

The End of Philosophy

Many of you will know, although some of you may not, that eighty years ago, “Catherine Mariotti Pratt, wife of an Assistant Professor of [of all things] Philosophy,” suffering from the “tedium of New England winters” so familiar to us all, initiated the Faculty Lecture Series, requesting that “learned professors talk seriously about things that really mattered to them” (*WC Faculty Handbook*, 8/86, VI-DEFG-1). How quaint. Little could Mrs. Pratt have known that less than a century later the New England winters would have begun to retreat in the face of the greenhouse effect, and that at least some of the most learned of professors would have ceased to “talk seriously,” preferring instead playfulness, irony, and puns.

Given the greenhouse effect (as well as ski lifts, TV sets, and—especially—indoor basketball courts), it may be decreasingly necessary for us to comply with Mrs. Pratt’s request, and given rhetorical trends in the humanities and some of the social sciences, it may be decreasingly possible for some of us to do so. Nevertheless, I shall attempt to comply, because the tedium of New England winters has not yet been overcome entirely and because, although I acknowledge that playful and ironic talk can be learned, I am not convinced that learned talk should always be playful and ironic. In any case, if the ghost of Mrs. Pratt continues to haunt this otherwise no doubt sanctified campus, I hope that what I say may help to relieve her tedium. As will, I am confident, what is said on this stage at this time next week, when Bill Lenhart of the Computer Science Department presents his lecture entitled “Computational Geometry: Mathematics Comes Full Circle.”

The title of my lecture is “The End of Philosophy.” Difficult though you may find this to believe, it was not until after I had chosen that title for this lecture—after I had chosen the title but long before I had begun to write—that I remembered that I had used the same title for my doctoral dissertation, roughly ten years ago. My retrieval of this title might be evidence, reassuring to Mrs. Pratt, of the seriousness of my long-term interest in the topic. On the other hand, my having forgotten that I had previously used it might be evidence of the weakness of my long-term memory.

Be that as it may, I assure you that I shall not, this afternoon, merely repeat what I wrote those many years ago; I was tempted to do so, but I reluctantly concluded that that a lecture covering 532 pages of written material might try the patience even of Mrs. Pratt. This, then, is my second discourse titled “The End of Philosophy.” But I link it to the first by quoting my dissertation’s opening sentence: “Philosophy may come to its end in either of two ways: it may be completed, or it may be abandoned.” Five hundred and thirty-two pages later, I concluded that Hegel did not succeed in completing philosophy (he thought he had completed it by bringing it, in the words of Bill Lenhart’s title, full circle). I concluded that Hegel did not consummate his love of wisdom by becoming wise, but that philosophy’s resistance to its own completion need not, and should not, lead to its abandonment.

Now, these ten years later, I continue to be concerned with philosophy’s abandonment—this continues, in Mrs. Pratt’s words, really to matter to me—but the possibility of its abandonment now strikes me as more complicated. If philosophy is abandoned, it now seems to me, it may be abandoned in either of two ways: it may be

explicitly rejected, or it may be tacitly forgotten. The end that concerns me most at present is the last of these ends, the end philosophy would reach in being forgotten. What? you may ask. Philosophy, forgotten? The very suggestion may seem absurd: there continue to be philosophy departments in major colleges and universities at least throughout the West, and the word “philosophy” and its derivatives appear with striking—and to me at least, appalling—frequency in popular magazines and in our ordinary language. Football coaches can describe their “philosophies” of recruiting, day care centers their “philosophies” of child care, and colleges the “philosophies” underlying their ways of managing their endowments. And people who would not call themselves philosophers, and would not claim to know or want to know anything about anyone who was a philosopher, have no trouble using and understanding assertions that begin, “Well, my philosophy is....”

It may seem, then, that there are philosophies everywhere. Would this not be a sign that philosophy, far from being forgotten, is flourishing, perhaps as never before? Might not this suggestion be supported by the continuing existence of academic departments of philosophy, well over one hundred years following the early positivists’ explicit rejection of philosophy, their triumphant announcement that the philosophical age of metaphysics had ended and the post-philosophical age of science had begun? Perhaps. But I remain concerned about the distance between the current notion that a philosophy is something that one can have—one has one’s philosophy of recruiting, or of deficit management, or of education, or of life—and the suggestion, implicit in the name

“philosophy,” that philosophy is something that one engages in or is involved with, and not just another consumer good to be acquired and possessed.

What’s in this name, “philosophy”? I indulge in another self-quotation:

“Philosophy is the only academic discipline enshrined in our current curricula to be named neither for a well-defined subject matter (rocks, plants, etc.) nor for a product or method (the logos or scientific account sought by the likes of biology and psychology, the nomos or law of concern in astronomy and economics). Philosophy is named, instead, as an affect or emotion whose object is identified only vaguely: philosophy is the love of wisdom.”

My concern with the forgetting of philosophy arises from an observation about names that has been made by many: as Nietzsche puts it, words are pockets, into which now this meaning is stuffed and now that, and now many meanings at once. The word “philosophy” is a pocket, and the meaning we are most likely to pull from that pocket defines a philosophy as a product, a set of fundamental beliefs for which one may have reasons, but which one is disinclined to question: “well, that’s my philosophy” functions as a conversation stopper, not as an invitation to further discussion. If we rummage around long enough in the word-pocket “philosophy,” we may come up with other meanings; we may even come up with the love of wisdom. But for the most part, I fear, we haven’t the time for such rummaging. I hope that, this afternoon, the tedium of the New England winter may provide us with that time.

In our common understanding, I have suggested, a philosophy is something one can have; as an uncommon alternative, I have suggested that philosophy can be

something one can be engaged in or perhaps even taken by. Philosophy can be the love of wisdom. I now want to consider what philosophy as the love of wisdom might be—I want to retrieve that meaning, now in danger of being forgotten, from the past. I attempt to do so by looking to relevant passages from the Western tradition’s archetypal philosopher, Socrates, and its most exceptional philosopher—its strangest philosopher—Nietzsche.

Socrates

I have called Socrates the archetypal philosopher because if Western philosophy has a single founding document, its author must be Plato, and if it has a founding figure, the figure must be Socrates, Plato’s teacher and the central figure in his dialogues. In the attempt better to understand what philosophy as love of wisdom might be, I look back to a document that has as good a claim as any to being foundational for the Western philosophical tradition; I look to Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*.

The *Apology* is, as Mrs. Pratt will certainly have known, Plato’s version of the speeches Socrates gives in his own defense against official charges of religious heresy and of corrupting the youth of Athens. In his defense of himself and of philosophy, Socrates suggests that philosophy began—for him and therefore, in an important sense, for us as his heirs—as a response to a single, decisive event. The event is an exchange between one of Socrates’s companions, Chaerophon, and the oracle at Delphi. Chaerophon, Socrates reports, asked the oracle whether there was anyone wiser than Socrates; the oracle’s answer was “no.” Upon hearing this, Socrates suggests, he changed his life, devoting himself thenceforth to the “service of the god” (23c). How strange. Socrates here suggests

that in the “philosophical” activity for which he was condemned to death, he was motivated not by the love of wisdom, but rather by love of, or at least obedience to, a god. Socrates himself makes this suggestion, yet the context within which he makes it, within which he introduces the Chaerophon story, is complex. Socrates is defending himself against the official charges that have been brought against him, but he has already asserted that the official charges are relatively unimportant. If he is convicted, he suggests, the cause of his conviction will lie not in the official accusations, but rather in slanderous reports about him that the members of the jury have heard not only recently, but for years, beginning when they were young and easily persuaded.

Socrates describes the slanderous charges that have become common opinion as follows: “that there is a certain Socrates, a wise man [or, translating more freely, a wiseacre, a smart ass], who muses about the things aloft, who has investigated all things under the earth, and who makes the weaker speech the stronger” (18b). These charges are particularly effective, Socrates continues, because those who hear them assume “that investigators of these things also do not believe in gods” (18b).

The assumption that only an atheist would make investigations of the sort Socrates is said to prefer seems particularly damaging, because it provides at least oblique support for one of the official charges against Socrates, namely, that he does not believe in the gods in whom the city believes (24b). Faced with these converging charges, it would appear to be astute for Socrates to affirm his belief in the city’s gods, and to offer his response to Chaerophon’s story as evidence in support of that belief. We might expect Socrates to insist, “You charge that I do not believe in the city’s gods, but my response to

the Delphic oracle shows that my life is guided by a god's command; you cannot condemn me without condemning your own god." It might be astute of Socrates to say this, but this is not quite what he says.

Socrates explicitly counters the charge that he investigates things above and beneath the earth by pointing out that although many in the jury have often heard him speak, none has heard him speak about such things (19d). He takes himself hereby to have refuted the unofficial charge relating to his investigations. In refuting this charge, he suggests, he has also refuted the charge relating to his religious beliefs: "from this you will recognize that the same holds also for the other things that the many say about me" (19d).

By the time he gets to the Chaerophon story, then, Socrates claims already to have countered the substance of the slanderous charges; he has turned from the substance to the cause, that is, to a concern that he may himself have given the jury. He voices what he takes to be the question on their minds: "surely, ... such a report and account would not have arisen, unless you were doing something different from the many. So tell us what it is, so that we do not deal unadvisedly with you" (20c). In other words: if you are just another Athenian-in-the-street, Socrates, why do so many people hate you so much?

Here Socrates tells his story of Chaerophon and the Delphic oracle: it is his explicit account of why his own practice, for which many hate him, is so different from the practice of the many. And what is Socrates's practice? He goes to those who are reputed to be wise and engages them in discussions, in order to compare their wisdom with his own. His own wisdom, he is convinced, is minimal: he knows only that he knows nothing, he knows only that he is ignorant. But he discovers, again and again, that those he

questions know no more than he knows. The result of his first interrogation of one reputed to be wise, a result repeated countless times, he describes as follows: “it seemed to me that this man seemed to be wise, both to many other human beings and most of all to himself, but that he was not. So from this I became hateful both to him and to many of those present” (21c-d).

Socrates’s activity, following Chaerophon’s questioning of the oracle, indeed seems to explain why many would have hated him: those he questioned he embarrassed directly, and those who had respected them he embarrassed indirectly, both no doubt to the delight of the youthful followers he was said to be corrupting. This activity was, to many, obnoxious; but was it in service of a god?

Socrates’s activity, his relentless questioning of those reputed to be wise, does seem to qualify as “service to the god” in that it supports the pronouncement of the Delphic oracle: it demonstrates, again and again, that no one is wiser than Socrates. It does not demonstrate that Socrates is wise, but this too supports the god, because the oracle asserted not that Socrates was wise, but that no one was wiser. What Socrates calls his “human wisdom” may well be, then, what has become famous as Socratic ignorance: Socrates knows only that he does not know.

From these considerations, should we conclude that Socrates is motivated by devotion to god rather than by love of wisdom? In presenting the story of Chaerophon and the oracle, Socrates implies that the god’s pronouncement has determined the course of his life. Should we not conclude that Socrates takes himself to know that a god speaks through the oracle, and to know that this god should be obeyed? If he indeed knew these

things, would he not be, in some important sense, wise? Or if Socrates does not know these religious tenets to be true—and therefore is not wise—but nevertheless accepts them without question, should we not say that what he loves is not wisdom, but rather these religious beliefs?

Perhaps. Perhaps we should conclude that Socrates is not a philosopher, that he is instead either a sage (one who is wise), or a sophist (who believes himself wise), or a philodoxer (a lover of opinion or belief). But let us not draw this conclusion quite so quickly, because neither Socrates's motivation to his peculiar, possibly philosophical activity, nor his biography, is as clear as I have so far suggested. First, concerning the piety of his motivation: although he asserts that his questioning is in the service of the god, and although he claims to consider "the god's business of the highest importance" (21e), he also reports that he, conscious that he himself was "not at all wise, either much or little," expected and even intended, initially, not to confirm the god's announcement, but to refute it: he assumed that he would "show the oracle, "This man is wiser than I, but you declared that I was wisest" (21c).

If on the one hand, then, Socrates's reported response to the oracle can appear as evidence of his piety, it can also, on the other, appear as evidence of extreme impiety: he attempts to prove that the oracle is wrong. Even if the oracle's pronouncement motivates a drastic change in Socrates's life, then, the basis of that motivation remains unclear. And the very unclarity of this basis leads me to raise a broader question: what influence should we suppose the oracle's pronouncement indeed to have had on Socrates? What should we assume Socrates had been up to before Chaerophon journeyed to Delphi?

A first possibility we might consider is that Socrates, prior to his putatively decisive moment, had been an ordinary Athenian mason, building houses, raising a family, and chasing cute young boys. This could be how it was, I suppose, but there is no good reason for thinking that it was, and there is one powerful reason for thinking that it wasn't: if Socrates had been doing nothing out of the ordinary, it makes no sense that Chaerophon would have asked the oracle, "is there anyone wiser than Socrates" rather than "who is the wisest?"

Given Chaerophon's singling out of Socrates, it seems likely that Socrates had been doing something that led Chaerophon to suspect that indeed no one was wiser than he. But what would that have been? One possibility is that he had been a sophist, a teacher who supported himself by ignobly accepting fees from students in return for teaching them the truth. This again could be how it was, but again there are reasons for thinking that it wasn't. First, Socrates explicitly denies ever having made money attempting to educate others (19d-e), and he denies ever having thought that he knew any truths to teach. Perhaps, in making these denials, he is lying, but he does seem confident that no one will testify to the contrary. In addition, there is an even stronger argument against the suggestion that Socrates, early in his life, had claimed to be wise or had believed that he was wise. The argument is based on Socrates's response to the oracle. One need not, I think, be a modern capitalist in order to see the advertising potential of a god's endorsement of one's wisdom. If Socrates had thought himself wise, or had wanted others to think that he was, it seems likely not that he would have gone out to question others,

but rather that he himself would have continued to teach. The god's proclamation would have changed his life only by allowing him safely to escalate his tuition fees.

I have introduced reasons for thinking that Socrates, prior to Chaerophon's purportedly decisive journey to Delphi, was neither an ordinary Athenian nor an ordinary teacher. What does this leave us with? The obvious suggestion, it seems to me, is that he may have been doing *before* the encounter at Delphi precisely what he claims to have done only following that encounter. Perhaps, long since, he had been walking around Athens, questioning all who claimed to know in order to learn from them what they knew if they did know, and to learn that they knew nothing if they did not. Perhaps, contrary to what he himself suggests, Socrates's turn to philosophy was not a response to the proclamation of the god; perhaps, instead, Socrates's response to the god was determined by his engagement in philosophy.

There are various reasons for accepting this suggestion. First, it explains the question itself: if Chaerophon had been among the youths following Socrates around and delighting in his deflations of their pompous elders, then Chaerophon, having seen Socrates unmask so many who claimed wisdom, might well have been led to wonder whether Socrates would ever meet his better.

Moreover, the suggestion that Socrates was already philosophizing explains his response to the oracle, in its ambiguity: Socrates responds to the oracle's claim of knowledge in precisely the way that, according to my suggestion, he has consistently responded to all claims of knowledge: he doubts it, and he attempts to test it. When human beings claim to know, Socrates questions them. Testing the Delphic oracle is a

more complicated affair, but it is one that Socrates nevertheless pursues: he tests the truth of the claim that no one is wiser than he by examining as many candidates as he can find. What he now does “in the service of the god” is what he had been doing anyway, without regard for the god; the only difference is that the god who speaks through the oracle is now among those whose knowledge claims are subjected to Socratic interrogation. If this is so, then, after all, Socrates does what he does not for the love of god, but rather, perhaps, for the love of wisdom.

If Socrates’s activity is as I have described it, then philosophy, for Socrates, is something one does, not something one has. But what can we say about what Socrates does? Certainly, many found it obnoxious. Many, indeed, found it worse than obnoxious: the Athenians were convinced that the political dangers it posed warranted the judgment that condemned Socrates to death. And even if we ignore those objections, the value or desirability of this kind of philosophical activity might seem to be undermined by its futility: Socrates ought at some point to realize that he is never going to find anyone who is wise; he ought to give up philosophy and do something more productive or at least more lucrative.

Socrates may seem, after all, to be left in the position of the Edward Abbey protagonist Henry Holyoak Lightcap, a 43-year-old graduate school drop-out who, in the course of a seduction attempt that becomes successful only months later, announces, “I was a philosophy major. Well, a second lieutenant. That’s why I’m totally confused. Ask me a question, I think of sixteen possible answers, all false. The result is a kind of infantile paralysis” (*The Fool’s Progress*, 333).

Philosophy as love of wisdom at least runs the risk of becoming a kind of paralysis, infantile or otherwise. But Socrates did not suffer from such paralysis. In the *Apology*, he provides us with two examples of decisive political actions; he describes two occasions when he risked his life in order to do what he deemed right. The question arises: how, if he knows nothing, can he ever decide to act? His answer is contained in a passage from the dialogue *Crito*, where he discusses with Crito his decision not to escape from prison, a decision that, as he knows, will cost him his life. In that discussion, he announces, “Not only now but always, I am such as to accept nothing other than the account [*logos*] that, upon consideration and discussion [*logizomenoi*], appears [*phainetai*] to me the best” (46b).

Socrates does not “have a philosophy.” Nor is he wise. What Socrates has is accounts, or beliefs, and he is willing to act, even to risk his life on the basis of those beliefs. But he does not love his beliefs; he does not *know* that they are the best—quite to the contrary, he *knows* only that he does not know that his beliefs are the best. Nevertheless, they *appear* to him to be the best, and this appearance is the result of consideration and discussion. But he acknowledges, out of respect for the wisdom that he loves but does not have, that his beliefs are only beliefs, that they are not knowledge, and that they therefore remain open to rejection or alteration by further consideration and discussion.

So much, for the moment, for what I take to be the Socratic form of philosophy as love of wisdom. I now take a chronological leap of some twenty-five hundred years,

turning from this figure who arguably marks philosophy's beginning to the figure who, according to some, marks its end.

Nietzsche

In turning from Socrates to Nietzsche, I indulge in another self-quotation, referring now not to my dissertation, but to one of my course descriptions: "Before Nietzsche, philosophers tended to view the history of philosophy as a linear, progressive development toward a goal shared by all; Nietzsche is the most important initiator of the 'post-modern' rejection of the Western philosophical tradition." Despite the aspects of rejection I attribute to Nietzsche in this description, I also believe that there is an important sense in which he, like Socrates, is a philosopher.

To get at that sense, I will consider a passage in which Nietzsche appears to be anything but a Socratic philosopher. In a speech entitled "Of War and Warriors," Zarathustra—Nietzsche's counterpart to Plato's Socrates—challenges his audience, "You say it is the good cause that hallows even war? I say unto you: it is the good war that hallows any cause" (59.7-8; 159.21-23). Here, Nietzsche seems to emerge not as a lover of wisdom, but rather as a lover of war.

In cases of conflict that may lead to war, the "you" Nietzsche's Zarathustra challenges in the passage I have just cited—a "you" within which he takes us, his readers, to be included—refers to those who are inclined to think first of causes, and only then of wars. If our cause is the liberation of innocent people, our war may be holy (even if that is not the description we would be inclined to use), whereas if our cause is the domination of those of other faiths and races, our war will be a desecration. To be sure, there may be

disagreements among us concerning which causes are good—some of us might be in favor of the oppression of infidels, as long as we’re the ones doing the oppressing—but the question would retain its focus: our evaluation of the *cause* would precede and determine our evaluation of the *war*.

Zarathustra thinks first of wars, not of causes. Here, he may seem to presage Mussolini, who insists that “a minute on the battlefield is worth a lifetime of peace,” and elaborates,

War alone brings up to its highest tension all human energy and puts the stamp of nobility upon the peoples who have the courage to meet it. All other trials are substitutes, which never really put men into the position where they have to make the great decision—the alternative of life and death. (*Doctrine of Fascism*, #22)

For Mussolini, unlike the “you” or “us” Zarathustra addresses, war is valuable in itself, not merely as a means to the furtherance of a good cause. But Zarathustra does not side with Mussolini. Both consider wars before considering causes, but whereas Mussolini simply deems war good, Zarathustra refers to the good war. His position is not that every war is good, or that every cause anyone is willing to fight for is thereby hallowed; what hallows the cause, he tells us, is not that it be defended in war, but that it be defended in a good war: “it is the *good* war that hallows any cause.”

Zarathustra’s opponents, among whom we may be included, advocate the evaluation first of causes. Before we go to war, we want to be sure that our cause is good. If we determine that it is, then we may be tempted to conclude that our war is holy. The question whether our *holy* war is a *good* war may then never arise. If it does not arise,

then we will be confident that our war remains holy no matter how it is waged; if the cause is good, the use of nuclear bombs and napalm, the use even of chemical and biological weapons, could not serve to make the war unholy.

Zarathustra directs our attention away from causes, and toward the wars that may be fought for them. If we follow his suggestion, then we begin to reason differently: ignoring the goodness of causes, we ask about the goodness of wars. We ask whether following the Geneva conventions or attempting to minimize civilian casualties would suffice to make our war a good war; we might ask whether our war would be good only if it were waged by means of economic sanctions rather than by the force of arms.

I don't mean to suggest that we now, all of us, evaluate only our causes and not our wars. Nor do I mean to suggest that if we focus on the goodness of wars rather than on the goodness of causes all our questions about war in general, or about our current war, will be answered. I do mean to suggest that if we reflect on Zarathustra's announcement, rather than immediately dismissing it as the raving of a mad proto-Nazi, we are led to difficult and important questions.

But we are not led, only or even primarily, to the kinds of questions I have just raised. We are not, because the war and warriors Zarathustra is concerned with chiefly are not like those currently struggling in the Middle East. That Zarathustra's concern lies elsewhere is indicated earlier in the same speech, where he admonishes, "If you cannot be saints *of knowledge*, at least be *its warriors*" (159.3-4).

The war that concerns Zarathustra is intellectual rather than political; it is a war of knowledge, not a war for oil or land or political liberation. Zarathustra's war is, as

Nietzsche puts it elsewhere “War (but without gunpowder!) between different *thoughts!* and *their* armies!” (16[50];10:515.13-14). It is such a war that Nietzsche wages in his earlier work *Human, All-too-Human*, of which he writes, much later, “This is war, but war *without* powder and smoke, *without* warlike poses, without pathos and strained limbs” (EHVI:1).

Nietzsche’s wars are intellectual wars, intellectual conflicts. In considering such conflicts, he tells us, it is the goodness of the war that determines the holiness of the cause, not the goodness of the cause that determines the holiness of the war. What does this mean? What makes an intellectual war a good war?

At this point, I could consider various possible answers to the question before revealing the one that appears to me, upon consideration and discussion, to be the best. I could, but I recognize that the tedium of the New England winter, enervating as it is, may be surpassed by the tedium of a lecture that goes on too long. So, I will make short what could be a much longer story.

Returning to Socratic terms, intellectual wars, wars of knowledge, are wars to determine which accounts are stronger, which are weaker. If we knew, prior to the waging of the war, that one account was true, then we would know the other to be false. We could then be saints of knowledge; we would then be able to wage holy wars. But, Nietzsche suggests, those of us who are not saints of knowledge—those of us who are not wise—can nonetheless be its warriors: we can wage wars on its behalf. We will not then view the wars we wage as holy, but we might nevertheless be able to deem them good. And if we do, if the wars we fight are good, then the causes that clash in them will thereby

be sanctified. From this it does not follow that all causes are holy; unholy would be the cause that could be defended *only* in bad intellectual wars.

Love and Wisdom

The connections I want to make between Socrates and Nietzsche will, at this point, be apparent. I attribute to both the belief that we human beings cannot be wise, cannot be saints of knowledge, and that we therefore must depend upon our beliefs. I attribute to both also a love of wisdom that precludes the love of beliefs, and that thereby keeps beliefs open to question. Finally, I attribute to both a distinction between good and bad ways of questioning beliefs. Nietzsche introduces the distinction between good and bad intellectual wars; Socrates regularly stresses both the importance and the extraordinary difficulty of distinguishing between philosophy and sophistry, and between dialectic, or conversing in order to learn, and eristic, or arguing in order to win.

Speaking very generally: good intellectual wars, for both Nietzsche and Socrates, are waged by philosophers in the interest of learning, and are waged by means of conversation and reflection; bad intellectual wars, for both Nietzsche and Socrates, are waged by sophists or dogmatists in the interest of winning, and are waged by means of coercion and confusion. Sophists and dogmatists fight in order to win rather than to learn because sophists believe that learning is impossible, and dogmatists believe that it is unnecessary. Learning is impossible for sophists, because the only distinction they recognize is that between winning and losing. Learning is unnecessary for dogmatists because they take themselves already to know all that they need to know. Then need not philosophize; they already *have their* philosophies.

The notion of philosophy I have attributed to Socrates and Nietzsche is one that, I have suggested, is in danger of being forgotten. It is a notion that is at least obscured by many ordinary-language uses of the word “philosophy.” But it may also be obscured by much of what goes on in academic departments of philosophy, for what is done by professional philosophers, or philosophy professors, may often seem to bear little resemblance to the love of wisdom I have attributed to Socrates and Nietzsche. So-called analytic philosophers tend to spend their quality time sifting through the minutiae of abstruse logical puzzles, and so-called continental philosophers are inclined to occupy themselves poring over archaic texts.

What do these activities have to do with the love of wisdom? Often, perhaps, nothing; some professors of philosophy, at least some of the time, may do what they do—we may do what we do—not from love of wisdom but rather from love of leisure or (thanks to the institution of tenure) from love of security, or even from love of money—even if more money is to be made in the practice of law or medicine or, within the academic setting, in professing economics or computer science. Alternatively, some may study philosophy not from love of wisdom but from love of erudition: some may want to acquire, as bits of intellectual property to be spent or traded, the “philosophies” of Plotinus and Augustine, or of Descartes and Hume. Still others who teach or study philosophy may do so in order to hone their skills in waging intellectual wars; most of us, I suspect, have been exposed to so-called “philosophers” who manage to win arguments by using techniques we find objectionable, even if we don’t know quite how to express our objections.

All of this I grant. Nevertheless, I think, much of what goes on in philosophy departments *can* serve to enhance philosophy as the love of wisdom, even if that may not be what it seems to do. Reading and rereading, considering and reconsidering the works of Spinoza and Aristotle, Hegel and Kant (among many others, among whom I would obviously include Plato and Nietzsche) *can*, I think, enhance the love of wisdom, because in these canonical texts, we are presented with systems or aggregations of opinions broad and deep enough that they would make us wise, if only we knew them to be true, and because, even if we cannot know them to be true, consideration and discussion may nonetheless lead us to accept them as the best, or to modify or reject them.

And not only do these classical philosophers present us with sets of opinions that, if known to be true, would make us wise; in addition, they fight for their opinions, and against opposing ones, in intellectual wars that lend themselves to evaluation in terms of their goodness. Consideration of what has been written by these philosophers thus can further our own philosophical activity not only by aiding us in discussing and considering accounts that might appear to us to be the best, but also in distinguishing good intellectual wars from bad ones.

This afternoon, in describing philosophy as the love of wisdom, I have concentrated on the love and not on the wisdom. I have distinguished wisdom, as a kind of knowledge, from belief, but I haven't said much about how wisdom might relate to other sorts of knowledge. At this point, I shall not try to say much; but I will say a bit more. Early on, I noted that whereas the names of many academic disciplines clearly specify objects of study—biology is the study of living things, anthropology the study of

human beings—the name “philosophy” determines its object only vaguely, as wisdom. Even the indistinct contrast between specificity and vagueness, however, suggests something: it suggests that no specific or delimited knowledge—no knowledge of rocks, or of trees, or of subatomic particles, or of fractals, or, to use Nietzsche’s favorite example, of the brain of the leech—would qualify as wisdom.

What *would* qualify as wisdom? I don’t know, of course, and the account that seems to me best is one that remains vague. It does seem to me that the knowledge that would be wisdom would have to be practical as well as theoretical—it would have to be knowledge concerning not only what is, but also what is to be done. And I do have some confidence in some tests that can be applied to accounts. One test asks the question, could I be wise if I did not know whether this account were true or not? Another test asks the question, would this account make me wise, if I knew it to be true?

Accounts that pass the second of these tests continue to be the focus of my own philosophical work. They continue, as Mrs. Pratt has it, to matter to be, in part because they continue to intrigue and to delight me. The most recent object of such delight, for me, is the system of Schopenhauer. Until last month, Schopenhauer’s works were included on that long list of things I’d perused, and had long intended to read, but had not read. Then, fortunately for me, two students, Ken Levy and Bill McRae, decided that we should use our tutorial to immerse ourselves in Schopenhauer’s system.

And a magnificent system, I am discovering, it is. If, for Schelling (a predecessor of Schopenhauer I examined in my dissertation), the world process results from the attempt of a primal spirit to know itself, for Schopenhauer, it results from the attempt of a primal

will to consume itself. A heavy metaphysical hypothesis, open of course to immediate objections. Even if there were such a will, one might ask, why would it attempt to devour itself? Schopenhauer's answer, which I find irresistible, is this: it devours itself because it's all there is, and it's hungry (*WWVI*:§28).

Sublime though this notion is, it might still seem far-fetched. Not so, argues Schopenhauer; indeed, its truth has been recognized, at least vaguely, throughout the world, except in those portions influenced by Judaic theism. If his basic notion sounds far-fetched to us, he argues, that is because of our Judeo-Christian prejudices.

And not only, Schopenhauer insists, are his teachings consistent with those of the world's non-theistic religions; they are also compelling in form, and comprehensive in content: they tell us, on the basis of an intellectual war he deems to be good, not only about what is, but about what is to be done, and about what is beautiful.

Schopenhauer's account is philosophical: it is one that would make me wise, if only I knew it to be true. Like the other accounts I have mentioned, his was written by a dead white male (or, at the most recent *Economist* has it, for acronymic purposes: dead white *European* males, or DWEMs). But there are yet other accounts, not written by DWEMs, that are nonetheless philosophical in that they too would make us wise, if only we could know them to be true. That there are such other accounts, often ignored by philosophers in the past and yet to be examined by many of us in the present, provides not a reason for the ending of philosophy, but rather another reason for its continuation. Indeed, as long as such accounts remain to be discovered, to be considered and

reconsidered, to be written and rewritten, I suspect and I hope that there will continue to be people, like me, who *resist* the ending of philosophy, in all of its various forms.

Among other things, this lecture has been an act of resistance, in that it has been an apology, in the Greek sense: I have been defending philosophy. Perhaps my defense may provide the impetus, during the coming weeks of tedious New England winter and, alas, the only marginally less tedious weeks of mud season, for some good intellectual skirmishes. To the extent that the lecture itself has been an act of intellectual warfare, I hope that it has been a good one, by which I do not mean primarily that I hope you have not found it tedious, although I hope that as well. The account of philosophy I have given in the course of this defense is the one that seems to me at present, upon consideration and discussion, to be the best. But I make no stronger claim for it. Whether it is true or not, as Socrates would say, only the gods may know. Nietzsche would insist that they couldn't know either—but that is a conflict to be considered on another occasion.

I thank you for your attention.

Alan White

1991