Chapter 12

THE PROSPECT
Philosophy at the Turn of the Century:
A Return to Systems

1. THE 20TH CENTURY REJECTS THE HERITAGE OF THE 19TH

The characteristic style of 19th century philosophizing consisted in the articulation of ambitious systems of thought, whose leading ideas generally centered around a single, grandiose organizing principle. For while a “big picture” was being attempted, the position being expounded was nevertheless almost always one whose core could be represented epigrammatically by a compact and pithy but all-revealing slogan. In metaphysics, for instance, we find such examples as the idealism of Hegel and Fichte for which “Reality is the product of Reason (or of Mind)”, the doctrine of Schopenhauer for which “Reality is the product of the interaction of Will and Idea”, while the scientific materialism of Ernest Haeckel, or the dialectical materialism of Engels and Marx also represented positions that could be encapsulated in analogous epigrams. The style of approach is the same throughout. Every such metaphysical doctrine represented the development of a far-reaching theory above principle components pivoted on a single leading idea capable of a neat and compact articulation. And the generative impetus of the whole was itself provided by a unitized cardinal principle that could be sketched more or less adequately, in a single sentence—or paragraph at most. Systematization was the watchword, with everything tightly focused and compactly unified around the ideational core of some central ruling principle.

In 19th century ethics we find exactly the same phenomenon. Here we encounter a plethora of summun bonum positions such as the personalistic theory of the good as that which best fosters people’s personal development, the hedonistic theory of the good as that which maximally facilitates human pleasure, the evolutionary theory of the good as that which conduces to the well-being of the species, and the like. And then in political philosophy we have such positions as the Hegelian doctrine that right action is that which optimally expresses the demands of the Zeitgeist, or the
utilitarian theory of right action as that which redounds to the greatest good of the greatest number. Here, once again, everything is pivotal upon and organized around a neat single predominating principle.

And so, quite in general, the style of 19th century philosophizing—not just in metaphysics and ethics but all across the board—was to endeavor to resolve far-reaching philosophical issues on the basis of a small centralized cluster of rather straightforward and compact principles. And at the end of the period, the turn-of-the-century philosophers still reflected this heritage, with versions of this centralizing style of philosophizing exemplified in the intuitionism of G. E. Moore, the neutral monism of Bertrand Russell, the vitalism of Henri Bergson, or the pragmatism of William James. The philosophies of this era were usually still devoted to in articulating various relatively compact central-principle theories which, nevertheless, were sufficiently ambitious to claim a capacity to “do it all”.

However, this 19th-century vision of the philosophical enterprise received a harsh treatment at the hands of the 20th century. Here, as elsewhere, World War I provided a great ideological watershed. In producing a pervasive disillusionment with the aggrandizingly imperialistic political systems of the past, it also engendered a cultural attitude manifesting a comparable disdain for the centralizing philosophical systems of the past. The aftermath of the war thus saw unfolding in Europe and America a negatively, skeptical climate of thought that rejected the doctrines and dogmas of the pre-war era and dismissed with contempt the whole process of system building and systematization. The consensus view of this period insisted that the time when metaphysical deliberation is a viable enterprise is past, and that nothing meaningful and sensible can be said about such issues, so that silence is the best policy—just as the early Wittgenstein maintained. Alike with positivists, nihilists, phenomenologists, Hermeneuticists—the major new tendencies of philosophical thought of the post-World War I era all maintained that philosophical systematization of the traditional type must be abandoned, and something very different substituted in its place.

To be sure, distinctly diverse doctrinal tendencies came to the fore regarding the nature of this substitution. The logical positivists of the Vienna Circle school proposed to take a science-is-all line. As they saw it, the entire project of speculative philosophy—and metaphysics in particular—is a matter of fraud and delusion. Insofar as meaningful questions going beyond the formalities of logic and language are at issue, natural science can resolve them. A different approach was taken by cultural relativists, who
were inspired by the social rather than natural sciences. They relegated all philosophizing to the level of mere opinion and nailed their flag to the mast of psychology and sociology rather than physics and chemistry. Accordingly they rejected any idea of an objectively determinable fact of the matter regarding issues of the sort with which philosophy has traditionally dealt. It is all simply a question of what people happen to think. Again, adherents of the analytic school insisted that philosophy as traditionally conceived must be abandoned in favor of exegesis of the use of language. We should not—must not—investigate what such things as truth and justice and beauty inherently are and involve, but should instead examine how the expressions such as “truth”, “justice”, “beauty” are ordinarily used when such matters are discussed. And, rather similarly, the philosophically skeptical Martin Heidegger of his later period also insisted that metaphysical issues of the traditional sort cannot be addressed meaningfully. Instead we must, he held, focus our philosophical concerns on the prosaic matters of ordinary life and everyday affairs, and preserve a stance of relaxed and disdainful indifference (Gelassenheit) towards those fruitless speculation in which speculative philosophers have traditionally indulged.

In ethics and moral philosophy we find much the same situation. The ethicists of the analytical school wanted to abandon concern for the substantive issues of the domain in favor of a meta-ethical preoccupation with how language functions in discussing such matters. Other ethical theorists took a positivistically sociological line and sought to replace ethics with the study of people’s attitudes regarding right and wrong conduct, substituting the study of mores for moral theory as such. Still others deemed it best to view ethics in terms of the rhetoric of promotion and persuasion. What is at issue, they maintained, is just a matter of recommending certain attitudes and actions on the basis of personal predilection. And so, while different thinkers thus took very different lines, nevertheless all these tendencies of the post-1920 generation agreed in rejecting substantive ethics with its traditional goal of providing a theoretical framework for right action—either altogether, or in favor of some less strongly normative, more experientially based observational/empirical endeavor that forswore any aspirations in the direction of a systematic theory of morality.

A definite over-all picture emerges from such a survey of the situation. The principal thinkers of the post-war period took a close look at 19th century epigrammatically systematic philosophy and decided they wanted no part of it. Instead, they proposed to reform our understanding of the world by shifting its basis from philosophically geared principles to factually ori-
entered disciplines—in natural science, in cultural studies, in language and logic, in everyday-life contexts, or whatever. All across the board, the most influential tendencies of thought of this era shared a common negativism towards classical systemic philosophizing. They regarded the world’s factual arrangements (as portrayed in science or in ordinary life) as being final and self-sufficient without requiring—or even admitting of further philosophical grounding or substantiation.

2. THE SHIPWRECK OF INTER-BELLUM NEGATIVISM

This negativistically skeptical climate of thought dominant in intellectual circles after World War I was itself consumed in the flames of the great anti-totalitarian crusade that culminated in World War II. In the post-war reaction against the paroxysm of dictator-imposed horrors, people were no longer all that willing to abandon the quest for meaningful harmony with its absorption in normatively substantive concerns. Increasingly a consensus emerged that it was totally inappropriate to dismiss efforts to provide theoretical validation for the traditional normative distinctions such as true/false, right/wrong, and just/injust. The ethos of the new age was increasingly reluctant to cast such rationale-oriented justifactory projects up on the trash heap of outmoded styles of thinking. Questions of validation, justification, and evaluation began to emerge into prominence once more, and philosophers once again showed signs of nurturing systematic aspirations.

The fact is that many people were put off by the negativistic modes of anti-philosophy of the inter-bellum era and their positivistic or language-analytic expressions. After World War II, many among the best and the brightest of the younger generation simply turned away from academic philosophy altogether (especially in Britain, where professional philosophers stayed attached to inter-bellum negativism). Young people who were drawn to philosophical interests now often looked outside the Anglo-Saxon mainstream. Some turned to Eastern philosophies and others to the literally or sociologically or psychoanalytically inspired modes of cultural speculation that had increasingly become a substitute for philosophy in France. Still others turned to ideology, either religious (as with the Catholic theoreticians who hijacked the hermeneutical movement) the anti-religious (as with the ideologists who yielded to the siren call of an atheistical ideology inspired by such theorists as Nietzsche or Marx). However, many professional philosophers themselves also reacted against the current—not by
way of this sort of abandonment of the historical productions of the discipline, but rather by returning to the tradition and endeavoring to rehabilitate and reassert classical positions and perspectives. Increasingly, the post-war rejection of the negativism of the inter-war era led philosophers to look with deepening interest and sympathy to the positions of the past.

There was now a great revival of preoccupation with the philosophy of the traditional mainstream and a revulsion against both the dismissive attitudes of the logical positivists and the know-nothing approach of the ordinary language philosophers. This phenomenon occurred not only in metaphysics but also—and especially—in ethics and moral philosophy. Reacting against the unspeakable brutality of the Stalin and Hitler regimes—and particularly in the wake of catastrophic developments in the old French Indo-China—American philosophers in particular once again returned increasingly to substantive and normative issues. Thus old-line normatively prescriptive ethics made a noteworthy come-back, as people once again sought to establish formative guidelines as between good and bad, right and wrong. This phenomenon was especially manifest in the growth of “applied ethics”—the study of moral issues arising in professions such as medicine, business, or public service. Such issues as the protection of human life, people’s rights and freedoms, the claims of future generations, and the like, began to be argued on old principles (contractarianism, natural rights, neo-Kantian deontology), duly fitted out with new wrinkles. And even in matters of science and mathematics, philosophers increasingly sought to achieve a systematic and holistically rationalized understanding of the processes involved. The stage was now set for philosophy to move once more in positive and constructive directions.

3. THE BURNED BRIDGES

Willingly or not, however, those concerned for the revival of the substantive philosophical aspirations at issue in the systems of an earlier era had to come to terms with the 20th century’s cultural disinclinations towards those earlier perspectives. After all, it is never comfortable to occupy a home that was constructed with a view to conditions very different from those of one’s own times and situation. Accordingly, any straightforward restoration was rendered impracticable by several major factors:

1. *The knowledge explosion* marked by a vast increase in the number of scholars and scientists, of books and journals, of students and teach-
ers, of laboratories and institutes, etc.—an expansion that swiftly brought entire new branches of science to the fore and vastly enlarged the framework of ideas with which philosophy had to contend.

2. *The proliferation of approaches* in the formal sciences. In mathematical analysis we nowadays have an intuitionism, finitism, “fuzzy arithmetic”. In geometry we have the proliferation of non-Euclidean systems. In logic we have a whole gamut of non-stretched systems. In computation theory we have a whole line of moral approaches. The formal sciences are no longer monolithic wholes, but have come to encompass a vast profusion of alternatives.

3. *The diffusion of complexity* in the wake of the rise of the new physics with its drastic revision of our picture of the universe, its dematerialization of matters in subatomic physics, its complexification of causality in quantum physics, the emergence of scientific cosmology, the rise of neo-Darwinism evolutionary theorizing, the development of scientific physiological psychology, the emergence of artificial intelligence, etc.

4. *The realization of cognitive finitude* engendered by forced recognition that our knowledge cannot plumbs the ultimate depth of things. We have to reckon with limits and limitations. Our mathematical systems cannot encompass the whole of arithmetic (Gödel). Our languages cannot encompass the whole of truth (Tarski). Our particle accelerators cannot push particles to the speed of light, nor can our cooling apparatus attain absolute zero.

As regards the explosion of knowledge, consider just one illustration: the emergence of a heretofore undreamt of complexity of knowledge reflected in the process of taxonomic proliferation. In the 11th (1911) edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, physics is described as a discipline composed of 9 constituent branches (e.g. “Acoustics” or “Electricity and Magnetism”) which were themselves partitioned into 20 further specialties (e.g., “Thermo-electricity” or “Celestial Mechanics”). The 15th (1974) version of the *Britannica* divides physics into 12 branches whose subfields are—seemingly—too numerous for comprehensive listing. (However the 14th 1960’s edition carried a special article entitled “Physics, Articles on”
which surveyed more than 130 special topics in the field.) When the U.S. National Science Foundation launched its inventory of physical specialties with the National Register of Scientific and Technical Personnel in 1954, it divided physics into 12 areas with 90 specialties. By 1970 these figures had increased to 16 and 210, respectively. Substantially the same story can be told for every field of science. The springing up of new disciplines, branches, and specialties is manifest everywhere. And as though to counteract this tendency and maintain unity, one finds an ongoing evolution of interdisciplinary syntheses—physical chemistry, astrophysics, biochemistry, etc. The very attempt to reduce fragmentation produces new fragments.

Herbert Spencer argued long ago that evolution is characterized by von Baer’s law of development “from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous” and manifests and ever-increasing differentiated “definiteness” and complexity of articulation. This may or may not be correct for biological evolution, but it assuredly holds for cognitive evolution. As the 20th Century unfolded, the increasingly clear realization of the complexity of the task of knowledge extension and the finitude of our means for its achievement has created a new sensibility that stresses the acknowledgment of limits. And this sensibility has rendered it impossible to return to the comparatively simple certainties of the old-style monolithic philosophical systems.

All this has meant that philosophy’s traditional concern a systemic understanding able to elucidate “what it all means” faced a new cognitive scene of amazing scope and complexity. And so, those not prepared simply to abandon philosophy in favor of something altogether different were now impelled towards a new philosophical style—a new mode of philosophizing. The ruling idea of the time was that of the dictum “Something positive, yes—but nothing that smacks of those grandiose but oversimple systems of our grandfather’s day.” And in the circumstances such an altitude was only natural. After all, how can philosophy possibly stay simple in an awesomely complex world? How can our philosophical view of the world remain between the covers of a single book when our libraries are bursting beyond their four walls?

4. THE RISE OF PARTICULARISM

In addressing the increasingly manifest complexity of the real world—and thus also of the world of learning—the philosophical style that increasingly came into vogue in the 20th century may, for want of a better name, be characterized as particularism. Its salient features were as follows:
1. **Specificity tropism**: Adopting a case-study methodology by addressing concrete cases and specific situations. Turning away from general theories and broader speculations to examine particular small-scale issues.

2. **Preoccupation with discourse**: Concern for linguistic micro-detail regarding the use of particular words and expressions; the interpretation of particular sentences; nature of particular arguments and lines of reasoning.

3. **Preoccupation with matters of detail**: Dealing with concrete matters of minute detail, with questions so small-scale—and thereby so remote from the classical “big question” of philosophy—as to have the aspect of virtually legalistic quibbles.

4. **Concern for technique and the triumph of the technical**: Preoccupation with those aspects of the issues that can be addressed by means of the machinery of logical and linguistic analysis.

5. **Possibility mongering**: Preoccupation with hypothetical cases and situations. Concern not just with the reality of things but with virtual reality as well.

Philosophical inquiry now added a new-style disaggregation and proceeded to deal with questions of local rather than general issues, focusing in a micro-explanatory fashion on highly detailed questions in such contexts as:

- to explicate the meaning of philosophical concepts by means of “truth” conditions of language usage,

- to explain human capacities (e.g. for knowledge or for understanding) in terms of models or analogies from computing machines and “artificial intelligence” considerations,

- to explain human rule-following practices in terms of social policies and norms,

- to explain human capacities (e.g. for knowledge or for understanding) on the basis of evolutionary theories and Darwinian natural selection.
In the wake of proliferating details, specialization and technicalization has increasingly come to the fore. In the Anglo-American context above all, the post-war generation of 1945-75 saw a new emphasis on the development and deployment of formal techniques of analysis suitable for elucidating not large-scale, global issues but rather for minor issues of small-scale, localized detail. Concern for small-scale micro-issues examined with the powerful magnification of new tools of logical and linguistic analysis—was now the order of the day. The writings of such major mid-century English-language philosophers as John Austin in Britain or Nelson Goodman in the U.S.—and even Ludwig Wittgenstein, a figure of an earlier time whose influence only then became prominent—were of such nature as to seem to the uninitiated as little more than an aggregation of logic-chopping quibbles and nit-picks.

The turning of philosophy from globally general, large-scale issues to more narrowly focused investigations of matters of microscopically fine-grained detail now became a strikingly notable phenomenon. In particular, the past three decades have seen a great proliferation of narrowly focused philosophical investigations of particular issues in areas such as economic justice, social welfare, ecology, abortion, population policy, military defense, and so on. In this context, the rapid growth of “applied philosophy”—that is, philosophical reflection about detailed issues in science, law, business, social affairs, information management, problem solving by computers, and the like—is an especially striking structural feature of the contemporary North American scene.

And philosophical investigations now made increasingly extensive use of the formal machinery of semantics, modal logic, computation theory, learning theory, etc. Ever heavier theoretical armaments were painstakingly developed and brought to bear on ever smaller problem-targets—to such an extent that sometimes lead readers of the professional literature came to wonder whether the important principle that technicalities should never be multiplied beyond necessity had been lost sight of.

Moreover, agenda-enlargement is yet another of the notable features of the period. The pages of its journals and the programs of its meetings bristle with discussions of issues that would seem bizarre to their predecessors of earlier days and to present-day philosophers of other places. For example, the overall program of the annual meeting of the Eastern Division of American Philosophical Association in December of 1991 included papers on “Is it Dangerous to Demystify Human Rights?”, “Difference and the Differend in Derrida and Lyotard”, “Animal Rights Theory and the Dimin-

Entire professional societies are dedicated to the pursuit of issues now deemed philosophical that no-one would have dreamt of considering so a generation ago. (Some examples are the societies for Machines and Mentality, for Informal Logic and Critical Thinking, for the Study of Ethics and Animals, for Philosophy and Literature, for Analytical Feminism, and for Philosophy of Sex and Love.) A vast part of the discussions of the present-day professional conferences and the current literature of the field would have struck our philosophical predecessors of 50 years ago as dealing with matters outside the boundaries of the subject.

In this context, the rapid growth of “applied philosophy”—that is, philosophical reflection about detailed issues in science, law, business, social affairs, information management, problem solving by computers, and the like—is an especially striking structural feature of contemporary philosophy. In particular, the past three decades have seen a great proliferation of narrowly focused philosophical investigations of particular issues in areas such as economic justice, social welfare, ecology, abortion, population policy, military defense, and so on. The turning of philosophy from globally general, large-scale issues to more narrowly focused investigations of matters of microscopically fine-grained detail became an especially striking feature of American philosophy after World War II.

This agenda enlargement made for a revolution in the structure of philosophy itself by way of taxonomic complexification. The recent period accordingly saw philosophical study and writing proliferate enormously in the wake of a vast expansion of the American system of higher education after World War II. (There are currently in excess of 10,000 professional philosophical academies in North America.) Specialization and division of labor now began to run rampant, and cottage industries became the order of the day. The situation has grown so complex and diversified that one comprehensive recent English-language encyclopedia of philosophy cautiously abstains from providing any taxonomy of philosophy whatsoever. (This phenomenon also goes a long way towards explaining why virtually no accounts of the subject in its present configuration exist.)

In consequence of these developments, philosophy—which ought by its historic mission and tradition to seek an integration of knowledge—has itself become increasingly disintegrated. No single thinker can any longer
command the whole range of knowledge and interests that characterizes present-day concerns of philosophy. After World War II it became literally impossible for philosophers to keep up with what their colleagues were writing. For there can be no doubt that the growing technicalization of philosophy has been achieved at the expense of its wider accessibility—and indeed even to its accessibility to members of the profession. No single thinker commands the whole range of knowledge and interests that characterizes present-day philosophy. The field has outgrown the capacity not only of its practitioners but even of its training institutions: no single university department is so large as to have on its faculty specialists in every currently active branch of the subject.

5. A VISION OF WHOLENESS

However, this preoccupation with particularistic detail came to leave many thoughtful people deeply dissatisfied with its resulting fragmentation and dissonance. And so there come to the fore once again philosophers who cared for the big picture and yearned for a vision of wholeness.

Like fashions in clothing or hair styling, intellectual fashions also come and go. They run their course and are replaced by something else, something theretofore unexpected because substantially opposed to the prevailing order of things. The Law of the Swinging Pendulum also obtains with regard to particular emphases and tendencies in intellectual culture: a movement towards one extreme comes to be succeeded by one that moves towards the opposite extreme, with action in one direction succeeded by a reaction in the other. And often as not the reaction is an overreaction. All this holds not just in matters of style, politics, and the like, but for philosophical movements as well. And so by way of reaction against the post-war generation’s concern for discrete, local, and, as it were, technical issues, their successors came to yearn for a restoration of the Leibnizian (or Hegelian) vision of a philosophy that is synthetic, systemic, synoptic—in sum, one that provides for larger vistas.

To be sure, the urge towards seeing things whole has never been totally lost in philosophy. However unpopular it may be for a time, the lure of the idea of system has never disappeared altogether from the scene. It stretches through the history of modern philosophy from Leibniz to Hegel, Lotze, Peirce, cropping up even in the hostile environment of the 20th Century via such then rather unfashionable philosophers as Ernest Cassirer and A. N. Whitehead. But as inter-bellum negativism receded ever further into the
historical past, philosophers of the younger generation increasingly came to look with favor and fondness on the project of systematization. So many trees were growing that people came to insist once more in having a look at the forest. The yearning for coordinative syntheses, and unifying integrations—for an approach that is holistic rather than particularistic—began to make something of a comeback as the 20th century approached its end.

6. THE NEW ORDER: A REVIVAL OF SYSTEMATIC PHILOSOPHY

And so, the lure of the idea of system has once again come to the fore. But the task facing the project of philosophical systematization in the fin de siècle era was something distinctly new and different. The old-style reliance on monolithic central principles has become untenable, there being no real possibility of return to the simplistic systematizations of the beginning of the present century. Those neat “25 words or less” definitions and central-principle formulations beloved by writers of handbooks and textbooks are no longer seen as viable. The era of formulaic philosophy has had to be consigned safely to the unrecoverable past. The context within which present-day philosophizing must proceed exhibits characteristic features that separate it from the styles of systematization that characterized 19th century philosophizing. Slogans on the order of “Truth is correspondence with reality”, “Justice consists of acting so as to make for the greatest good of the greatest number”, or “Knowledge is true justified belief” have come to be deemed unable to accommodate the presently acknowledged complexities of the relevant issues. What has emerged, clearly and for all to see, is a new mode of complex systematization suited to an era of complexity. (“Complex systems for a complex age” would now seem to be the methodological watchword.)

And so, while the current style of philosophizing is involved in a return to systematic concerns, it has been a return with a difference. Its origins in an era of particularism has imbued present-day philosophizing with a care for detail—a concern to address concretely realistic issues by detailed elucidation and close argumentation. It still seeks to combine the care for minute analysis and concrete case studies. But it no longer sees the results as ends in themselves but rather as building blocks for those larger-scale systematization at which it aims. Care for the big picture across the details has returned to philosophy. “Meaningful detail, meaningfully integrated” in yet another guiding watchword of the new-style philosophy.
As the 21st century begins, the evolution of this new complex-system style of philosophizing is already well under way. But it is easily overlooked. For the history of philosophy has long accustomed us to a “great thinker” perspective, and on this basis one has become accustomed to seek for innovations only in the writing of some great innovator or other. But is the present case, the situation is such that we are going to have to be dealing with diffused and disaggregated movements or schools of thought rather than stellar individuals. The new-found prominence of microscopic detail has brought forth through the usual processes of specialization and division of labor, a vast host of detail workers. And so system-development has come to take the form of a multilateral and as it were collaborative project.

For the complexity that confronts us throughout the realm of inquiry means that the present situation of philosophy is such that satisfying systems can no longer emerge from single minds like Athena from the head of Zeus. Philosophy has had to come to terms with the fact that the problem situation with which it must nowadays grapple has grown in extent and complexity to the point where adequate systematization lies beyond the power of any individual intellect. And so the order of the day is disaggregated collaboration through the development of schools and circles. Philosophers once again produce complex systems. But they do so multilaterally and collectively, by way of a disaggregated and unplanned collaboration.

Holistic thinking has become one of the leitmotivs of late 20th century thought on a wide range of topics. One finds it in medicine, in thought about environmentalism, conservation, and species protection, and in urban planning and renewal, and in various other domains. And as the present deliberations indicate, it has a presence in philosophizing as well.

What we have nowadays in philosophy is a matter of the unprogrammed and disaggregated collaboration of diffused movements and schools of thought—not roadways constructed by a single engineer but paths created by the footsteps of many people, each crossing the terrain at issue their own individual errand. The format of present-day philosophizing thus has its own, new and distinctively characteristically multilateral configuration—an uncoordinated programmatic unity superimposed spontaneously on a division of labor in matters of detail.

Moreover, the task of complexity management calls for new modes of exposition—and new modes of teaching and learning to follow in its wake. One salient sign of this is the demise of the single-author expository text-
book or handbook for teaching purposes. Single authored texts and treatises can no longer adequately encompass the inherent many-sidedness of present-day philosophizing. What we have seen in their place is the emergence of exposition by anthology. Or, often as not, philosophy teachers nowadays simply create a do-it-yourself anthology via reading lists. Had the copying machine not already sprung into existence, people would have become driven to invent it. And the internet is only now beginning to make its potentially enormous impact in philosophical instruction. All of these innovations, organizational and technical combined, have carried philosophical systematization into a new and different era.

7. THE CONTEMPORARY SITUATION

Then, too, the new concern for combining a holistic approach with a particularistic care for detail has led philosophy—or, rather, philosophizing—to develop in a new direction. And it is instructive to take a closer look at the contemporary situation of the field as it emerges in the light of these considerations. For there can be no question that the development of the new style of micro-systematizing philosophizing has wrought a substantial sea-change in the nature of the enterprise.

Once upon a time, the philosophical stage was dominated by a small handful of greats and the philosophy of the day was what they produced. Consider German philosophy in the 19th century, for example. Here the philosophical scene, like the country itself, was a disjointed aggregate of principalities—presided over by such ruling figures as Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Schelling, Schopenhauer, and a score of other philosophical princelings. But in the present day, this “heroic age” of philosophy is a thing of the past.

The extent to which significant, important, and influential work is currently produced by academics outside the high-visibility limelight has not been sufficiently recognized. For better or for worse, in the late 20th century we have entered into a new philosophical era where what counts is not just a dominant elite but a vast host of lesser mortals. Great kingdoms are thus notable by their absence, and the scene is more like that of medieval Europe—a collection of small territories ruled by counts palatine and prince bishops. Scattered here and there in separated castles, a prominent individual philosophical knight gains a local following of loyal vassals or dedicated enemies. But no one among the academic philosophers of today manages to impose their agenda on more than a small fraction of the larger,
internally diversified community. Given that well over ten thousand academic philosophers are at work in North America alone, even the most influential of contemporary American philosophers is simply yet another—somewhat larger—fish in a very populous sea. If two or three percent of professional colleagues pay attention to a philosopher’s work, this individual is fortunate indeed.

The fact is that those bigger fish do not typify what the sea as a whole has to offer. They are certainly not the only contributions to the literature of the field. Be it for reasons of careerism (“Publish or perish”) or of authentic dedication, almost all of those numerous philosophers make some contribution to the literature of the field—mostly by way of journal contributions but frequently by way of books. (North America currently has over 150 philosophy journals.)

Consider, then, the situation in the U.S.A. Matters of philosophical history aside, some of the salient themes and issues with which American philosophers are grappling at the present time are

- logic in its non-classical dimension (modal, many-valued, “fuzzy”, “paraconsistent”, etc.);

- truth and meaning in mathematics and formalized languages;

- computer issues: artificial intelligence, “can machines think?”, the epistemology of information processing;

- the nature of physical reality in the light of modern physics (relativity, quantum theory, cosmology, etc.);

- rationality and its ramifications in practical and theoretical contexts;

- social implications of medical technology (abortion, euthanasia, right to life, medical research issues, informed consent);

- feminist issues in ethics, social polity, science, etc.;

- social and economic justice, distributive policies, equality of opportunity, human rights;
• applied ethics: ethical issues in the profession (medicine, business, law, etc.);

• the merits and demerits of scepticism and relativism regarding knowledge and morality;

• the nature of personhood and the rights and obligations of persons.

None of these issues were put on the problem-agenda of present concern by any one particular philosopher. None arose out of a reactive preoccupation with the fundamental concerns of some particular influential philosophical writer. None arose out of one specific philosophical text or discussion. Instead, they blossomed forth like the leaves of a tree in springtime, sprouting forth conveniently in scattered places under the formative impetus of the Zeitgeist of societal concern. And this holds also for the flourishing use of the case-study method in philosophy, a notable phenomenon for which no one philosopher can claim credit. (To a contemporary observer it seems like the pervasively spontaneous expression of the ethos of the age.) The nature of American philosophy today is such that for the most part new themes, ideas, and tendencies have come to prominence not because of the influential impact of some specific philosopher but because of the disaggregated individual efforts of a host of writers. Philosophical innovation today is generally not the work of pace-setting individuals but a genuinely collective effort that is best characterized in statistical terms.

A century ago, the historian Henry Adams lamented the end of the predominance of an elite oligarchy of the great and the good in American politics—as it had been in the days of the Founding Fathers. He regretted the emergence of a new order based on the dominance of masses and their often self-appointed and generally plebeian representatives. Control of the political affairs of the nation had slipped from the hands of a cultural elite into that of the unimposing, albeit vociferous representatives of ordinary people. In short, democracy was setting in. Exactly this same transformation from the preeminence of great figures to the predominance of mass movements is now, one hundred years on, the established situation in even so intellectual an enterprise as philosophy. In its present configuration, American philosophy reflects that “revolt of the masses” that Ortega y Gasset deemed characteristic of our era. This phenomenon manifests itself not only in politics and social affairs, but even in intellectual culture, including philosophy, where Ortega himself actually did not expect it.
what our century’s spread of affluence and education has done through its expansion of cultural literacy is to broaden the social base of creative intellectual efforts beyond the imaginings of any earlier time. A cynic might perhaps characterize the current situation as a victory of the troglodytes over the giants. In the Anglo-Saxon world at any rate—cultural innovation in philosophy as elsewhere is a matter of trends and fashions set by substantial constituencies that go their own way without seeking the guidance of agenda-controlling individuals. This results in a state of affairs that calls for description on a statistical rather than biographical basis. (It is ironic to see the partisans of political correctness in academia condemning philosophy as an elitist discipline at the very moment when professional philosophy itself has abandoned elitism and succeeded in making itself over in a populist reconstruction. American philosophy has now well and truly left “the genteel tradition” behind.)

Insofar as such a perspective is valid, some far-reaching implications follow for the eventual historiography of present-day philosophy. For it indicates a situation with which no historian of philosophy has as yet come to terms. In the “heroic” era of the past, the historian of the philosophy of a place and time could safely concentrate upon the dominant figures and expect thereby to achieve a certain completeness with respect to “what really mattered”. But such an approach is wholly unsuited to the conditions of the present era. Those once all-important “dominant figures” have lost control of the agenda. To accommodate the prevailing realities, the story of contemporary philosophy must be presented in a much more aggregated and statistically articulated format. And insofar as single individuals are dealt with as such, it must be done against such an enlarged background, for they now function as representative rather than as determinative figures, with the status of the individual philosopher selected for historical consideration generally downgraded into a merely exemplary (illustrative) instance of a larger trend. The historian of philosophy in its present-day configuration accordingly faces a task of selection entirely different in nature and scope from that which prevailed heretofore. The role of the individual in the historiography of the future will be as the subject of a footnote illustrative of the diffused and diversified general trends and tendencies of thought to which the main body of the text will have to be dedicated.

Overall, then, philosophy at the end of the century wears a different and distinctive look. It is once more traditionalistic in orientation and systematic in its interests and aspirations—concerned to examine the classical big questions of traditional philosophy in a detailed, comprehensive, and sys-
tematic manner. But it is no longer an intellectual enterprise of the “great thinker, great system” type familiar from the earlier tradition. Systems are nowadays constructed rather like ant-hills than like pyramids that are the product of centralized direction. Unprogrammed and disaggregated collaboration among many workers distributively addressing large and complex projects has become the order of the day. And in every area of philosophy a literature of vast scope and complexity has emerged whose mastery is beyond the capacity of single individuals. Systematization is at work, but rather at the collective level than at that of individual contributions. The programmatic format of present-day philosophizing is actually an uncoordinated unity spontaneously superimposed on a division of labor in matters of detail. What we have nowadays in philosophy is a matter of the unplanned and disaggregated collaboration of movements and schools of thought—not roadways constructed by a single engineer but paths created by many people, each crossing the terrain at issue on its own individual errands. Philosophizing at the end of the century thus has a new form—one which (like the science of the present) calls for collaborative teamwork, albeit of disaggregated and unorganized sort (unlike the science of the day).

And this is not necessarily a bad thing. After all, where is it written that philosophical systems must be compact and their production must come from the selected few—that they cannot be many-facedly complex and take the form of a complex, collective and collaborative intellectual, cultural, and scientific projects and positions?

Philosophy cannot stand still, seeing that what it must provide in the end is a cognitive accommodation of experience. For in the course of time the entire network of contexts within which human experience unfolds—alike cognitive, scientific, social, technical, or political—is all subject to change. And here, as elsewhere, new circumstances will call for new responses.

What is the philosophy of the 21st century going to be like? A famous jazz musician was once asked “Where is jazz going?” He replied, “If I knew that, we’d be there already.” But while it is indeed effectively impossible to say what those philosophers of the future will produce, it is possible to make a plausible conjecture about how they will produce it. They are likely for some time to proceed in much the same way as at present—by the same sort of disaggregated collaboration that we are currently witnessing.

Yet one thing seems sure. The dream of systemic understanding and holistic cognition is something that philosophers are unlikely ever to abandon
altogether. To be sure, it is unlikely in the extreme that there will soon be a restoration of the ambitious single-author systematizations the have characterized philosophical productivity in the past. Nevertheless the development of systems is nowadays once more a living venture in philosophy. But it has become multilateral and diffuse—no longer the product of single minds. Present-day philosophy systematizers can no longer manage on their own—any more than contemporary experimental scientists can. The systems to which they aspire may be akin to those of the earlier tradition, but the means of their construction must be configured differently. For those aspiring systematizers of the present era have to depend on effort—or even mere chance—to provide them with collaborators among their colleagues. In this regard, we simply “can’t go home again”.8

And the implications of this reality for philosophical hermeneutics are profound and ramified. Texts have to be construed against the background of their originating conditions. And the context in which present-day philosophical texts have to be studied and interpreted is something quite different from what is was in days of yore. A Leitmotiv of ongoingly connected relevancy links philosophical discussions across the ages. But as with the rivers of Heracleitus, new waters are ever streaming in.

NOTES


3 Not that a sizable percentage of people-at-large takes any interest in philosophy. In this context the democratization of the field is something quite different from its popularization.

4 “Philosophy needs no protection, no attention, no sympathy, no interest in the part of the masses. Its perfect uselessness protects it.” (The Revolt of the Masses [La rebelión de las masas], tr. by Anthony Kerrigan [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989], p. 73. This classic work originally appeared in Madrid in 1929.)

5 The General Editor of a first-rate survey of American humanistic scholarship wrote in the foreword to the volume on philosophy: “Not many of the names mentioned in these pages are recognizable as those of great intellectual leaders, and many are unknown even to an old academic hand like myself who has a fair speaking ac-