Chapter 1

THE PROJECT
Philosophical Discourse and Its Interpretation

1. THE AIM OF THE ENTERPRISE

 Hermeneutics (from the Greek *hermeneuô* = to interpret) is the systematic study of texts—and philosophical texts in particular. And here it is clear that any sensible interpretation of a philosophical text must unfold against the background of an understanding of the situation of philosophy and the nature of the philosophical enterprise. Some understanding of the field itself is presupposed for any meaningful endeavor to interpret properly the texts that are supposed to fall into its domain.

Philosophy as traditionally conceived calls for using the resources of our information and reason to resolve, as best we can, the big questions regarding the nature of human beings and their place within the world’s scheme of things. The history of philosophy consists in an ongoing intellectual struggle to comprehend the seemingly endless diversity and complexity that surrounds us on all sides. Aristotle was right on target when, in the first book of the *Metaphysics*, he said that “it is through wonder that men now begin and originally began to philosophize, wondering first about obvious perplexities, and then gradually proceeding to ask questions about the greater matters too, such as ... the root origin of it all.”¹ Philosophy deals largely with *how* and *whether* and *why* questions: how the world’s arrangements stand in their relation to us, whether things are as they seem, and why things should be as they are (for example, why it is that we should do “the ethically right” things). Ever since Socrates pestered his fellow Athenians with puzzling questions about “obvious” facts regarding truth, beauty, and justice, philosophers have probed for the reason why behind the reason why of things.

As part of this venture philosophy also deals with the method by which such inquiries are concluded. For what we seek are not just answers but rationally defensible and well-substantiated answers. Philosophy strives after
that systematic integration of human knowledge that the sciences initially promised to give us but have never managed to deliver because of their ongoing division of labor and never-ending pursuit of ever more specialized detail. Throughout philosophy one can never escape a concern for “the big picture”.

Philosophy excludes no subject matter altogether. Its issues are too synoptic for the conscientious practitioner of the descriptive to rest content with any delimited range of preoccupation—no issue in the dominion of nature or in the province of human thought is in principle outside its sphere of interest and concern. Virtually everything is in some way relevant to its task of providing a sort of traveler’s guidebook to the lay of the land in reality at large. Dealing with being and value in general—with possibility, actuality, significance, and worth—the concerns of philosophy are universal and all-embracing. The problem field of philosophy is as wide and borderless as is the domain of human knowledge itself. What makes an issue philosophical is not the topic but the mode of treatment and the point of view from which the topic is considered. Philosophizing represents the product of people’s attempts to bring intelligible order into our often chaotic experience of the world.

2. THE METHOD OF PHILOSOPHY: TRUTH-ESTIMATIVE CONJECTURE

When philosophers pursue their mission of grappling with those traditional big questions regarding ourselves, the world, and our place within its scheme of things they standardly do so by means of what is perhaps best characterized as rational conjecture. This is a matter of achieving not with the best possible answer (in some rarified sense of this term), but with the best available answer—the putative optimum that one can manage to secure in the actually existing conditions in which we do and must conduct our epistemic labors. To be sure, rational conjecture is not to be a matter of mere guesswork, but one of responsible estimation in a strict sense of the term. It is not just some sort of estimate of the true answer that we want, but an estimate that is sensible and defensible—one to whose tenability we are prepared to commit ourselves. We have a need for more information than is strictly speaking in hand, but we certainly do not want to make it up out of thin air. The approach of philosophy to its problematic concerns is as a branch of rational inquiry—a process of deploying our speculative abilities to provide answers to our questions that are validatable through
cogent processes of evidence, inference, and the usual instruments of rational substantiation. However much speculation and conjecture may go into the process by which philosophers find their answers, evidence and argument must always underpin those answers where authentic philosophizing is at issue.

In interpreting philosophical texts we cannot ask for certainty with respect to the issues. Given the limitations of information and insight in this domain of inquiry we can expect no logically airtight guarantee that what is, as best we can tell here and now, the optimal available answer is actually true. Acknowledging the information transcendence at issue in philosophical truth estimation, we know that we cannot guarantee the truth of its product. (Indeed, if the history of human inquiry has taught us any one thing, it is that the best estimate of the truth that we can make at any stage of the cognitive game will all too frequently come to be seen, with the wisdom of eventual hindsight, as being well off the mark.) Inquiry in philosophy, as elsewhere, is a matter of doing no more—but also no less—than the best we can manage to realize in the prevailing epistemic circumstances. Nevertheless, the fact remains that what is, in the circumstances, the rationally indicated answer affords our most promising estimate of the true answer—in the sense of that one for whose acceptance as true the optimal overall case be constructed with the instruments at hand.

The need for such an estimative approach to philosophy is easy to see. One must not ask for too much. After all, we humans live in a world not of our making where we have to do the best we can with the means at our disposal. We must recognize that there is no prospect of assessing the truth—or presumptive truth—of claims in this domain independently of the use of our imperfect mechanisms of inquiry and systematization. We are not—and presumably will never be—in a position to stake a totally secure claim to the definitive truth regarding those great issues of philosophical interest. But we certainly can—and indeed must—do the best we can to achieve a reasonable estimate of the truth. We can and do aim at the truth in our inquiries even in circumstances where we cannot make failproof pretensions to its attainment. We have no alternative but to settle for the best available estimate of the truth of the matter—that estimate for which the best case can be made out according to the appropriate standards of rational cogency. And systematization in the context of the available background information is nothing other than the process for making out this rationally best case. Accordingly, it is rational conjecture based on systematic considerations that is the key method of philosophical inquiry, afford-
ing our best prospect for obtaining sensible answers to the questions that confront us.

The complexity and many-sidedness of the problems is such that there can be few—if any—hard and fast rules for their intelligent treatment. Human life and thought are so varied, so diversified, so many-sided in substance and interconnections that sensible discussions of the issues cannot be regimented by universalized specifications.

3. ARE THERE RULES FOR WRITING PHILOSOPHY?

To be sure, the articulation thought framework that pervades awareness to philosophical questions is subject to individual perception and concern. There are no hard and fast rules for writing philosophy any more than there are hard and fast rules for writing poetry or history. Every philosopher must come to his or her own terms not only in substantive matters but also in dealing with the expository problems of the field. No one approach is fitted for every writer or suitable for all issues. When addressing their concerns, individual philosophers must attune their expositions to their own perspectives—their own priorities and appraisals of the issues—and bear upon them.

But although there are no rules, there certainly are guidelines—general norms that one is well advised to follow because in flouting them, one opens the door to avoidable problems and difficulties. Such guidelines are no more than mere rules of thumb that the teachings of experience indicate as deserving of respect. But to violate them without good cause is to invite yet further problems in a domain already strewn with difficulties.

Throughout the present discussion these strictures must be borne in mind. Wherever the discussion proceeds on the language of rules it must be understood that rules of thumb are at issue. And all such rules have their exceptions. Each one can be violated for good and sufficient reason, but such violations are never cost free: each violation exacts some price, and one had best be sure that this is offset by some compensatory advantage. While the rules in this domain are mere guidelines and nothing hard and fast, one nevertheless violates them only at one’s peril. Effective communication about philosophical issues is difficult enough; there is no point in making it harder for oneself than it needs to be.
4. DESIDERATA IN PHILOSOPHICAL WRITING

AMPLITUDE

Immanuel Kant tells us (quoting the Abbé Terason) that from the reader’s point of view many a book would be shorter if it were not so short—if it provided more explanations, examples, clarifications. But while this is true enough, the balance of danger goes the other way. By and large, the risk that the philosophical author will try the reader’s patience with excessive explanations and detail is greater than that the reader will be left wishing for a fuller exposition. (In general this is something that only book reviewers ask for, and not people who actually have to pay for the book.) Readers usually do not resent the challenge of having to figure something out for themselves.

After all, it lies in the very nature of philosophy that not all the i’s can be dotted and the t’s crossed. In principle, every philosophical concept can be given further explanation, every philosophical thesis further substantiation. There is always more to be said. Each sentence can profitably use a commentary—and so can each sentence of that commentary. The answers we give to philosophical questions are always only rough and approximate. Our solutions to philosophical problems engender further problems. They are always open to challenges that require additional elaboration and refinement. In philosophy we are always impelled toward greater sophistication—our problem-solving distinctions always bring yet further distinctions. We are led to compound wheels upon wheels—adding further epicycles of complexity to the theories we are seeking to render acceptable. The writer who insists on completeness will wind up saying nothing.

To be sure, one need seldom concede that a philosophical doctrine as such is inadequate, but only that its specific formulation in a particular state of the art is. The doctrine as a whole should be seen as a diachronic organism, something that develops and grows and changes over time, maintaining its identity not in its specific content but in its general orientation and, above all, in its genealogy—its exfoliative linkage to the core commitments from which it arose. A doctrinal position as such (i.e., in contrast to its specific formulation) is schematic, maintaining its identity through successive systemic formulations by its overall programmatic tendency rather than through its substantive detail.

We arrive at a model of philosophical development that is essentially exfoliative. Every philosophical position is linked to and developmentally
derived from a prior doctrine that contains its root idea. (In the realm of philosophical though as in physical nature we have ex nihilo nihil.) This exfoliative process involves a superengrafting of new distinctions upon old, with new topics and issues continually emerging from our efforts to resolve prior problems. There is an unending process of introducing further elaborative refinement into the setting of old, preestablished views, which sees an ongoing emergence of new positions to implement old doctrines. Thus, every philosophical concept and position always has a genealogy (an archeology, in currently fashionable terminology) that can trace back its origins programmatically through a means-end chain of problem solving. Every position and distinction has its natural place in the developmental tree.

No exposition of a philosophical position is ever long enough. Not theoretical adequacy but common sense alone can tell us when we have rendered a position of “enough said”.

**CLARITY**

Philosophical positions are bound to be large, complex, elaborate structures. They do not neatly lend themselves to condensation, abbreviation, summarizing. All the same, the philosopher who does not have an accessible message—who does not present a compactly summarizable answer to an identifiable question—is asking for trouble. Philosophy must, in the end, be bound up with the problems and issues of life, with people’s ventures at coming to intellectual and practical terms with themselves, their fellows, and the world. The philosophers whose deliberations cannot readily be brought into a discernible explanatory relationship with these issues run a real risk that people will consign their efforts to the storage shelves of material devoid of relevancy and interest. To address those whose interest is geared to the remote technicalities is to run a real risk of confining one’s readership to this sparsely populated group. If one has something of value to say it is well worthwhile to make the effort to gain for it the widest practicable audience.

Our philosophical questions are always answered incompletely, in ways that inevitably leave further crucial detail to be supplied. In fact, in recent times philosophy has moved toward increasing technicality and sophistication. So much so that it makes interested bystanders impatient. They cry: Will philosophy ever again address the heavens? Will it contribute anything to man’s vision, rather than merely clarifying it? But this sort of
complaint overlooks the filiation of means and ends in question resolution that links the technical issues of philosophy to the fundamental presystemic questions from which they arise. We are (or should be!) driven to those technical micro-issues by the inexorable necessity of addressing them in order to secure rationally adequate resolutions of the presystemic macro-issues afforded by the “eternal problems” of philosophy.

A happy medium between over- and underexplaining has to be struck in philosophical writing as elsewhere. And here we must set out from the basic consideration that in philosophy nothing can be explained completely—all the way down. Enough must be said to remove ambiguities and possible misinterpretations. But the trouble with excessive detail is that it tends to lose sight of the issues and to introduce misleading emphases. (In this regard it is worth contrasting the essays of G. E. Moore with those of Bertrand Russell.) To be sure, the adequate treatment of technicalities is sometimes unavoidable, and technicalities require detail. The writer who does not use good judgment in this may soon lose those readers, however, once they become persuaded that the effort-to-return ratio for those technical elaborations is turning unfavorable.

After all, total clarity is never attainable in philosophy. The philosopher is caught in the bind created by two facts: (1) No concrete philosophical statement is ever adequate to the issues: every philosophical statement needs further commentary and explanation—more delineation and qualification. (2) No philosophical statement is altogether clear until its full explanation is provided. It is an inexorable consequence of these facts that we can never get clear but only clearer. The best one can do in philosophical matters is to provide what clarity suffices for our present purposes. It is easy to make errors here. Writers know (or think they know) what they want to say, but it is easy to misjudge how matters look from where the reader stands. Still, one does well to try for as much clarity as one can afford to obtain within the limits of the available space and time, for insofar as we are not clear, we defeat our own communicative purposes. Since we write to convey and convince, unclarity inevitably puts obstacles in the way of our aims.

Philosophy is, after all, a matter of publicly accessible inquiry. The basic problems with which philosophers deal are public property, so that the inquiries have to be conducted in the public domain by means of generally available conceptual resources. If thinkers did not see these doctrines and supporting arguments as public objects—communally available and appraisable—they would be doing something very different from philosophizing.
Admittedly, clarity is not enough. But when other things are anything like equal, it is greatly preferable to its contrary. The writer who makes obscurity a trademark does well to have an unalloyed confidence in the quality of his work. In making their writings obscure philosophers take a step in the direction of condemning them to obscurity.

MAINTAINING TOUCH WITH A TRADITION

For all intents and purposes, philosophers fall into groupings that are internally united by an affinity of doctrinal fundamentals, but externally divided into distinct schools of thought and traditions. On the surface, it certainly seems to be a fact of life that there are always different schools of philosophical thought regarding the same issues—different approaches to resolving the same problems. Philosophers seem usually to belong to warring tribes. In antiquity we have Aristotelians and Platonists, Stoics and Epicureans; in the Middle Ages, Thomists and Augustinians and Scotists; in modern times Rationalists and Empiricists, and so on. Or so it seems. But various theorists have recently argued that these appearances are misleading. What seem to be conflicting philosophical doctrines are in fact—so they contend—totally separate positions that are actually incomparable or incommensurable. Such discordant positions—so these incommensurability theorists maintain—simply cannot be brought into contact with one another; they cannot be compared in point of agreement or contradiction because no common measure of comparison can be established between them. Different philosophers do not, in fact, form schools that hold divergent views on essentially the same issues—they actually share no issues and live in disjoint cognitive domains that share no common territory. Rival doctrinal positions are totally disconnected; different theories are incommensurable—they cannot be expressed in common units of thought. Adherents of different theories literally live in different thought worlds, among which contact—be it by way of disagreement or agreement—is simply impossible.

In the English-language orbit, the prime spokesman for such a view was R. G. Collingwood:

If there were a permanent problem $P$, we could ask: What did Kant, or Leibniz, or Berkeley, think about $P$? and if that question could be answered, we could then go on to ask Was Kant, or Leibniz, or Berkeley, right in what he thought about $P$? But what is thought to be a permanent problem $P$ is really a number of transitory problems, $P_1$, $P_2$, $P_3$, ... whose individual peculiarities
are blurred by the historical myopia of the person who lumps them together under the name $P$.\textsuperscript{3}

Various intellectual historians share this point of view, maintaining that every thinker stands alone—that every teaching is ultimately distinctive, every thesis so impregnated with the characteristic thought style of its proponent that no two thinkers ever discuss the same proposition.

On such a view, there just are no schools of thought constituted by different thinkers who share common commitments and no perennial issues treated in common by successive generations of theorists. Different thinkers occupy different thought worlds. Disagreement—indeed even comprehension—across doctrinal divides becomes impossible: the thought of every thinker stands apart in splendid isolation. Discordant philosophers can never be said to contribute to the same ongoing issues: “There are simply no perennial problems in philosophy: there are only individual answers to individual questions, with as many different answers as there are questions, and as many different questions as there are questioners.”\textsuperscript{4} Philosophers of different persuasions are separated from each other by an unbridgeable gulf of mutual incomprehension. So argue the theorists of doctrinal incommensurability.

The fact, however, is that this view exaggerates mutual incomprehension to the point of absurdity. Of course, incomprehension \textit{can} and sometimes \textit{does} occur across reaches of time or space when major conceptual dissimilarities are involved. But this is certainly not the case generally or necessarily.

There is, after all, no shortage of examples of problems and issues discussed by different philosophers working in different times and places. Protagorean relativism, Cartesian skepticism, and Berkeleyan phenomenalism are all issues that our contemporaries can identify and examine equally well as their inaugurators—and accept or reject in whole or in part as their own commitments would indicate. Philosophical concepts and issues can certainly be transposed from one systemic setting to another, despite any differences of nuance and attunement derived from their particular context of origin. Indeed even the very question that we are presently discussing (Can different philosophers debate the same issues?) is a clear-cut example of this commonality of issues, with, for example, Collingwood and Randall assuming essentially the same holistic position and the present discussion rejecting it—along with the entire doxographic tradition. To insist that deliberations about the nature and function of the law in St. Thomas Aquinas
are incommensurable with those in Kant is like saying that the Alps and the Rockies cannot both be mountain ranges because they are so different.

To deny the possibility of philosophical disagreement on grounds of incommensurability is to abandon the enterprise as a meaningful cognitive project from the very outset. Only if disagreement is possible does the enterprise make sense. Philosophical positions have a point only insofar as they deny something: *omnis affirmatio est negatio*. They claim truth by denying falsity; they assert saving insight by attacking dangerous error. To this end there must be contrasts. If one denies the very existence of rival positions and views them as literally *inconceivable*, there can be nothing substantial to one’s own view. Where there is no opposition to attack, there is no position to defend. To see rival positions as incomprehensible is to demean and devalue one’s own; if opposing positions were conceptually ungraspable in their very natures, there would be little use in taking a stance that precludes them. Where no possible rival position has the least plausibility, advocacy of a particular doctrine as the “appropriate” position becomes altogether pointless.

Without the prospect of shared problems and theses considered in common by diverse thinkers, all hope of interpretation and comprehension is lost. Every thinker—indeed each one of us—would be locked within the impenetrable walls of his own thought world. If one philosophical mind cannot connect with another, then we ourselves cannot connect with anyone either. In the absence of relatability to other times and places, the historian himself would be faced with issues that he is incapable of dealing with. If Kant cannot address Hume’s problems, neither can Collingwood. If conceptual contact across the divide of conflicting beliefs were impossible, then, given the diversity of their views, all philosophers would be condemned to mutual incomprehension. Were it the case that, as a matter of principle, $X$ would not come to grips with a rival theorist $Y$ by way of agreement or disagreement, then we ourselves would be condemned to philosophical solipsism—unable to come to make a rational assessment of the ideas of any other thinker due to an inability to make conceptual contact. If philosophers cannot speak to one another, then they cannot speak to us either. Any prospect of communal discussion of shared issues is at once destroyed. If the conflicting views of philosophers cannot be brought into touch—if they indeed are strictly incommensurable, with each theory enclosed in a world of its own—then they become altogether inaccessible. We all become windowless Leibnizian monads—though bereft of the coordinative benefit of a preestablished harmony.
A dogmatic insistence on cognitive incommensurability is unprofitable and self-defeating. Contact of some sort among philosophical doctrines is essential. Determinists and indeterminists do not generally disagree about what causality is, but about its pervasiveness. Skeptics and cognitivists need not disagree about the idea of knowledge, but only about its availability. Statists and libertarians do not clash about what desires individuals have, but about the weight these should carry in public policy deliberations. All such controversies flow from agreement about the range of jurisdiction or desirability of certain factors with respect to whose nature there is little or no disagreement. If we cannot in principle relate the thought of distinct philosophers by way of identity and similarity, if we cannot say that here they are discussing the same (or similar) questions and that there they are offering consonant (or conflicting) answers, then we shall be in bad straits indeed. If we cannot relate X’s thought to Y’s, we cannot relate it to ours either. We are locked into mutual incomprehension. (And worse! After all, what makes for so great a difference between X’s understanding of Y and X’s understanding of the X of a year ago who also held rather different opinions? A cognitive solipsism of the present moment looms before us here.)

A crucial factor for interpretation lies in the fact that in writing philosophy one has no sensible alternative but to proceed on the supposition that others can understand us in the sense we intend—if they are willing to make a sufficient effort which we are well advised to make as undemanding as possible. And we do well to explain, develop, and substantiate our own position in terms of its relationships with the ideas and doctrines to which it is linked by way of affinity or opposition.

To be sure, this can be overdone. Philosophical writers frequently indulge negative explanations. Employing formulas such as “In saying thus I don’t mean to maintain so”, they are telling us about what they do not claim or believe or assert in a well-intentioned endeavor to head off misunderstanding. But they often seem insufficiently aware of how unproductive this can be. Guarding against misinterpretation is all very well, but the range of things one may not mean is usually so large that it is not particularly enlightening to be presented with a few items that can safely be stricken from the list. It is perhaps more painful for the author, but certainly more helpful to a reader, when writers take the via positiva and set out, plainly and explicitly, what they are prepared to assert. Authors who have not thought things through to the point of feeling comfortable about accentuating the positive have apparently not yet managed to develop their ideas to a point where they merit the exposure of publication.
HEEDING THE GUIDANCE OF LOGIC

Few features are more advantageous to a philosophical discussion than the maintenance of a logical order of exposition that renders the filiation of ideas and the relationship of theses as clear and conspicuous as possible.

But Descartes’s fond vision to the contrary notwithstanding, the presentation of a philosophical position generally does not easily lend itself to the linear mode of exposition of pure mathematics, moving from axiomatic first principles to ever more complex derivative truths. The realm of fact and reality just does not have the neat sequential structure of written exposition. A philosophical exposition must be logical: it must present its ideas in a rational and coherent way. But this does not mean that it will exhibit a predestined sequential order, proceeding along an inexorable line of development from a starting point in unavoidable first principles. In giving an account of the nature of things, philosophers must impose a certain rational order on the materials at issue—exactly as with those who set out to provide an account of a city or of a country. And—within limits—they are free to do this in many different ways.

Moreover, philosophical problems frequently make demands of their own. Often they will not allow one to work in the way one would prefer, but insist that the discussion proceed in their way. And when this occurs, there is no use struggling against the inevitable.

A philosophical position, like a defended city, will have some sectors more weakly protected than others. The writer of philosophical deliberations can be quite sure that readers will probe for such weak spots—to say nothing of referees and reviewers. One is well advised to take preventive measures to bolster them in advance—enlisting the aid of friends and colleagues insofar as possible. No position is totally invulnerable to objection, but there is no point in making things more difficult for oneself than necessary. In philosophy, perhaps more than in any other mode of writing, criticism is a boon—provided it comes before rather than after publication. Of course, philosophical excellence is not a matter of tight reasoning alone—or even primarily. But loose thinking certainly does not advance its cause.

Philosophy does not furnish us with new ground-level facts; it endeavors to systematize, harmonize, and coordinate the old into coherent structures in whose terms we can meaningfully address our larger questions. The prime mover of philosophizing is the urge to systemic adequacy—to achieving consistency, coherence, and rational order within the framework of what we accept. Its work is a matter of the disciplining of our cognitive
commitments to make overall sense of them—to render them harmonious and coherent. Two prime injunctions regarding the mission of rational inquiry accordingly set the stage for sensible philosophizing:

1. Answer the questions! Say enough to satisfy your curiosity about things.

2. Keep your commitments consistent! Don’t say so much that some of your contentions are in conflict with others.

To be sure, there is a tension between these two imperatives—between the factors of commitment and consistency. We find ourselves in the discomfiting situation of cognitive conflict, with different tendencies of thought pulling in divergent directions. The task is to make sense of our discordant cognitive commitments and to impart coherence and unity to them insofar as possible.

Note that a writer’s claims do not wear their reasons for acceptance on their sleeves. Few and far between is the sentence able at one and the same time to state a claim and to present explicitly the reason for its acceptance—to make an assertion and at the same time to offer a reason for accepting it. After all, even a claim of the form “$P$—and moreover $Q$ , which is the case—constitutes a good reason for accepting $P$ ” still leaves open the question: But why accept $Q$ ? Claims do not—nay, generally cannot—be self-validating in concurrently presenting the grounds for their own acceptance. What they achieve is not to state the grounds for their acceptability, but at best to suggest them to the perceptive reader.

And here, once again, the writer is well advised to be helpful to readers, for cogent legitimation is the requisite of philosophical adequacy. And where this is not forthcoming readers have no right to be satisfied and authors no right to ask for our acceptance/endorsement of the views at issue.

It is this aspect of philosophical exposition that marks the discipline as a venture in rational inquiry. No matter how pretty the story, or no matter how much it appeals to our imagination or our admiration—however much it enlists our approval—it can make no claims on our understanding save through the instrumentality of reason.
AVOIDING UNDUE TECHNICALITIES

Non-philosophers sometimes ask: Why is so much present-day philosophical writing boring and irrelevant? A substantial divide apparently separates the issues that intrigue philosophers themselves from those that non-philosophers think philosophers ought to discuss. The principal reason why the non-specialist obtains this impression is that contemporary philosophical writing is in great measure technical and addressed to the specialist alone. But why should this be? Is it perhaps simply a matter of the fashion of the day? By no means! There is good reason for it. Contemporary philosophers generally do—and surely always should—deal with technical issues in the field because they are constrained to do so. They address this technical issue to resolve another in order to resolve yet another and so on until finally one reaches what is needed to resolve some probably significant presystematic, nontechnical issue.

A thread of means-ends filiation should always link philosophical technicalities to the nontechnical big issues of life, the universe, and everything with which philosophy traditionally deals. Philosophical technicalities can be unavoidable means to sensible ends—and should, in fact, only be there when this is so. They matter when—but only when—they are required for the satisfactory handling of something nontechnical. Regrettably, however, people sometimes become entranced by technicalities for their own sake. They are unwilling to take the time and trouble to explain to their colleagues (let alone to laymen) why those technicalities matter, how they arise out of the fundamental issues of the field, and why they are needed to resolve problems satisfactorily. They talk—and want to talk—only with fellow specialists, fellow technicians whose concern for technical issues can be taken for granted. And then those complaints about irrelevancy will clearly be legitimate. The cardinal principle is that technicalities should be minimized: they should never be multiplied praeter necessitatem but only be resorted to insofar as necessary. It is true that technicalities may become unavoidable in the adequate treatment of philosophical issues, but it is no less true that they should never be deployed beyond the point where they indeed are unavoidably required.

A considerable host of philosophers from Hume to Russell and beyond show that it is possible to do both technical philosophy and popular communication—occasionally even in one and the same book. Unfortunately, too few philosophical writers are willing to make the effort.
AVOIDING HISTORICAL OVER-CAUTION

More than any other family of academic researchers, philosophers are constantly harking back to the work of their predecessors. They are imbued with the fear of being accused of reinventing the wheel or rediscovering the North Pole. But constantly looking back over one’s shoulder is not only likely to give one a stiff neck, but it also makes it hard to be forward looking.

From Socrates onward, there are encouraging precedents for creative work in philosophy with only modest attention to the burdens of the past. And there is something to be said for such an approach. If we are too fearful of doing injustice to the past, we shall have to preoccupy ourselves with it to an extent that makes it hard to get one with the work of the present. If we become too heavily burdened with the freight of the books of bygone thinkers, we shall lack the time and the energy to think for ourselves. Unable to get on with our proper task, we shall become becalmed—with various colleagues and some entire university departments—in the sterile waters of ancestor worship.

The philosopher who is unduly afraid of making wrong claims, of making mistakes, is in grave difficulty through an excess of caution. But so is the philosopher who is overly afraid of making anticipated claims, of making repetitions. The former is condemned to skepticism, to saying nothing. The latter is condemned to retreating into history, to rehearsing what has been done to the detriment of creative innovation. He is in danger of joining those for whom, in Kant’s words, “the history of philosophy becomes a substitute for philosophy itself”.

Every generation must do its own philosophical work, must find its own answers to the big questions that crowd in on it from many sides. If it can find help ready-made in the labors of bygone days, that’s just splendid. But this is eminently improbable. The history of philosophy can be a useful tool for philosophical work. But historical studies are no substitute for philosophizing.

The retreat into history mongering and the withdrawal into skepticism both represent a comparable failure of nerve in philosophizing, an unwillingness to take the cognitive tasks of the day into hand in the face of the difficulties and risks that are inherent in the enterprise.
ACKNOWLEDGING CLAIMS TO CONVICTION

When writing philosophy it is always advantageous to bear in mind how the situation looks from the reader’s point of view. In particular, the writer of philosophy should constantly be asking: Just why is it that the reader should accept this claim of mine? And shrewd readers will also bear this in mind, constantly asking themselves—sentence by sentence—just why the author’s claims should be accepted. With philosophical discussions, the reader can and should engage in a constant dialogue with the text, at each step challenging it with the question: On what sort of basis can the author expect us to accept the assertion at issue? Is it as a matter of scientific fact, of common sense—of what everybody should realize—of accepting the assertion of some expert or authority, of drawing a suitable conclusion from previously established facts, or just what? In reading—or writing—a philosophical discussion one is well advised to step back from the text and consider the prospects of such a legitimation commentary.

Ultimately, the issue of acceptability is always one of considerations we are expected to endorse or concede because of the plausibility of their credentials. And this has many ramifications.

Be it as single individuals or as entire generations, we always start our inquiries with the benefit of a diversified cognitive heritage, falling heir to that great mass of information and misinformation that is the “accumulated wisdom” of our predecessors—or those among them to whom we choose to listen. What William James called our “funded experience” of the world’s ways—of its nature and our place within it—constitute the data at philosophy’s disposal in its endeavor to accomplish its question-resolving work. These data of philosophy include:

1. commonsense beliefs, common knowledge, and what have been the ordinary convictions of the plain man since time immemorial;
2. the facts (or purported facts) afforded by the science of the day; the views of well-informed experts and authorities;
3. the lessons we derive from our experiential dealings with the world in everyday life;
4. the received opinions that constitute the worldview of the day; views that accord with the spirit of the times and the ambient convictions characteristic of one’s cultural heritage;
5. tradition, inherited lore, and the transmitted wisdom of the past;

6. the teachings of history as best we can discern them.

No plausible source of information about how matters stand in the world fails to bring grist to philosophy’s mill. The whole range of the (purportedly) established facts of experience furnishes the extraphilosophical input for our philosophizing—the materials, as it were, for our philosophical reflections.

All such philosophical data deserve respect: common sense, tradition, general belief, accepted (i.e., well established) prior theorizing—the sum total of the different sectors of our experience. They are all plausible, exerting some degree of cognitive pressure and having some claim on us. They may not constitute irrefutably established knowledge, but nevertheless they do have some degree of merit and, given our cognitive situation, it would be very convenient if they turned out to be true. The philosopher cannot simply turn his back on these data without further ado.

Still, even considering all this, there is nothing sacred and sacrosanct about the data. Taken as a whole, the data are too much for tenability—collectively they run into conflicts and contradictions. The long and short of it is that the data of philosophy constitute a plethora of fact (or purported fact) so ample as to threaten to sink any ship that carries so heavy a cargo. Those data are by no means unproblematic. The constraint they put on us is not peremptory and absolute—they do not represent certainties to which we must cling at all costs. What is owed to these data, in the final analysis, is not acceptance but merely respect. In philosophizing even the plainest of plain facts can be questioned, as indeed some of them must be. What counts here is, ultimately, not our individual beliefs but the entire belief system as a whole. The mission of the enterprise is, after all, to get a grasp on the issues as best we can—a grasp that reaches firmly across the board. What we seek is not only to get answers, but to have them be coherent and systematically harmonious.5

Coda

Even as philosophy itself should by rights aim at plausibility, logic, cogency, clarity, historical contextuality, and the like, so a philosophical text demands that its readers—in all due charity—impute to its author the aspiration to such desiderata, conceding to the most ample extent possible the
realization of these definitive aims of the philosophical enterprise. After all, the philosopher who, with the best of interpretive good will, falls short in point of plausibility and rational conviction is simply wasting the ink being put on paper.

NOTES


5 Materials for this chapter were drawn from editorials that the author wrote for the *American Philosophical Quarterly* during his many years of editorship of this journal.