
BEYOND EXPERIENCE:
METAPHYSICAL THEORIES AND
PHILOSOPHICAL CONSTRAINTS
Second Edition

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For Sylvia, Diane, Efrem, Eva, Harry, Paul, and Lorna (Theresa).

And in loving memory of my father, Martin.

Presenting philosophy

“For whom is this book written?” The question has two answers, one short, the other rather long.

The short answer is that I have written this book for my two children, Diane and Efrem. At various times during their growing-up years, they asked me, “Dad, what is philosophy?” I explained to them that the question “What is philosophy?” has no easy answer; that they would need to take a course or read a book to find the answer. And thus it was, in part, a desire to answer their question that prompted my undertaking to write this book. But in the meantime, they have each gone on to university and have each taken philosophy courses. And so from their teachers, they both have learned what philosophy is. Indeed Diane has even acquired a postgraduate degree in philosophy. For them, then, this book has turned out to be not so much an introduction to philosophy per se as it is an entree to their father’s own thoughts about philosophy, it is, one might say, a testament of their Dad’s interests and reflections.

But this book was scarcely undertaken solely for my children. I also had a much wider audience in mind. And it is to you of this wider audience I now turn to make a few remarks explaining what I try to do herein.

In a way, the question “For whom is this book written?” is a remarkably *contemporary* question, very much the sort of question which arises naturally in the age where an education is no longer reserved for a privileged few. For nowadays it is the fashion when writing ‘learned books’ to address them either to specialists (cognoscenti) in one’s own specialized discipline, or to nonspecialists, often students, and in the latter case to present the material in the familiar form of a textbook.

If we look into historical practices, however, we see few instances of this kind of division of labor. Books were not written to be read only by specialists or only by tyros, but were addressed broadly to the educated and would-be-educated public alike. Plato, Aristotle, Aqu-

nas, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Frege, Russell, Sartre, Camus, Austin, etc., never – not one of them – ever wrote a *textbook*. They – all of them – wrote philosophy books, books which they intended to be read by persons interested in philosophy, never mind whether those readers were professional philosophers or lay readers. The philosophy textbook is pretty much a product of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It has, however, become so entrenched in the current teaching of philosophy that we often forget that it is an upstart and that it is possible – if one makes the effort and has the interest – to write philosophy both for one’s professional colleagues and for the interested lay reader. At least I hope it is still possible. Of course I may be wrong. Philosophy may have become so specialized, so technical, in recent decades that it is no longer possible to address the same book both to one’s professional colleagues and to the interested, educated adult reader. I hope this is not so.

The style of the bulk of the writings of Karl Popper gives one cause for some optimism. Many of his numerous articles and the greater part of his several books are read and enjoyed both by his professional peers and by interested readers who are far from being professional philosophers. His popularity is no accident. He is, after all, a fine and important philosopher. But there is a significant additional element as well, a craftsmanship about which I heard him speak often.

When I was a graduate student, I was fortunate to take a course from him. Time after time, Popper exhorted his students to try to write so clearly that virtually anyone could understand the material. He warned that if your presentation was so dense that it could be read (I would say “deciphered”) only by a learned colleague, then you should go back and rewrite it again and again until it was pellucidly clear. His own work, for the greatest part, really does exhibit the very virtue he urged on the rest of us. I have found his advice compelling and have tried to follow it and commend it to others. I will try here to write a book in the old-fashioned style. It is intended as an antidote to the modern textbook. I will try to make the material accessible and comprehensible to a wide audience. However, I will not condescend to simplify. Quite the contrary, some sections of this book have earlier been published as journal articles for professional colleagues.

Much – far too much, I would hazard – of recent philosophical writing apes the lamentable style of contemporary articles in physics and chemistry journals. Historically, scientists did not write in the compressed, antiseptic, manner currently favored in the scientific journals. In centuries past, much of the humanity of scientists, their disappoint-

ments, their triumphs, and their frailties, was obvious in their writings. Thus, for example, we find Count Rumford (Benjamin Thompson) positively delighting in the effect of his experiment (c. 1790) of heating water by friction (emphases are Rumford's own):

At 2 hours 20 minutes it was 200° [Fahrenheit]; and at 2 hours 30 minutes it ACTUALLY BOILED!

It would be difficult to describe the surprise and astonishment expressed in the countenances of the bystanders, on seeing so large a quantity of cold water heated, and actually made to boil, without any fire.

Though there was, in fact, nothing that could justly be considered as surprising in this event, yet I acknowledge fairly that it afforded me a degree of childish pleasure, which, were I ambitious of the reputation of a *grave philosopher*, I ought most certainly rather to hide than to discover. ([176], 15; gloss added¹)

(We will return in chapter 4, to examine Rumford's experiment in closer detail.)

Today, perhaps because of the sheer volume of scientific writings, most articles have been reduced to a kind of formula prose which simply tells what was done and the results of the experiment. Only those scientific magazines which are expressly written for the lay public (e.g. *Scientific American* and *Discover*) preserve any modicum of literary worth. But as regrettable as the situation has become in science, it is worse in philosophy. For in philosophy there are no magazines targeted for the public. And thus nonspecialists find themselves, year by year, further removed from the researches and writings of philosophers. This unhappy state of affairs can only be to the detriment of both the public and philosophers themselves.

Why do persons become philosophers? No one ever gets hired as a philosopher without years of preparatory training. No more so than do doctors or lawyers. Persons become philosophers because they are intensely interested in philosophical problems. And yet so little of this genuinely, deeply felt interest comes across in their professional writ-

1. Hereinafter, when I interpolate a gloss within a quotation I will not call explicit attention to the insertion. The square brackets alone will indicate my editorial elaboration. Also, see footnote 1, p. x.

ings. All sense of adventure, of personality, of struggle, and, yes, on occasion, of fun, is sucked out of most that is written in philosophy nowadays. Journal articles and books often are tortuously dry reading and are almost entirely in the third person, as if they had been written, not by living, breathing, feeling, human beings, but by disembodied oracles. Far too many authors, in trying to affect a modish kind of objectivity, end by writing a prose which is so painfully impersonal that it reads like a technical manual for the disassembly of a carburetor. One can read entire philosophy books and never once find therein the word “I” or “you”, as if these two comfortable English words were somehow vile subjective dissonances.

This book will be different. In the third sentence of this introductory chapter, I have already used the word “I”, as I will many, many times subsequently. And from time to time, I will use the word “you” too, remembering that I am writing this book to be read by interested persons, and not just to be soaked up by the silicon chips of the microcomputer on which I happened to have typed these words.

R.G. Collingwood’s aphorism “every new generation must rewrite history in its own way” ([51], 248) might equally well be said for philosophy. Not only do we each have a uniquely personal perspective from which we regard our world; there is also something of a cultural perspective, and certainly, too, something of a parochial perspective, especially if – as I do – one belongs to a certain school of thought. In my case, I am a product of an undergraduate degree in physics and a graduate degree in Anglo-American (so-called Analytic) philosophy. I make no apology for this mind-set: it is impossible to do philosophy without a mind-set. One cannot transcend all mind-sets and aspire to The Truth. That kind of Presuppositionless Objectivity is quite beyond the capabilities of human beings. All that we can do is to be honest about our own approach and to try to get as clear as we can about just what it is that we are doing.

Philosophy, like so many other twenty-first-century studies, has broadened its compass enormously. I am no polymath; I can only offer my own opinions, grounded in my own particular training and perspective. This book, like every other book in philosophy, however much some writers try to pretend otherwise, is a *personal* statement by its author. There are no authorities in philosophy. There are only gradations of plausibility.

These views explain why, then, I will try to do *two* things in this book. To be sure, I will devote much of what follows to exploring some traditional problems in metaphysics; I will review a variety of

theories that other philosophers have offered as solutions; and I will on occasion criticize these theories; and I will, too, sometimes offer my own ideas as to what solutions might be. But I will try to do something else as well, and this ‘something else’ accounts for the “Philosophical Constraints” which figures as the second part of the subtitle of this book.

I want to try to explain why philosophers disagree, why the seeming consensus which exists in something like, let us say, physics seems so often unattainable in philosophy. Many newcomers – particularly those used to the textbooks of public high schools, where all controversy and intellectual struggle have, deliberately and systematically, been expunged – are dismayed at the indecisiveness of so much of philosophy. “All those questions; never any answers” I have often heard some of my students complain. There is no disguising the fact: there is much disagreement in philosophy. But, as we shall see, there is much – or at least there is room for as much – disagreement in physics, chemistry, and biology, too. In chapter 4, I will argue that philosophy is not really any worse off in this regard than the so-called hard sciences. The difference is that the very existence of controversy itself is one of the central concerns of the philosophical enterprise, and thus tends to become spotlighted. But controversy is the fuel of any and every intellectual discipline. As this book progresses, I will try to explain the *nature* of philosophical controversy, or to be more exact, the aspects and parts of philosophical controversy familiar to me. Indeed, the very nature of controversy itself turns out to be a controversial topic within philosophy. Different philosophers have different accounts of the origins of, and the possibilities for resolving, controversy. And thus, to be perfectly frank, when I subsequently offer my views as to the nature of controversy – why it exists and what role it plays in the intellectual enterprise – I will not simply be presenting a settled matter of fact, but will, by that very attempt, be engaging in a piece of philosophizing which, like all philosophy, is itself a proper object for debate and analysis.

But before we begin our studies, allow me a cautionary note. Professional philosophers are constitutionally incapable of succumbing to the danger I am about to alert you to. But if you are new to philosophy, be careful. Philosophy ought not to be something that one acquires like a piece of purchased material goods. Philosophy ought to be acquired by struggling *yourself* with its problems and exploring a variety of proposed solutions looking for the ‘best answer’. For only

in the crucible of the clash of ideas can we hope to construct good theories.

If you find yourself interested in the questions I am about to pursue and find yourself attracted to the tentative answers I am about to offer to some of those questions, do not accept my own answers by default. The answers I proffer in this book (at least at the time of my writing this book) seem right to me. But if you, like me, find that these questions are fascinating, then you owe it to yourself not to accept any one person's answers – neither mine nor anyone else's – until you have savored and reflected on a variety of answers, even a variety of approaches. Then you can make up your own mind. In short, if it turns out that I have been privileged to introduce you to metaphysics and to philosophy, and if you find that you resonate – as some do – to these kinds of ideas, then I urge that you let this be only the first of many books you read on these subjects. For philosophy is, in the end, an attitude or a process of thought; it ought not to be regarded as a finished product.