Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature

Thirtieth-Anniversary Edition

Richard Rorty

With a new introduction by Michael Williams,
a new afterword by David Bromwich,
and the previously unpublished essay
“The Philosopher as Expert”

Princeton University Press
Princeton and Oxford
PHILOSOPHY

about to go the way of the medieval image of the priest. If that happens, even the philosophers themselves will no longer take seriously the notion of philosophy as providing "foundations" or "justifications" for the rest of culture, or as adjudicating quæstiones juris about the proper domains of other disciplines.

Whichever happens, however, there is no danger of philosophy's "coming to an end." Religion did not come to an end in the Enlightenment, nor painting in Impressionism. Even if the period from Plato to Nietzsche is encapsulated and "distanced" in the way Heidegger suggests, and even if twentieth-century philosophy comes to seem a stage of awkward transitional backing and filling (as sixteenth-century philosophy now seems to us), there will be something called "philosophy" on the other side of the transition. For even if problems about representation look as obsolete to our descendants as problems about hylomorphism look to us, people will still read Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger. What roles these men will play in our descendants' conversation, no one knows. Whether the distinction between systematic and edifying philosophy will carry over, no one knows either. Perhaps philosophy will become purely edifying, so that one's self-identification as a philosopher will be purely in terms of the books one reads and discusses, rather than in terms of the problems one wishes to solve. Perhaps a new form of systematic philosophy will be found which has nothing whatever to do with epistemology but which nevertheless makes normal philosophical inquiry possible. These speculations are idle, and nothing I have been saying makes one more plausible than another. The only point on which I would insist is that philosophers' moral concern should be with continuing the conversation of the West, rather than with insisting upon a place for the traditional problems of modern philosophy within that conversation.

The Philosopher as Expert

RICHARD RORTY

AN UNUSUALLY thorough reader of the New York Times will occasionally come across a back-page squib announcing that the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association has just held its annual three-day meeting, and that it has elected Professor White to succeed Professor Black as its president. Should he ask himself what this organization might be, he will probably conclude, correctly, that it is made up of the people who teach philosophy in colleges and universities. Dim memories of a course called "Ethics" or "Descartes to Kant" may return, and he will recall the slightly comic earnestness with which old Professor Dunkelberg attempted to demonstrate that pleasure wasn't worth having, or that the desk in front of him was an idea in the mind of God. If he wonders what went on during those three days, he will probably guess, correctly again, that these people spent their time reading papers at each other. But he may ask himself, why couldn't the Times find anything newsworthy in all that paper reading? Are the philosophers content merely toumble to themselves? Surely by now they've passed beyond Dunkelberg's dreary absurdities? Philosophy, after all, is supposed to be the queen of the sciences, to provide us with ultimate values, to give direction to the whole movement of human thought. Why aren't the philosophers pulling their weight?

The publisher wishes to thank Neil Gross, who discovered this previously unpublished essay in the research for his book Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher (University of Chicago Press, 1980) and supplied us with a copy of the typescript. According to Gross (162), Rorty wrote the essay while at Wellesley (1958-1961) and revised it sometime after he moved to Princeton in 1961. This version includes the revisions as incorporated and edited by his wife, Mary Varney Rorty.
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This line of thought illustrates the paradoxical character of the outsider’s attitude toward professional philosophers. On the one hand, everybody knows that philosophy is terribly important: everybody should have, everybody does have, a philosophy. Everyone also knows that philosophy is a “profound” and “difficult” subject. Everyone is dimly aware that there are some people who make philosophizing a full-time job, and who might presumably be expected to have the profoundest philosophies. But no one is particularly eager to find out what these experts think, nor do they themselves seem anxious to communicate anything. Philosophy in America is just one more academic specialty. In what follows, I want to develop this seeming paradox in more detail, and then proceed to some reflections on the practical questions that it suggests: (1) Should the professional philosophers be doing something different from what they’re currently doing? (2) If not, should they be getting more attention than they do?

Not only the educated laypeople, but also their fellow academics, are usually utterly in the dark as to what philosophers do with their time. A geneticist can, if he takes the trouble, visualize roughly what his colleagues in economics or French literature are trying to do, and what means they employ to do it. They, with a bit more trouble, can do the same for him. But all of them find it much more difficult to do this for their friends in the philosophy department. Such phrases as “a spectator of all time and all eternity” and “the investigation of the being qua being” are appropriate to August and long-dead figures like Plato and Kant, but it’s hard to associate them with young Professor Dimble, who, desperately bucking for tenure, keeps promising to finish his book (entitled “Structure, Interpretation, and Choice: A Linguistic Approach to Value”). Dimble, it appears, is interested in language and in ethics. But when asked to resolve concrete moral dilemmas, he is embarrassed and annoyed. When asked questions about linguistics (in the sense of comparative grammar, phonematic analysis, and the like), he is blankly ignorant. When asked what his research for the book consists in, it turns out that he simply reads other philosophers and makes notes about their mistakes. When asked whether what he’s doing has any relation to what Plato and Kant did, he assures you that it does indeed—adding that, although of course Plato was thoroughly muddled about ethical choice, Kant did glimpse, as in a glass darkly, some of the truths that his book will soon unfold. These responses leave the inquiring colleague as baffled as ever.

Puzzlement and suspicion about professional philosophizing are as well entrenched among nonacademic American intellectuals as among academics. People who read and those who write for magazines like Encounter and Partisan Review, who analyze trends in our culture and the sickness of our souls, usually have just as fuzzy a notion of what might be happening at the American Philosophical Association’s meetings as does the ordinary Times reader. Dimly aware that journals exist, they have only hunches about what they might contain. When they have occasion to refer to professional philosophizing, it is usually to dismiss it with a pat historical generalization: “the absorption in linguistic trivia of recent Anglo-American philosophy,” the “hysterical irrationalism of postwar European philosophy,” “the fantastic divorce between fact and value, which has crippled philosophy since the Renaissance,” “the worship of mathematics, which has vitiated philosophical speculation since Plato.” Such dismissive clichés, usually picked up at third hand, permit literary intellectuals to take over the role of critic and conscience of culture without bothering to find out why, or even whether, the professional philosophers have abdicated it. When they run into Dimble at a cocktail party, they discover that he cannot discuss Kierkegaard, because he has never read him. They discover further that his admiration seems to be reserved exclusively for a contemporary English philosopher named Waffle (who, it appears, has published some “terribly important” articles in a journal called Mind). This experience confirms all they have ever heard about the “narrowness” of professional philosophers, and they look about for more worthwhile company.
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We may conclude, then, that professional philosophers do, by and large, talk only to each other. There are, of course, significant exceptions. Some few nonacademic intellectuals know quite as much about the history of philosophy as the average professional; when they employ the above-mentioned generalizations, they’re prepared to back them up. Further, there are in every generation one or two “great” professional philosophers (a Dewey, or a Heidegger) who become known, are read, and have an influence outside of the profession. But these exceptions merely make the general paradox stand out more clearly: a discipline that is supposed to concern itself exclusively with first principles is largely overlooked, and this at a time when every other public utterance, from highbrow essay to lowbrow sermon, reminds us that we are badly in need of some first principles.

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We can get some initial understanding of this situation by returning to a point mentioned earlier: the lack of any clear criterion for “progress” or for “discovery” in philosophy. The bafflement felt by the layperson, the fellow academic, and the nonacademic intellectual, if and when they’re confronted with a piece of technical philosophic research, is of a peculiar sort. It is bafflement about aims and about criteria of worth, not simply about particular techniques. It is not the kind of incomprehension felt when watching a physicist manipulate the controls of a cyclotron, but the kind felt in inspecting an exhibit of what appear to be utterly pointless works of modern art. In the case of the physicist, we have some sense of how, apart from simply asking other physicists, we might decide whether he’s doing a good job. If he’s twiddling the controls properly he will perhaps get us a bigger bang for a buck. Even if we happen to be utterly indifferent to both physical theory and national defense, we can see why some people might be interested. In the case of the artist, there is a different and more radical sense of helplessness. Here we are called upon to respect what seems hopeless to adjudge. Not only don’t we know whether the work in front of us is good of its kind, but we can’t imagine why anyone would want something of this kind. The realization that no procedure for judging is available except asking other artists, or professional art critics, sometimes leads us to such paranoid suspicions as “This abstract expressionist stuff is all just a racket.” So it is with Dimble. We know he’s a promising young philosopher because all the other philosophers say he is. But how are we to know that the whole profession isn’t in on the fix? Is there no way to break out of the circle of mutual admiration toward some objective criterion of excellence? Haven’t we, indeed, read somewhere that contemporary American philosophers have all succumbed to some disease called “linguistic analysis”? Perhaps we should think about getting rid of Dimble and his ilk, and getting ourselves some real philosophers.

Why, however, should we entertain such dark suspicions about philosophers when we wouldn’t dream of doing so about, say, Latin epigraphists or botanists? It is not sufficient to say that we have a clearer vision of the results produced by the latter disciplines; most of us have a blind faith that there are such results somewhere, but we are quite content to remain in ignorance of them. Even if we know nothing of botany, we should shrug off as a crackpot someone who told us that no real botanical research had been done in America for thirty years, and that what was carried on under that name was a fraud and a delusion. If we do listen with concern to similar announcements about philosophy, it is because philosophy shares with art the character of being “something that everybody ought to think about.” Nor is this mere snobbery. It is unfortunate, but it is not inhuman, to know nothing of botany. It is inhuman to simply ignore either art or philosophy, and no one really does. Even while being too diffident to express preferences, there is no one who isn’t convinced, in the secret places of his heart, that what he likes in art is, indeed, “objectively” likable. Nor is there anyone who doesn’t feel that “what the philosophers are looking for” is what he himself has known all along, only he “can’t express it.” When it comes to philosophy, we all instinctively
embrace the Platonic theory of recollection: in asking philosophers for "the answers" we assume automatically that we are quite capable of recognizing these answers should we happen to hear them uttered, for they have long lain within us, just beneath the level of consciousness. It is significant that when we are baffled by a scientist or an historian we simply confess bafflement, whereas when we are baffled by an artist or by a philosopher we are tempted to say "That's not what I call art" or "That's not what I call philosophy."

Philosophy as a specialized academic discipline, then, is viewed with a mixture of reverence, perplexity, and distrust. Somehow, philosophy when practiced by amateurs seems preferable to philosophy practiced by professionals. It is high praise for a specialist in some other field (a Schrödinger, or a Toynbee) to say that his work has "philosophical implications." Among professional philosophers, we are happiest with those who first won distinction in other fields (as, for instance, Russell and Whitehead in mathematics). Like athletic skill or personal beauty, philosophy seems an excellent thing to have as an added attraction ("the bloom on the rose"), but there is something odd about a full-time and exclusive concern with it.

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One can begin to account for this confusion about the aims of philosophizing and this skittishness about professionalism in philosophy as follows. Half the time we think of philosophy as a quasicientific discipline—indeed, as scientia scientiarum, the area in which clarity, logical rigor, communicability, and intersubjectivity should reach their acme. The other half of the time we think of philosophizing as a variety of artistic creation, and we think of the philosopher as seer. The first way of thinking leads us to expect teamwork, integrated research, consensus about aims and methods, and agreement about the value of results. The second leads us to expect an occasional extraordinary vision, embodied in the work of some great thinker.

Now if we could be content to think of philosophy either as simply a kind of art or as simply a kind of science, it would be very easy to clear up the misconceptions that give rise to this oscillation and to our original paradox. If philosophy were distinguished from other scientific disciplines simply by subject matter, one could say that simple ignorance of the subject produces the kind of puzzlement we've mentioned, and that outsiders should take the time to be systematically trained in philosophy before they start making judgments. This is, in fact, the line that professional philosophers sometimes take when their patience with easy generalizations about the defects of contemporary philosophy has been exhausted. If, on the other hand, philosophy is an art form, then we can understand and excuse the outsider's unconcern with what happens at American Philosophical Association meetings. (Who, even among readers of poetry, would dream of attending a "Poet's Conference"?) We can look upon academic departments of philosophy as places where people who might turn out to be philosophers are given a chance to earn their bread by instructing the young in the classical achievements of their art, just as potential composers find a living in music departments teaching the history of the symphony. We should not then expect "progress" or "research" in philosophy; instead, we should be more self-confident about our habit of ignoring all philosophers except the occasional "great" one. This is the line sometimes taken by philosophers when suddenly challenged to justify their existence by educational bureaucrats; they fall back on intimating that to doubt "philosophy's contribution to culture" is sheer philistinism.

In fact, however, it would be equally misleading and unfruitful either to think of philosophy as one more scholarly discipline concerned with a peculiar subject matter or to think of it as one of the arts. The tension between philosophy as science and philosophy as vision is as old as the word "philosophy" itself. It was explicit in Plato, and formed one of the principal themes of his dialogues. It is the effort to eliminate this tension that has inspired each of the successive revolutions in philosophical thought—revolutions that are
the very stuff of the history of philosophy. A new philosophy almost invariably announces itself either as making philosophy, at long last, a strict science, or as liberating philosophy, once and for all, from bondage to the methods and forms of scientific thought. Within such every reconstruction of philosophy, however, the familiar tension breaks out anew. It is precisely this continuing tension that makes philosophy what it is, and makes it sui generis. The uneasiness with which philosophy is approached is the uneasiness felt before anything that won't let itself be put in such familiar pigeonholes as "science-art," "rigorous-visionary," "objective-subjective," "private-public." But if we ask ourselves where the pigeonholes come from, whether they're adequate, and whether we need really be uneasy if such distinctions seem not to be exhaustive or exclusive, where do we turn? Presumably to philosophy. What about the questions are these? Presumably philosophical questions. Philosophy, as the discipline that asks the largest questions and establishes the most comprehensive schemes of classification, always has the last word. The one sort of question that can never get a definite answer is a question that asks about itself. It is precisely reflection on the adequacy of questions, rather than answers, that has determined the course of the history of philosophy. Reflection on whether and when we can pose the questions "science or art?" "objective or subjective?" takes pride of place. Thus to insist that philosophy fall, once and for all, under one side or the other of such dichotomies is ipso facto to forbid it to raise questions as to the status of such distinctions. Such an insistence, as we've noted, has been the driving force behind each historic revolution in philosophy; the unacceptability of the concomitant prohibition is the reason why no such revolution has been, or can be, the last.

Those familiar with the habits of philosophers will recognize that the last paragraph I have been invoking has still another, and by far the most maddening, of the philosopher's standard lines of reply to criticism. The basic play here is the familiar "Define your terms!" Since nobody except professionals ever worries much about what he means by "objec-

tive," or "science," or "vision," this gambit is calculated to make the critic wonder if these terms don't bear some esoteric meaning, and whether he himself may not have been employing them in some stupidly slipshod way. If he's not cowed by this possibility, the philosopher will nevertheless be able to reduce him to silence by leading him rapidly through one or the other of the following dialogues (an operation that, after a few years of teaching, all professional philosophers can perform while half-asleep, and which some do):

**Critic** (briskly): Why aren't you philosophers more scientific?

**Philosopher:** What do you mean by "scientific"?

**Critic:** What I mean is, why don't you ever agree on any answers?

**Philosopher:** What questions do you want answered?

**Critic:** Do you honestly mean you don't know what questions you're talking about?

**Philosopher:** Quite. That's the question we're talking about you see.

Or, alternatively:

**Critic** (soulfully): Why aren't you philosophers concerned with the really important things?

**Philosopher:** How does one know what's important?

**Critic:** But if you don't even know what's important, how can you ever decide anything?

**Philosopher:** That's just the problem we're trying to solve. Surely you'd grant that that's important, wouldn't you?

Despite the familiarity of this kind of argument, the ranking suspicion of trickery that it incites, and the misuse to which it can easily be put, taking such arguments seriously is the only way to reach an understanding of the function of
technical philosophy or of its place in culture. Let us return once more to our paradox: philosophy is unanimously agreed to be very difficult and crucially important, yet the experts in it talk only to themselves. But if one sees philosophy as being important because it attends to the formulation of questions, rather than because it answers them, this paradox begins to dissolve. It will dissolve further if one sees that philosophy is difficult not because it calls for the exercise of occult faculties that either must be acquired through long mental discipline (“logical thinking”) or are the infrequent gift of fortune (“synoptic vision”), but because it calls for an acquaintance with the fantastic variety of questions about the legitimacy of questions that have been, and can be, raised. It may dissolve entirely if one ceases to think of the philosophical expert as one whose function it is to offer “a philosophy.” This is, indeed, an important part of his function, just as it is an important part of the function of the financier to actually possess some investment capital, or of the chess player to have retained enough pieces to be able to make a move. But a “philosophy” wrenched out of the continuing historical dialogue concerning the legitimacy of questions is as ridiculous and pathetic as stock certificates in a world of barter, or as chess pieces in a world where no one plays chess. It may retain, as may the certificates or the chess pieces, an aesthetic value. But in a world without this dialogue, it would have merely this value. Philosophy will become an art form only if and when philosophers cease to talk to each other. It will become a science only if and when philosophers agree that certain particular formulae embody both the questions they want answered and the criteria for knowing when answers have been given. The “last” philosophy, could there be such a thing, would not be a philosophy, as we know it, at all: it would be, if it were intelligible, an odd kind of poem, or an odd kind of technical manual.

The reason for thinking that there will be no “last” philosophy is simply that no “answer” can fail to be an answer to a question, and that no question can guarantee its own permanent relevance. It is here that we find the core truth in all the clichés about “the illimitable reach of the mind,” “man’s striving for the infinite,” and so on.

The sense in which philosophy is “illimitable,” and the sense in which it is sui generis, may perhaps be clarified further by saying that whereas the arts may be expected to produce “visions,” and science and scholarship “results,” philosophy’s product can only be dialogue. Neither the “conclusions” that a philosophical book offers nor the relation which these conclusions bear to whatever is offered as “evidence” for them, can, in itself, be the object of a judgment of worth. In the arts there is an important sense in which the product can and must be judged all by itself, as an isolated form. This isolation is not appropriate in the sciences, for there what counts is whether the conclusions are well-founded. In philosophy, neither manner of judging applies. As against science, in philosophy the criteria for being “evidence” for a position or for a claim being “well-founded” are themselves in question. Here philosophy is more like the arts, for both evidence for conclusions and questions about whether this “evidence” is evidence must be presented, and must hang together in a relationship that is more like aesthetic unity than it is like inductive or deductive inference. But against the arts, the totality that we’re accustomed to think of as “a philosophy” is essentially incomplete once it is separated from all the other “philosophies.” If one asks how one can break the circle of mutual understanding and appreciation formed by the professional philosophers of a given epoch, the answer is that one can appeal to the unanswered questions of philosophers of other epochs. But if one asks how one can escape from the dialogue that is the history of philosophy to a point outside it from which its “progress” may be gauged, there is no answer. One can’t. This dialogue is autonomous. Its continuation is what, in the last analysis, every philosopher may be held responsible for “producing.”

Within the perspective set by these remarks, we can nevertheless admit, and explain, the fact that we often do praise professional philosophers both for the “depth of their vision” and for “the precision and conclusiveness of their results.”
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We can thereby also sketch the way in which “teamwork” and “agreement” are and are not possible in philosophy. At this point, I should note that I’ve been drawing upon the commonsensical, and drastically oversimplified, notion of a sharp disparity between the methods of the sciences and the methods of the arts. Imaginative vision, of course, just what distinguishes the first-rate scholar or scientist from the hack. Methodical care in exploring the possibilities of an idea or a technique is what distinguishes the artist from the dilettante. There is no discipline that does not require both “vision” and “method,” and whose practitioners are not praised for the presence and blamed for the absence of either. Philosophy is no exception. What still needs to be clarified, however, is the particular manner in which these virtues appear in a discipline whose product is dialogue. As to “vision,” of course, this is fairly obvious: what is demanded of a philosopher is that he should be able to see what is presupposed by asking a certain question that other philosophers (or scientists, or people at large) have been in the habit of asking. Having seen this, his contribution to the dialogue is to raise a new question about whether this presupposition is justified. It is this “seeing through” the unexpressed assumptions of a previous philosophy, or of a culture, or of some particular discipline, that sets apart a Kant, a Kierkegaard, a Whitehead, or a Wittgenstein. This is the side of philosophizing that is closest to the arts, the side where there is room for individual creativity and for “greatness.” It is also, oddly enough, the side that is most easily available to the outsider. The works of such men as these have a kind of freshness and power that (even when wrapped in the jargon of a Kant or a Whitehead) will make itself felt in a rapidly expanding series of extraphilosophical concerns.

But it is not the only side. When we turn to the side of “method” and “rigor”—the side of philosophy that approaches the popular notion of the philosopher as the preeminently “logical” thinker—it becomes harder to formulate what kind of thing a philosopher does. If to philosophize is to raise questions about questions, what place is there for rigor? Surely rigor is found only within a well-defined framework of questions, assumptions, and criteria—within, in short, what we have been calling “science”? With this question I return to my central topic of this essay—the nature of expertise in philosophy. Given the sketch of the nature and function of philosophizing that has been drawn so far, what are we to say of the host of technicians—devoted disciples and competent journeymen—who remain after one has plucked out the occasional great thinker from the ranks of the professional philosophers? When Dimble reads a paper at an American Philosophical Association meeting, or publishes an article in a learned journal, the chances are that he will not be calling into question the implicit presuppositions of an era, but will be arguing a point that makes no sense whatsoever to anyone who hasn’t “followed the literature” with some care. (The chances are also rather good that the conclusion of his argument will sound so completely obvious and trivial to the layperson that he will be entirely unable to see why anyone should mention it.) Dimble’s colleagues, however, will sometimes be heard to say that Dimble has “come up with an important result” or has “decisively disposed of” an alternative view. Here we are clearly in an ambience which approaches that of the sciences, even to the point of collaborative work being possible. How, in the midst of a continuous questioning of questions, can such an ambience develop?

The most general answer to this question is: the questioning of presuppositions will not be effective unless one can show that there exist genuine alternatives to these presuppositions, and to show this takes time, patience, and attention to detail. In particular, to show that purported alternatives are genuine involves showing, paradoxically enough, that the world is not radically changed by the new perspective that the adoption of such an alternative involves. Even the greatest philosopher can only suggest how things will look from the new perspective that his new questions create; to fill in the outlines of this suggestion is the work of a generation. When a philosopher tells us that pleasure is not a good, or
that matter doesn’t exist, or that the law of noncontradiction is false, we may be willing to admit that he’s succeeded in questioning a presupposition that we’d never dreamed of questioning ourselves, but we still need to be shown that doing so is worth the trouble. It is this “naturalizing” of apparent paradoxes that is the work of the disciple in philosophy. It is left to him to show that we can still say everything that we want to say within the new perspective, and that it will be said better than before by virtue of the gain in critical self-consciousness that this new perspective offers us. By its very nature, a new philosophic vision must first appear as a paradox—a notion that, if accepted, would overthrow part or all of the comfortable set of beliefs within which we live and move. New philosophies get a hearing only because no given set of beliefs is ever quite comfortable enough. To get beyond the stage of a preliminary hearing, however, it has to be shown that the new philosophy, in addition to relieving whatever tensions existed between members of our old set of beliefs, will preserve for us all the comforts we’ve previously enjoyed. This is too big a job for one person. If it were not for people who, perhaps incapable of the original set of questionings, are nonetheless able to see what is implied by a new philosophic vision and willing to devote their lives to explaining and defending it, philosophical speculation would never rise above the level of personal eccentricity.

It would be too simple, however, to classify all philosophers into great and original speculators on the one hand and their respective troops of disciples on the other. It is true that philosophical dialogue is largely a matter of opposing schools, but one must remember that by now, twenty-four hundred years after Plato, there are a great many schools to choose from. For no philosophy ever simply disappeared—at most, it is ignored for a generation or two. For example, idealism, which was “in” up until the First World War, and had by then reached its stage of decadent scholasticism, is currently “out.” But it is only a matter of time until the philosophical movements that took its place (analytic philosophy, phenomenology) reach their own decadence. When that time comes, it will be noticed that there was much that was sound in idealism, and much that can be harmonized both with the schools that supplanted it and those which it supplanted. Idealism will become one more voice in a dialogue whose interlocutors are always growing in number, and in which the speeches are always growing more complex. Within this dialogue, there are those who are deliberately eclectic. Neither bold speculators nor devoted disciples, they are trying to see their way through a welter of overstated dogmas to a coherent, if limited, set of conclusions about a particular issue. Although these compromisers cannot be sharply distinguished from disciples, we can, if we wish, think of them as “jouneymen” of philosophy. Without them, the philosophical dialogue wouldn’t be a true dialogue at all, but simply an exchange of claims and counterclaims.

Among these disciples and journeymen, then, we find the examination of particular points, the explication of particular texts, and the systematic exploration of the possibilities and problems presented by alternative presuppositions, which make up the “technical” side of philosophy. Here is where “rigor” and the scientific ambience come in. To explain, for example, just why one cannot simultaneously adopt a Marxist view of ethics and a Humean view of perception is a long and arduous process. It can be done well or done badly, but if it is done well it may actually show, once and for all, that a certain promising line of thinking is in fact a dead end. Although no philosophy ever dies, particular syntheses of particular parts of philosophies do. To take another example, it is a troublesome business to show that Spinoza’s distinction between “substances” and “modes” cannot be formulated in terms of the theory of knowledge to which Spinoza is committed. Such a task calls not only for long and careful study of the texts, but for a rethinking of many related problems in the history of philosophy before and after Spinoza. But if it is done well, it may make clear to us, once and for all, just what is living and what is dead in Spinoza’s thought, and this in turn will help philosophers of all persuasions to see just what elements of Spinoza’s monism
they can and can’t incorporate into their own contributions to the dialogue. Again, philosophies don’t die, but the formulae in which they’re expressed do. To take a third example, the insights of logical positivism into the nature of philosophical problems were for a long time inextricably tangled with a program that called for the construction of a ‘perfect language’—perfect in the sense that none of the traditional philosophic problems could be formulated in it. Before these insights could be disentangled from this program, somebody actually had to try to construct such a language. It required, in point of fact, almost a generation of effort, consisting of successive reformulations of various important bits of ordinary language, to discover the extent to which such a language could be constructed. It turned out that one simply couldn’t do certain things that the original logical positivists had assumed could be done. This result couldn’t have been reached in any other way than by a joint effort of many individual workers, each dealing piecemeal with certain bits of the problem. Once this result became generally acknowledged, it didn’t refute logical positivism, but it did require philosophers to rethink thoroughly just what it was in positivism that had originally captivated them. Philosophies, to repeat, aren’t killed off, but they are modified almost (but never entirely) beyond recognition as the dialogue continues. This process of modification is the work not of great thinkers, but of the technicians.

The random examples that I have just offered suggest, I hope, the kind of thing that the professional philosopher spends his time on. Insofar as he does this kind of job, the philosopher puts aside the role of questioner of questions and sets himself the task of working within a quite restricted framework of questions, assumptions, and criteria. He is no longer a spectator of all time and all eternity, but is simply asking “If we say X, can we then consistently say both Y and Z?” This is the kind of question where we can get both rigor in procedure and agreement on results. To take an example: no schools are further apart concerning the aims and methods of philosophy than Thomists and positivists, yet positivists who know their Aquinas can tell quite well which of the two Thomists has won an intramural debate, while Thomists who know logic and the history of recent philosophy can easily detect which positivist is making a contribution to his subject and which isn’t. The questions that each school asks may seem quite pointless to the other, yet this doesn’t prevent them from making valid judgments as to the worth of proposed answers to these questions. The “scientific” ambience that we’ve referred to can thus coexist with utter disagreement as to the adequacy of methods and questions. The closest analogy, perhaps, is that a golfer can, if he knows the rules of chess, evaluate chess players, although perhaps he can’t see why anyone would waste his time playing chess.

We should note, however, the way in which the analogy with the rules of chess is misleading: the layperson without training in philosophy will not be able to make valid judgments about the quality of Thomist philosophizing if he has read only Aquinas, nor about positivist philosophizing if he has read only the classics of empiricism. Positivist and Thomist alike are interlocutors within a single larger dialogue, even when they are deliberately working within restricted frameworks. Even within the borders of a school, the problems discussed are problems only because there exist other schools. What makes both Thomists and positivists mutually intelligible is the same thing that makes them practitioners of the same discipline: their shared knowledge of the history of philosophy. Philosophers are philosophers not because they have common aims and interests (they don’t), or common methods (they don’t), or agree to discuss a common set of problems (they don’t), or are endowed with common faculties (they aren’t), but simply and solely because they are taking part in a single continuing conversation.

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The sketch of different modes of philosophizing that we’ve been presenting has aimed at answering the rhetorical question “What do philosophers do?” This question needed to be answered before we could take up the practical questions
suggested by our original paradox: Should the professional philosophers be doing something different from what they are doing? Should they be getting more attention than they are?

As to the first question, it should be clear that, if there is any truth at all in our description of what philosophers do, it follows that this question is at best silly, and at worst potentially very dangerous. It is a question that will usually be raised only if one's notion of what philosophy is comes from inspection of a single philosophic school, engaged in working out the consequences of a single set of insights. If one is aware that there are alternatives to these insights, but fails to notice the context of dialogue within which this school lives and has its being, then one can delude oneself into feeling competent to redirect philosophical inquiry. In particular, if one is entirely preoccupied with a single question, and doesn't take the trouble to find out whether this may not be the first time the question has been raised, then one can easily become exasperated at finding philosophers discussing quite different questions. It is precisely the mark of the amateur in philosophy to picture philosophy as a discipline possessing a certain set of methods and instruments that work equally well when applied to answering any question. Given this picture, it is easy to think that it is only absent-mindedness, or stupidity, or fashion, that prevents a philosopher from doing what he wants done (which usually means finding reasons for his believing what he already believes). If one thinks that Dimble can turn from his present preoccupations to "the real problems" in the way in which an engineer might turn from designing bombs to designing power plants, then one may be exasperated by his reluctance to do so. Because power usually falls to the lot of philosophical amateurs, whose sense of benevolence and social utility drives them to give vent to this exasperation, philosophers quite frequently get told what they ought to be doing. (This advice comes not only from the demos or from dictators, but from religious and literary pontiffs, and from specialists in other disciplines.) The extent to which the professional philosophers ignore this advice and continue the dialogue among themselves is one of the handiest indices of the degree of intellectual freedom within a given culture.

Does this mean that the professional philosophers are always, and somehow automatically, doing what they should be doing? In the sense in which, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, this question is meant, I do want to say this: philosophers are questioners of questions whose function is to continue a dialogue. What they should be doing, therefore, is, among other things, to ask whether they're doing the right things, and this is precisely what they do do. There is, to repeat, no point outside this dialogue from which one can possibly say that this dialogue has gone in the wrong direction, or is concerned with the wrong questions. If one wants to say this, one has to get into the dialogue—all the way in. Dimble, for example, thinks that the minute, technical, and jargoneseque problems with which his book is concerned are problems that must be resolved before we can say anything sensible about the "real problems," as these latter are usually formulated. He may be wrong. But there is no possible way of saying whether he is or not without reading his book, and there is no way of understanding his book without reading a decent sample of the books that link his with Plato's Republic. Having done so, one may perhaps advance arguments showing that Dimble is concerned with pseudo-problems, arising either from stupidity or from Dimble's own ignorance of the history of philosophy. But to say that a philosopher, or a generation of philosophers, is stupid or short-sighted is not to say that they're not doing what they should be doing, but to say that they're doing it badly. The distinction is not fictitious. It is precisely the difference between the judgment of the amateur and the judgment of the fellow professional. To be able to pass such a judgment, within the dialogue, upon a generation or a school of philosophers, is to attempt to break through the confines set by one set of questions by asking new questions. If successful, such an attempt is a mark of "greatness" in philosophy. Once in a hundred times, therefore (the time when the question is posed within the dia-
among the professionals, and that the old questions and answers that he’d always thought were silly are now admitted to have been silly by the professionals themselves, he is liable to decide that he knew it all the time. He didn’t. He will find out that he didn’t as soon as he turns from the polemics of the new generation against the old to the intramural debates of the new generation. These will seem to him as pointless as ever the old questions and answers did. Even the polemical slogans of the new generation cannot mean the same thing to those within the dialogue and those outside it. For the insider, they are handy abbreviations. For the outsider, they are literal truths. Taken as literal truths, the terms in which they are formulated are naturally taken in the senses that common usage gives them. But the result of twenty-four hundred years of philosophical dialogue is, among other things, to develop senses for words that are either much more restricted, or much richer, than those of common usage. It is never necessary for the amateur to accept any given professional’s judgment about the proper senses of terms, but it is always necessary for him to know what this judgment is. The presumptive impermanence of any contemporary philosophic language does nothing to release one from the obligation of learning it. Each such language is the latest result in a continuing search for a language whose structure will not force one into adopting, as unconscious presuppositions, answers to hitherto unformulated questions. For the same reason that there will be no last philosophy, there will be no last philosophic language. But attempting to state a philosophic position (about the nature and aims of philosophy, or about anything else) without knowing the history of philosophers’ attempts to find a presuppositionless language combines, in a unique way, the disadvantages of writing verse without ever having read any verse and those of doing physics without having learned mathematics.

These remarks about the difference between professional and amateur proposals for revolutions in philosophy may be clarified if we substitute the term “ideologue” for the term “amateur.” The ideologue, in the sense in which I’ll use the
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word, is the person who overhears enough of the dialogue between philosophers to pick up a slogan, and a set of polemics against opponents, but not enough to know the slogan's place in the dialogue nor to know what the counter-polemics are. Given this half-knowledge, he proceeds to act on the assumption that the dialogue is over, and that philosophy as dialogue can now be replaced by philosophy as expression of vision or philosophy as instrument of social utility. For the ideologue, tout commence en mystique et finit en politique. The slogan that he overhears reverberates in the depths of his soul, with the peculiar resonance of a voice projected into a large empty space: "Existence precedes essence," "Metaphysics is a product of faulty grammar," "Truth is what works," "Man is alienated from the Ground of his Being." Because he doesn't ask himself what questions these slogans answer nor to what questions they give rise, he cannot grasp the relativity of answers to questions. Because he doesn't grasp this, he cannot see the need for the continuance of the dialogue. Rather, he finds it his duty to bear away the oracle from the shrine and bring it to the people. When he finds that messengers bearing other oracles have arrived simultaneously, he is forced into proclaiming that they come from the altars of false gods. The competing slogans (which he himself didn't overhear, or didn't understand) must be made to seem out of date, or merely eccentric, or the product of irrational forces. Sociological, economic, and kulturgeschichtliche explanations must be invoked to explain their popularity. The philosopher whom he did overhear must be made to seem not one philosopher among others, but somehow the only "real" philosopher. From this need come the sort of generalizations about the history of philosophy that I cited earlier. From this need, finally, come the proposals that the professional philosophers should stop doing what they're doing and get on with the job of shoring up, or deducing consequences from, the chosen slogan. If philosophers accept, or are forced to accept, these proposals, philosophy ends and ideology takes its place. If not, we get the actual situation in the West: a continuing dialogue among professional philoso-

phers running parallel with, but a few steps ahead of, a continuing debate (the philosophical subculture, as it were) among ideologues.

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Is the moral of all this, then, that the dialogue among professional philosophers should indeed get more attention than it does? If so, does this mean that, turning our backs on all substitutes, we must flock to the meetings of the American Philosophical Association for our views on large questions? That curricula should be reformed so as to give everybody a thorough grounding in the history of philosophy, from Plato through Dimble and Waffle? That discussion of concrete ideological clashes should be replaced by discussion of the methodological, epistemological, and metaphysical issues with which philosophers concern themselves? That philosophers must become kings, or kings philosophers?

None of these consequences is entailed. At the risk of a Leibnizian optimism, I want to say not only that professional philosophers are doing, by and large, about what they should be, but that they receive about the right amount of attention. On the one hand, it is perfectly true that debates among ideologues often set the teeth of professional philosophers on edge. The epistemological questions that professional philosophers discuss, for instance, will inevitably be encountered if ideological debate is continued long enough—even as, in the dawn of philosophy, they were encountered halfway through the Platonic dialogues. The naivé about such questions from even the most sophisticated among contemporary intellectuals genuinely appalls the professional. Philosophy is, indeed, the place where the last, leftover questions get discussed, and as such it is indeed the queen of the sciences. But on the other hand, although the absence of a sovereign may be disastrous to the state, and although a sovereign must have a court, it does not follow that we must all be courtiers, nor even that we must all read the Court Circular.

Let us distinguish. I am not trying to offer any generaliza-
tions about the extent to which any individual should or shouldn’t pursue philosophical studies. The question of when and where we may permit ourselves to debate a given question while preserving our intellectual honesty is a permanent problem—perhaps the problem—for each of us. (No professional philosopher, disciple, or speculator escapes this problem by virtue of his profession; for him, as for any specialist, there are lines of thought, unexplored traditions, and unread books that he must continue to ignore if he is to get any work done.) But in regard to the group rather than the individual—professional philosophy as a specialized activity in the context of contemporary American culture and institutions—I think that something can be said to support the optimistic conclusions I’ve offered. The point to be made is simply (and yet again) that in a free dialogue questions and answers get asked, offered, and discussed just about as they should. In other words, I am here once more invoking the thesis that no standpoint exists outside of an unrestricted dialogue from which one can judge that dialogue, and I’m bringing this thesis to bear on the fact that the dialogue which professional philosophers conduct among themselves is, to the degree that a society is free, continuous with the dialogues and debates of ideologues, specialists in other disciplines, and the public at large. In a free dialogue, the amount of questioning of questions to which one is driven is, automatically, as much as one needs. (This remark, I think, is simply analytic of the meaning of “free” as applied to culture.)

We need to recognize here that an artificially sharp distinction between the various kinds and levels of dialogue has been invoked up to this point. In the senses I have given these terms, there are of course “ideologues” within the American Philosophical Association, and “professional philosophers” outside it.

But, it may be objected, the perfect freedom and transparency of talk and thought thus envisaged would seem to imply that we must indeed become, one and all, part-time professional philosophers. For haven’t we said that each question in the special disciplines or in ideological debate needs critical inquiry, and that this inquiry is philosophy itself? Don’t all strata of culture exhibit an Andensträbning after the condition of philosophy, and wouldn’t perfect freedom mean that all streams of dialogue would flow into one—the distinctively philosophical? Now in an ideally free society, these consequences would follow. Nothing would impede the continuity of all discourse, and all controversies would be followed up, up to the last question. But to have such ideal freedom, it is necessary that no action be taken until all questions as to a choice between alternative actions are resolved. In such an imaginary society, all men would indeed be both kings and philosophers. But in a society where this condition does not hold, questions must be bated. To get things done, we all have to accept the burden of intellectual dishonesty involved in acting before the last questions have been resolved. Specifically, when action demands answers we must, insofar forth, neglect the possibility that we are asking the wrong questions. This means that we must often—even usually—systematically ignore the dialogue going on among philosophers as to the adequacy of questions.

But how do we know that we’re not neglecting it unduly? How can we tell whether we’re being reflective enough? If we cannot, how can we be in a position to assert that we here in America are dealing justly with our professional philosophers? Again, we must distinguish. It is one thing to have the freedom to engage in dialogue, but it is something different to have the will (or “intelligence,” or “dynamism,” or what you like) to use this freedom. I haven’t been, and am not now, saying anything about the latter. I am not here engaged in measuring the quantity of brains or energy possessed by contemporary American society. (I suspect that attempts to do so are inevitably famous and fruitless—the product of overindulgence in the pathos of history.) What I do want to say is simply that in America there does exist sufficient relaxation from the need for action to permit a law of intellectual supply and demand to take hold. I should want to argue, as I have indicated above, that the fact of its having taken hold is a large part of what we mean by calling ourselves “free.”
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When I say that the professional philosophers are getting their due, I mean simply that, insofar as they aren’t (insofar, for example, as ideologues waste time that could be saved if they knew more philosophy), this is the result of human finitude—simple laziness and stupidity, on the part of both the professionals and their various audiences. But of course in this sense, no book, no tradition, and no discipline ever gets its due. To announce that professional philosophy should get more attention would be important only if its plight were a special case.

Philosophy, I think, is not a special case. It looks as if it were because, as I’ve said, all debates and all inquiries rest upon asking questionable questions, and questioning them inevitably gets one into philosophy. But although philosophy is formally autonomous, it is not materially self-sufficient. It draws its nourishment, obviously, from research in other disciplines, and, less obviously but even more vitally, from debates between ideologues. There is a sense in which professional philosophy is as much of a parasite upon the ideological subculture as is the latter upon it. By watching the careers of, for example, Hegelian, Marxist, Thomist, or Deweyite slogans when they are caught up in ideological struggles and made into programs of action, the professional can re-evaluate what is living and what is dead in the body of philosophical speculation for which these slogans were originally abbreviations. Any restriction of ideological debate or of research in nonphilosophical disciplines will, sooner or later, diminish the quality of the philosophers’ dialogue, just as any restriction upon the latter will, sooner or later, diminish the quality of every other stratum of culture. In this situation of give and take, there are no special cases. The only guide is, as I’ve been arguing, the law of intellectual supply and demand, which is, in James’s phrase, the “cash value” of the notion of intellectual freedom.

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Announcements that we must all go and learn philosophy are a product of the same delusion that generates announce-