrigued to find there is a division of our subject going under the name of common-sense philosophy – put about by people called common-sense philosophers. No one expects certain doctors, lawyers, and engineering consultants to have to set themselves apart as a common-sense faction. Nor are there common-sense economists, geographers, or historians. To be sure, *common-sense* is not really a satisfactory label to rally around. It hints at a ground for a conviction – not quite sense perception, but like it – although in truth a ground is not invoked and is possibly not needed. But whatever the label, every philosopher takes out a temporary membership in this group when reacting to arguments for scepticism – even when contemporary philosophers claim that the arguments for scepticism are, when presented with care, much stronger than hitherto thought. It is then a question of patiently undoing what has been patiently done. In this way, there is point in Locke's description of the philosopher – or at least a certain kind of philosopher – as an under-labourer, removing the obstacles which lie in our path. We should note however that obsessive carefulness and a devotion to common sense is no guarantee that one will not say the strangest of things, as the example of Moore shows. One only has to think of what he had to say about 'goodness'.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Perhaps by Galen Strawson, see 'Why I Have No Future', *The Philosophers' Magazine*, 2007. 'You can't harm [people] simply by bringing about their painless and unforeseen death' (23–4). It is worth remarking on this curious qualification. The interesting truth is that we cannot harm people *simply by hurting* them. As we all know, a doctor can often truly say: 'This will hurt you, but don't worry, it won't harm you'. This tells us something significant about the concept of harm.

<sup>44</sup> This oddity is not however evenly spread. It is very prevalent in the philosophy of mind, and pretty evident in metaphysics and ethical theory, but in my experience modern epistemology is comparatively sane. This no



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This particular waywardness in philosophy is a result of three factors. The first factor must be the peculiar combativeness of philosophers, at least when roused. They act as if they would rather be different than correct. Feminists might say *male* philosophers at this point, but I have not myself noticed anything to justify this restriction. Philosophers at the outset of their careers, once they have a safe job, tend to feel obliged to make their mark by saying what will be thought by their immediate predecessors to be off the wall. It can be all right though, if a trifle risky, to return in triumph to the rejected conclusions of *the predecessors* of their predecessors. That nice old saying: 'Two Jews, three opinions' applies pretty well to philosophers too. (No, make that *four* opinions. . .) I speak in this paragraph about matters of theory only. In social attitude of course we can expect a good deal of the uniformity to be expected in humanities departments.

The second factor is the loss, at least in recent decades, of the insight that philosophers run the risk not only of saying things which are untrue or unwarranted, but also of saying what only appears to make sense. Philosophical enquiry takes place at the edges of our understanding, even when the topics are everyday ones. This is why we continually ask what is time, what is causality, number, action, knowledge, consciousness, etc., when in a sense we already know the answers. But in recent decades we have no longer been so sensitive to the risk of senselessness. So often what is offered as the results of philosophical enquiry should be regarded instead as the raw material for it. It is thought perhaps that as we are no longer logical positivists we can afford to relax in this regard, both in regard to propositions and questions. It is as if we were all now prepared to go along with W. E. Johnson's remark (expressing his exasperation with Wittgenstein) 'If I say that a sentence has meaning for me no one has a right to say that it is senseless'.<sup>45</sup> This subjective reassurance has rather returned to the subject and we are the poorer for it.

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doubt stems from the nature of the task epistemologists have so often set themselves: of *defeating* the waywardness of scepticism. Political philosophy too often avoids reliance on the uncertainties of theory, setting itself up as 'political not metaphysical'. The metaphysical doctrines in Hobbes – the psychological egoism, the determinism and the materialism – have little bearing on what is of interest in his moral and political philosophy and indeed prove something of a distraction.

<sup>45</sup> W. E. Johnson to Drury, 1929, *Ludwig Wittgenstein, Personal Recollections*, 118.

The last factor must be the peculiar difficulty of the topic. In Russell's estimation a good philosopher of logic could only think about his subject once in six months for half a minute.<sup>46</sup> I stress the peculiar difficulty, for one does not have to think of philosophy as the hardest subject there is. There is perhaps no one scale of hardness.<sup>47</sup> What gives philosophy its peculiar difficulty, by contrast let us say with chemistry, is that one is working with a thin set of presuppositions. No doubt there are philosophers who would like to be working without presuppositions at all. There is in addition an indeterminacy in the criticism of argument. Arguments even in philosophy are often – and of necessity – the merest of sketches, where the definitive detection of a fallacious step is difficult or impossible. Time and again we have to make do with the impression of validity.<sup>48</sup> Then there is the (related) handicap of not being able to see when one is gradually going wrong. Gains won are thus apt to be lost again like a rare patch of sunlight on a hill. There is an element of truth in the view of philosophy as seen from the perspective of our academic neighbours, the mathematicians. A colleague in mathematics, during yet another bout of anxiety about university funding, was explaining to me, with a wink, just how little by way of resources a mathematician required: no expensive apparatus – simply a pad of paper, a pen and a waste paper basket – the suggestion of course being that philosophy was even more economical, only paper and pen being needed. This rather nice distinction must I think have gone the rounds. It hits home.

## **7. Problems of Understanding**

All this said, we now have to face further troubling factors. Application can stumble over interpretation in a way which seems peculiar to our subject. Philosophers say a variety of strange things about time, causality, personal identity, consciousness; they say these things upfront, with punch and apparent clarity; we think we know where we are with these philosophers; we set out unflinchingly

<sup>46</sup> 'The Philosophy of Logical Atomism', 166.

<sup>47</sup> Wittgenstein told Drury, I do not expect very seriously: If you think philosophy is hard, you should try architecture. Rush Rhees, ed., *Ludwig Wittgenstein, Personal Recollections* (Blackwell, 1981) 121.

<sup>48</sup> It is possible to render an argument trivially valid by adding hypothetical premises, but this of course merely shifts the difficulty. We have now to consider the truth of these new premises.

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to ‘apply’ these teachings. But alas, so often, when philosophers say so forthrightly and clearly that  $p$ , it turns out they do not quite mean that  $p$ . Or they mean something which could be expressed: ‘ $p$  strictly speaking’ or ‘ $p$  for philosophical purposes’. This manoeuvre has been familiar since Berkeley made use of it.<sup>49</sup> The phrase ‘seriously speaking’, as used in the study, tends to become ‘frivolously speaking’ as soon as we step into the street. It turns out, in the small print as it were, that most of what we ordinarily think gets reinstated by the back door.

Philosophers start with what is bold. There are no clients to be advised, that has to be admitted. Ridicule is not going to intimidate them. They must after all follow the argument where it leads, to return to that heroic formula. However all is not lost. There *are* we shall be told – and no possible doubt about it – surrogate entities: quasi-clients, virtual clients, folk clients, clients unstrictly-speaking, or what might be called clients-for-practical-purposes. And once again we are back in business as if nothing had ever happened.

As an example of what I have in mind we might return to Eric Olson’s *What Are We?* As we saw, a chapter of this book takes up the thesis that we are nothing at all, that there are no people (‘just as there are no dragons’, 183). All the same, the proponent of this startling idea is apparently quite prepared, when put on the spot, to concede that there is *something* right in the thought that there are, let us say, at least six million people in London. ‘We can take it for ordinary purposes to be true’ he will say (184). Perhaps, after all, there is *almost everything* right in such a thought! Let us contrast the startling view that there are no people with the equally startling view that not only are there people, lots of them – there are also people *with wings*. David Lewis shocked his readers by explaining modality in terms of how things unmodally are. Thus if people with wings are a bare possibility there really *are* people with wings. They simply inhabit worlds which are radically inaccessible from the world we live in. The interesting thing however is that this remarkable discovery, just like the other, appears to have *no* practical implications. We can take it for ordinary purposes to be false.<sup>50</sup> A

<sup>49</sup> *Principles of Human Knowledge*, Sec. 51–3.

<sup>50</sup> David Lewis in ch. 2.6 of *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) says in effect that his doctrine has no practical implications. It has however an ethical upshot, good news for those who devoutly hope that ‘the good’ be maximised. For the sum total of this quantity in existence ‘is non-contingently fixed’ (128). It is thus forever maximised, and is indeed maximised whatever we do.

similar reassurance will perhaps be given by those who say curious things about consciousness. In the real world, it's business as usual. Someone who likes to inflict pain need not be disappointed to learn that consciousness does not exist. Nor need the news, purveyed by the next philosopher he meets, that *everything* is conscious, prompt him to flog the pavement.

This saying-and half-unsaying manoeuvre is perhaps not always a cheat, but it certainly lends further uncertainty to the project of applying philosophical discoveries. It is relevant here to note the extraordinary frequency with which philosophers claim to have been misunderstood even *by other philosophers*. Galen Strawson, after expressing his gratitude to all those who had commented on his paper 'The Self,' went on to say that 'the result was a festival of misunderstanding'.<sup>51</sup> Philosophers will not be particularly surprised with this reaction. But where does this leave the project of philosophical consultancy? Applied philosophers take up the work of non-applied philosophers, which quite likely they do not well understand (though perhaps they think they do), and with its aid advise those with little philosophy or none, who are presumably offered arguments which they in turn do not well understand (though perhaps they think they do).

Someone seeking advice from a philosophical counsellor will not simply be told what to do, but, in view of the waywardness I have talked about, will expect to be reassured with arguments. But – will the client be able to evaluate these arguments? Will he be *well* able to evaluate them? It was once part of my job to write a report for my professor on what was called 'the lunatic file' at the Lovell Radio Telescope at Jodrell Bank in Cheshire – then the largest such telescope in the world, much in the news, and the target of much peculiar correspondence lovingly preserved in this file. A few of the items had all the appearance, to untutored me, of rigour and solid content. I was rather in the position of a Diderot confronted by an Euler with a mathematical demonstration of God's existence.

## **8. The Curious Confinement to Matters Ethical and the Further Problems This Confinement Brings**

As we know, the project of practical advice based upon the insights of philosophy is so often supposed exclusively to relate to 'high matters

<sup>51</sup> 'The Self and the SESMET', 99.

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of the ethical' – not, for example, to the mere vulgar question of how to get something wanted. A consultant will invariably be found quoting the words of Socrates: 'We are discussing no small matter but how we are to live' (*Republic*, 352d). And this would be taken by readers – by secular modern readers – in a high-minded way, with a heavy emphasis on altruism and ecology.

This exclusive focus seems unnecessary. Might not a philosopher with an interest in metaphysics find gainful employment in a firm seeking to build a time machine? Some philosophers have conjectured that there could be cases of backwards causation – so that action could be taken now to ensure that people who might have been killed in an accident long ago in fact survived it. Surely this might have commercial applications? An embarrassed author who had published a mistake in a work of history might be willing to pay to have reality put right. Millionaires troubled about thoughts of death might want to call on experts in the problems of personal identity over time. McTaggart long since showed what could be done, republishing during the First World War the two chapters from *Some Dogmas of Religion* which defended a belief in human immortality.<sup>52</sup> Some people might hope for a different message, and look for a proof that death is the end – like the dying Maugham grasping his reassurance from the confident Ayer.

No doubt the commercial willingness to pay for philosophical insight has tended to focus on matters ethical rather than metaphysical for sound business reasons. For there is an evident necessity in every corporation to encourage honesty among employees. Analogous hopes might be entertained for all the ethics courses so eagerly introduced into our medical schools. They did not have ethics courses in Dr Shipman's time! However this involvement with ethics brings troubles of its own for philosophical consultancy and in more than one way. I shall begin with a *very* practical matter.

A course in practical ethics is supposed to be 'improving'. We need to ask whether this hope is realistic. There seems to be a confusion here between the philosophical and the inspirational. Should a corporation thinking of putting on an ethics course expect pilfering to increase or decrease? Inspirational courses, run by a reverend, might reduce pilfering somewhat. Distinctively philosophical courses on the other hand should increase it. After all, such a course will encourage the employees to question their beliefs.

<sup>52</sup> *Human Immortality and Pre-existence*, Edward Arnold, 1916. McTaggart's reasons were quite ungodly of course, he being a devout atheist.

That – we are continually told – is what philosophy is all about. Now some of these beliefs will be permissive, and some restrictive. Which kind of belief, are we to suppose, is the more likely to be questioned? Employees will have been taught, restrictively, that stealing is wrong. They may not all succeed in challenging this belief at the very first attempt even though it is plainly a barrier to freedom. I leave aside the fiddling of expenses for this can easily be justified without academic assistance. Otherwise inhibitions will remain strong. It will probably not be enough for their ethicist to proclaim “to each according to his need”, beautiful principle though this is. Some of the workforce will only set about stealing once they are introduced to the error theory of obligation, the theory which boldly proclaims the *falsity* of moral teachings. Others will hold out till they reach the next lecture, the one on fictionalism, which suggests that we should all nevertheless *pretend* that stealing is wrong; or the next and somewhat exotic lecture after that, the anthropological bit about guiltless thievery among the uk. Even then a pious and unadventurous remnant will cling to mother’s knee morality, at least until the lecturer turns to the embarrassing but inevitable question: why be moral? For the only rational response to this would seem to be: ‘Why indeed?’, or ‘I was just about to ask you’.<sup>53</sup>

The question why anyone need care to be ‘moral’ (the scare-quotes rather force themselves upon us) is made the more difficult because there is little agreement among the learned about what constitutes a reason for action. There is indeed little agreement about what morality is all about: the more the thought the more the variety. ‘Doesn’t he understand the difference between right and wrong?’ ‘No, he’s a philosopher.’ This lack of agreement, if known about, must undermine the confidence of those who somewhat unaccountably wish to obey the demands of morality and simply hope to obtain guidance as to what these demands might be.

Philosophical advising which calls upon moral philosophy introduces its *own* layer of difficulty – that is to say, apart from what might *already* arise from our difficulties with the concepts of knowledge, personal identity, consciousness, etc, which we have touched on above. The accounts of morality and its demands on offer are very confidently expressed and yet are hopelessly diverse. Philosophers, unless their education has been very confined, will be

<sup>53</sup> Well, that is a little hasty and cynical. The employees might be asked to read the careful and well-deployed answer to this important question at the end of Peter Singer’s *Practical Ethics*. This answer, if accepted, should increase pilfering considerably.

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aware of this, but their clients can hardly be expected to appreciate it. In medical consultation one might occasionally ask for a second opinion. In *moral* consultation, what ought the rational client be asking for? A twenty-eighth opinion? And as the number of philosophers at work increases all over the world so does the diversity. Think of what we have already. There are various incompatible virtue theories, incompatible appeals to intuition, colossal claims as to the interests of sentient beings, and so forth. Isn't compassion at least commended by everybody? Not if Nietzsche is to be included. And among those who stress compassion, some say that we must have a compassion not just for actual people (or perhaps 'sentient beings') but for possible ones as well (perhaps even 'possible sentient beings'). Others will regard this not just as false but as ludicrous. Or is the talk all about intrinsic value and rights? Some people think that trees have intrinsic value, others are absolutely sure they have none, and yet others will argue from the side-lines that this talk of intrinsic value makes no sense at all. Some people say that there are natural rights, others that there are no such things, yet others that the very notion of a natural right is nonsensical. Some say – Wittgenstein for example – that good conduct is simply obedience to God's commands. Their critics will say that this idea has been ruled out of court ever since the *Euthyphro*.<sup>54</sup> Some say that morality is about something called the right thing to do (with due allowance for joint winners) but that it is in principle impossible for us to know on any occasion what this is. Others will allow that we can sometimes know what this Right Thing is, but will then leave it entirely mysterious why people should be so concerned to find out. Would they have to be moved by items called moral reasons, or is there nothing interestingly distinctive of the kind? Isn't morality in any case something of a tyrant or a bully? Wouldn't 'liberals' be particularly anxious about this question? Or is it contrary to morality even to raise it? Philosophers worry incessantly about whether this or that account of morality is 'too demanding'. Other philosophers presumably worry about what 'too demanding' could mean. There are even those who suppose that morality makes no *demands* of us at all, that it simply pats certain backs. And we must not forget all those philosophers who continually say, with great assurance, that no one is ever responsible for what they do ('is never really or ultimately responsible' seems to be the preferred

<sup>54</sup> 'If there is any proposition which expresses precisely what I think, offered the familiar *Euthyphro* contrast, Wittgenstein is reported as saying: it is the proposition "What God commands, that is good".' F. Waismann, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, 115.



language) so that no one has ever deserved a pat on the back in the first place. Faced with all this, and more, one might be tempted to conclude, gratefully adapting what Russell – so often of assistance to us in this enquiry – once said about mathematics: Ethics is the subject where no one knows what they are talking about, nor whether what they are saying is true.<sup>55</sup>

Perhaps people will want to say that the most recent and up to date moral theorists have at long last turned a corner, that they now have a rather better understanding of all these things, just as we now have better dentistry. However these recent theorists are still not in agreement about the most elementary theoretical matters. I have space for just one example. Here is Hugh LaFollette, trying (admirably) to be very plain and straightforward. He is setting out to explain his subject to a beginner in the very first paragraph of a large anthology he has edited.<sup>56</sup> Surely the first step at least will be on firm ground? He distinguishes two kinds of choice. There are choices which affect only ourselves. These, he says, we do not consider to be ‘moral choices’. They are not, that is to say, choices which stand to be assessed ‘on moral grounds’. Such assessment is confined to choices which affect others. Of course being a thoughtful writer, he immediately issues a caution. It is often not too clear, he says, just when a choice ‘affects only the agent’. This cautiousness is of course in order. But it might encourage the reader to suppose that he is in safe hands. This however is not the case. A huge and controversial move has been made. What has gone wrong? I will simply say this, that neither Aristotle nor Kant would have recognised such a divide. For Aristotle what was of central importance was practical wisdom, or more colloquially good sense. For Kant, what was of central importance were the duties we have to ourselves. Hugh LaFollette in effect sides with Mill. Or rather I should say with the Mill of ‘On Liberty’, Chapter 4, where the distinction is indeed clearly made. Insofar, however, as Mill *was a utilitarian* – as most people are still determined to say – the LaFollette divide would make little sense. After all, if there is a duty to maximise the good (pleasure, or what have you) then the agent’s own good must count. Choices which affect only the agent would then be among the choices ‘we should assess on moral grounds’. If therefore, *either* Aristotle, *or* Kant *or* the utilitarians are right, something has gone importantly wrong in the first step, the step which looked so innocent. This will not be a rare event in philosophy.

<sup>55</sup> Russell’s original remark is in ‘Mathematics and the Metaphysicians’, *Mysticism and Logic*, 75.

<sup>56</sup> *Ethics in Practice* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) 1.

### 9. The Pretended Appeal to Something Independent

Moral theorising – that is to say, what we are called upon to apply – is supposed to provide a check, is supposed to be able to put us right. But it is always giving us (what we take to be) the wrong results in actual cases, sometimes indeed quite comical results – as with the suggestion that one must somehow be able to ‘justify’ going out for dinner or walking down a country lane. By contrast, we are far more sure that murder and rape are outrages than we are of any philosophical understanding of the matter, an understanding which eludes us if we attempt to go much beyond initial simplicities. Theorising is only taken to give us the right results when it more or less tells us what we think we know already, and the more we recognise our need to distrust it the more pronounced this tendency must be. Utilitarian theories have had continually to be ‘corrected’ in this way. Indeed, as Philippa Foot has said, the modifications seem never to have been able to catch up with the objections.<sup>57</sup>

Kant is commonly regarded as the most profound of moral theorists, he being the philosopher who thought most deeply about human dignity. But what good was that to him, so many philosophers will say, when the time for application came round? I mean application by the man himself, not by others who might well be misunderstanding him. His own applications indeed could well be taken as a guide to what he actually meant. His modern admirers however – and how many of them there are – will almost always consider that his applications, even those most closely related to the idea of human dignity, were profoundly misguided, and even offensive. Think what he would be telling them about lying, equality, animals, homosexuality, suicide and capital punishment. Think too about what he would be saying about ‘self defilement’, surely very much a Kantian notion. All very unpopular. If Kant were to say these things today he would be prosecuted for ‘hate-speech’. In recent decades support for abortion has almost come to define the decent mind. We can readily glean what *he* would have had to say on the topic. It would not be what his admirers would like to hear.<sup>58</sup> People will say that

<sup>57</sup> ‘Utilitarianism and the Virtues’, *Moral Dilemmas*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002) 60.

<sup>58</sup> For Kant’s view that that a human offspring is ‘a person’ and is not an item of parental property, see the discussion of procreation in *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Mary Gregor, trans., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 98–100). And concerning suicide, Kant maintains that it is not a crime only against oneself but is sometimes a crime against

Kant was simply carried away by the prejudices of his time. What makes them so sure that *they* are not being carried away by the prejudices current in present day academic circles? The one claim does not exclude the other of course. And in either case we are left with the solid result: that the application of ethics on the part of philosophers is strikingly susceptible to prejudice.

In practice all this will mean that people will accept philosophical doctrines when the application seems to fit what they would like to maintain. This is what we expect to happen in regard to claims about ‘personhood’ for example, gratefully pressed into service in order to excuse what we want to have done: not so much the application of philosophical insight as the philosophical decoration of an opinion. Concepts are here chosen to suit practical ends. In 1859 a black slave girl in the US tried her hand at a little practical philosophy, as we would nowadays call it, no doubt as advised by a skilful lawyer. On being accused of theft before Roger Taney, at that time Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, she ingeniously pointed out that she was not classified as ‘a person’, whereas the relevant statute said quite plainly: ‘Any person who...’ Naturally this was not going to produce the wanted result. It was ruled that she was a person after all, it being a matter (as the District Attorney said) of what was evident to the eye.<sup>59</sup>

## **10. Our Pessimism as to the Prospects for Moral Advice Unexpectedly Reinforced**

In 1977, when the movement for applied ethics had rather got under way, R. M. Hare, himself something of an inspiration to this movement, wrote an optimistic paper about its prospects: entitled ‘Medical ethics: Can the moral philosopher help?’<sup>60</sup> Despite the restriction in the title, this essay was concerned with ‘applying ethics’ rather generally. ‘The problems of medical ethics’, Hare said, ‘are so typical of the moral problems that moral philosophy is supposed to be able to help with, that a failure here really would be a sign either of the uselessness of the discipline or of the incompetence

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others too, and mentions the case of suicide in pregnancy. Parents who commit suicide, he says, can violate their duty to their children (218).

<sup>59</sup> *United States v. Amy*, 1859, 24 Federal Cases, No. 14445.

<sup>60</sup> Reprinted in Hare’s *Essays on Bioethics*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1993).

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of the particular practitioner' (1). Hare, though he can't have known it, offers some welcome support for the thesis I have been defending.

If the project of practical assistance is on track, Professor Hare suggested, this can only be because philosophy itself has turned a corner. Until quite recently, Hare was happy to admit, philosophy would have been totally incompetent to give advice, since it lacked a vital ingredient: rigour.

It is only very recently in the history of philosophy that general standards of rigour in argument have improved to such an extent that there is some hope of establishing our discipline on a firm basis. (1)

And it seems undeniable that standards of care and clarity in argument have rather risen since the mid nineteenth century, at least in philosophy of a broadly analytic character. But it matters how this 'rigour' is characterised. This is what Hare had in mind:

I mean such things as the insistence on knowing, and being able to explain, exactly what one means when one says something, which involves being able to say what logically follows from it and what does not, what it is logically consistent with, and so on. If this is not insisted upon, arguments will get lost in the sands (2).

Now if this is a precondition of the enterprise of advice, I wish to argue, the enterprise cannot possibly get under way. For where in philosophy is it possible to observe this standard of rigour? Philosophy discusses concepts about which we are unclear – cause, time, change, reason for action, knowledge, obligation, wisdom, possibility, intention, person, thought, and so on. In regard to all these we remain in difficulties even after considerable progress has been made. Arguments which essentially involve such concepts are going to be hard to evaluate. People think that it must be pretty easy for someone competent in formal logic to tell whether or not an inference is valid. This might be an artefact of the kind of exercises offered in logic textbooks. When Elizabeth Anscombe towards the end of her life produced a version of (or an improvement of) Anselm's *Proslogion* argument for God's existence, she said – interestingly – 'I could not determine whether it was a valid argument'<sup>61</sup>

<sup>61</sup> 'Anselm or Russelm', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 1993, 500, commenting on her earlier article 'Why Anselm's Proof in the *Proslogion* is not an Ontological Argument', *Thoreau Quarterly*, 1985.

Hare went on to say

Even now it [i.e. 'rigour' thus described] is insisted on only in certain parts of the philosophical world; one is very likely to meet philosophers who do not accept this requirement of rigour, and my advice is that one should regard them in the same light as one would regard a medical man, whether or not he had the right letters after his name, who claimed to have a wonder drug which would cure the common cold, but was not ready to submit it to controlled tests.

The upshot is clear, either we will pretend to a standard of 'rigour' which has always been impossible and will ever remain so, or we shall properly regard the purveyors of applied ethics as a bunch of quacks.

## **11. The assumption of Simple, Honest, Goodness**

If philosophers are to become not just our advisors but our spiritual directors one last difficulty must now be faced. We naturally tend to make the kindly and civilised (or perhaps just lazy) assumption, that consultants on matters ethical are nearly always going to be simple, honest and good – to borrow Nestle's language from the Shredded Wheat packet. But might they not quite often be shifty, bent or spoiled? I mean, somewhat more than is usual? And here I am not so much concerned with the case of a teacher who in the past might have acted 'unethically' in some spectacular way, such as the Safeway Poisoner, a onetime lecturer in biochemistry hired to teach medical ethics at the University of Manchester, having served 7 years of a 12 year sentence for attempted murder.<sup>62</sup> Such a teacher would, in my view, be somewhat more likely to have a sounder view of the sanctity of life than prevails among ethics teachers generally. I am thinking of rottenness embraced rather than rottenness repented of.

True enough, we are very willing to accept that human beings *can* be corrupt as distinct from incompetent. This is how people view contemporary holocaust-deniers. Or our minds will return to certain horrible exemplars from history. It might be thought that these exemplars could not include academics like ourselves, seriously concerned with ethics. But take the case of the eminent academic Joachim Mrugowsky. Professor Dr. Mrugowsky (as he was called, in Continental style) once edited, with a new Introduction, a work

<sup>62</sup> *The Times*, March 11, 2004.

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in medical ethics by the celebrated nineteenth-century doctor, Christoph Hufeland, a man who had corresponded with Kant and had treated Goethe. In demonstrating this concern for ethics Mugrowsky was indeed something of a pioneer, for the practical ethics enthusiasm with which we are now so familiar had yet to take hold: we follow in his footsteps. Yet only a few years after the book was published we find Mrugowsky being sentenced to death for ordering lethal typhus experiments on prisoners at Buchenwald. In his Final Statement to the Court he actually mentioned this work on ethics and claimed always to have lived by its principles.<sup>63</sup>

However a focus on such exotic examples is misleading. No one should suppose that those who are prominently concerned, often to good effect, with what are called 'human rights abuses' could not themselves be advocating human rights abuses.<sup>64</sup> Peter Singer artlessly divides humanity into those who are 'vicious, violent and irrational' and 'the rest of us'.<sup>65</sup> This is surely a divide appropriate only to the world of the Western movie or to the novels of Dickens. This them-and-us distinction is made easier by the inclusion of the word 'violent'. But we should remember that so many outrages, including murder, need not be in the least violent. Poisoning is a gentle thing. If someone is tempted by the thought that corruption is what happens elsewhere, it is something of an antidote to reflect how corrupt we in the West must appear to far-away Muslims. Alternatively, we could usefully imagine how practical ethics would probably have developed, and been taught, if the idea had taken hold in the American South before the Civil War. When Hume said that the errors in philosophy tended to be ridiculous rather than dangerous he cannot have thought how philosophy would one day be 'applied'.

There are two ways in which we will almost inevitably underestimate the extent of corruption. Firstly, we tend to think of corruption as a rottenness which spreads through our whole being, as with apples in the apple barrel. We might think here of the drawing of the boy

<sup>63</sup> 'As far as my own concepts of the ethical duties of the doctor are concerned, they are contained in my book regarding medical ethics, and I believe always to have acted according to the principles of that book and lived according to them. My life, my actions, and my aims were clean. That is why now that at the end of this trial I can declare myself free of personal guilt.'

<sup>64</sup> An organisation might usefully be devoted to second-order vigilance – 'Human Rights Watch *Watch*' it might be called.

<sup>65</sup> *How Are We To Live?*, London: Mandarin, 1994, ix.

who smoked in *Scouting for Boys*, his vice seeming to affect his very posture. It is surely important to recognise that a corrupt person can also show perfectly admirable and attractive traits. ‘Dissonance’ of this kind is perfectly common. Who is more despised than a child molester? But such an individual might be the very person who saves your life, even at the risk of his own. Secondly, we tend to work with a relaxed standard of good faith. More particularly we work with a *subjective* notion of good faith: a man has subjective good faith when he thinks – ‘sincerely’ thinks, I suppose it would be said – he is acting well. I say that this is a relaxed standard since almost everyone (not excluding Professor Mrugowsky) will be pretty well permanently in subjective good faith. This robs the notion of interest. It lacks interest rather in the way a concept of ‘subjective knowledge’ would lack interest. (I talk about ‘good faith’ rather than ‘integrity’. The word ‘integrity’ is indeterminate in sense, its chief use being to lend to one’s writing a certain tone. A concept-dropper’s notion.)

In considering this topic in the context of this talk let us leave aside the unlovely enthusiasm for ‘the unsanctifying of human life’ which is such a remarkable feature of the practical ethics movement. For there is a special kind of corruption relevant to teaching or advising. Nowadays the word ‘corruption’ suggests bribery. This represents a dangerous narrowing and trivialising of the notion. A corrupt teacher by this narrow notion would have to be – let us say – a professor of ethics caught taking kick-backs from a manufacturer of windmills in return for suitably scary lectures about global warming. The kind of corruption peculiarly relevant to teaching involves a willingness to lie or improperly to deceive, where there need be no suggestion of bribery. As we have mentioned, certain philosophers of academic standing have been saying in recent years that moral obligations are as mythical as ghosts and dragons, and that in consequence every moral judgment to the effect that this *ought* to be done, or that there was an *obligation* to do that, are all false. The default position would be that everything is permitted, though the very word ‘permitted’ would naturally drop out of use. Now there is nothing especially surprising about all this. It must indeed be allowed that the concept of a specifically moral kind of obligation is rather suspect. These philosophers however often want to continue to assert or endorse what they do not believe to be true: they want to continue to say that we are *not* permitted to rape or to be cruel. They want to ‘mis-speak’ as people nowadays say. This introduces a manipulative dishonesty into the heart of the project of practical ethics.



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It might be thought impossible that philosophers who are supposed to love the truth could favour the lie. But then we remember our founding father, Plato.<sup>66</sup> Berkeley though a bishop was prepared to suggest that philosophers should be willing to tell the general public all manner of things, 'how false soever they may be' in order to bring about the desirable result: human wellbeing.<sup>67</sup> Sir Isaiah Berlin was a man so greatly admired in our day for his learning and humanity. Yet he thought it right, both at the time and in retrospect, to betray the trust of his dying father.<sup>68</sup> The best known textbook in medical ethics, constantly in demand year on year in our medical school, writes as if telling lies to patients about their condition can be quite permissible, seeing that the Principle of Autonomy is sometimes overruled by the Principle of Beneficence.<sup>69</sup> The most that can be required of us is to be economical with the untruth. A similar message emerges from John Mackie's *Ethics*, a much reprinted work. 'A prudent man will not squander his limited stock of convincing lies, but use it sparingly to the best effect'.<sup>70</sup> That sounds like irony, but the context suggests not.

People who acknowledge that some prohibitions must be exceptionless have sometimes wondered whether the prohibition of lying should be included. They might mention jokes, or the conventional untruths which are part of etiquette. Or they might be thinking

<sup>66</sup> *Republic*, 389b, 414c.

<sup>67</sup> *Principles of Human Knowledge*, Sec. 52.

<sup>68</sup> 'Why I do not regret lying to my father about life after death', *The Times*, 19 July, 1996, p. 16. 'We did not talk about death at home. I think my father hoped that there was a future life. In fact, when he thought he was dying, he asked me if I thought there was going to be a life after death. I said that yes, I did. That was a lie. A lie, a lie which I uttered because he obviously wanted it to be so and hoped we would be able to meet again, and I did not want to tell him what I saw as the bleak truth. So I did not tell the truth, and I do not in the least regret it. Since I believed that nothing would follow one's death, why should I cause a dying father pain?'

<sup>69</sup> T. Beauchamp and J. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn., New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, 126: 'on balance the lie may be justified in this context...'. In Case 2, 512–3 it is referred to as 'a bald lie', so we know pretty well what we are talking about. Google-searching suggests that no one finds this passage in Beauchamp and Childress to be worthy of note. (This thought runs through various editions up to the present day.)

<sup>70</sup> *Ethics, Inventing Right and Wrong*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977) 183. The chapter is called 'Elements of a Practical Morality'.

of answers to be given to the Gestapo about the Jews in the attic. If so, we should narrow the description. We are dealing here with a special case, *lying in a fiduciary relationship*, that is to say a case of lying which is betrayal of trust, no doubt about serious matters. A teacher of practical ethics is in just such a relationship.

## **12. In Conclusion**

Where does all this leave the vulnerable client? It leaves him with the prospect of having to rely on an advisor who might think he more or less knows what's what, but whose mind has been filled with a cloud of unknowing: more exactly, with a mass of fantasy, uncertainty, and the occasional insight, put across with much unpleasing earnestness. Furthermore the advisor, being well read in ethics, might well have learned to lie or to deceive his clients – no doubt somewhat reluctantly, perhaps even half-consciously, but in the interest of some good cause dear to his heart or faction. All in all, hardly worth the fee.

I do not want to end however on this somewhat negative note. There is scope in philosophy for an instructive exercise or party game. We might call it 'proving the outrageous'. Nothing could be more practical. Participants take a short course in philosophy and then face certain questions, being expected to show versatility and ingenuity. In how many ways can it be shown that black is white? In how many ways can it be shown that nothing exists? In how many ways can it be shown that it is all right to kill a toddler? And so on. The power of moral philosophy provides enormous scope in regard to this last as I have often been able to demonstrate to my students. Certain elementary moves here will occur to anyone who has attended so much as half the short course. But there is also help to be expected from scholarship. There are insights, for example, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII. Sec. 12 – material which has, to date, been insufficiently exploited. It is about parents and their children, parts and wholes, shared identity and the ownership of teeth.