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### *Thinking in Good Company*

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#### 1. Entering the Profession

There are many different routes into the profession of philosophy, so I'm going to start by telling you a little about mine, which was unusual in some respects. I come from a lower middle class, white collar family—my father was a bookkeeper—and I was the first member of my immediate family to graduate from a four-year college. All of my grandparents and my mother were immigrants from Denmark. My mother was eight years old when she came to the United States, and she did not speak a word of English. In those days, it apparently did not occur to anyone in the school system that a child in that position might need some help. They just stuck her in the first grade, where the other children laughed at her because she was older and bigger than they were and could not even speak English. By the time she entered high school she had caught up by skipping two grades, and she was good enough at English to be the editor of her high school's literary journal. She would have liked to go to college, but she was the daughter of a garbage collector, and there was no question of his spending money on college for a girl. High school was as far as my mother got. My father could have gone to college, under the G.I. Bill, when he returned from the war, but I don't think he even considered it. During the depression, he had left high school to go to California to pick fruit in order to supplement his family's income. When he returned, he took night courses in business at Northwestern and then attended a two-year college. He and my mother

married just as World War II began and then they didn't see each other for several years while my father fought overseas. When the war ended, they were anxious to start a family and begin their life together. Still, because of my mother's experiences, I grew up in a household where language mattered, literature mattered, books mattered. Every Saturday we went to the library and came home with an armload of books. The town I grew up in was a suburb of Chicago, but it called itself a village, and it did have some of the characteristics of a village. Here was one: I exhausted the resources of the children's library before I was considered old enough to use the adult library. So my mother simply told the librarians they were going to have to let me into the adult library early, and they did.

I was good at academics. Time had moved on since my mother's day, and lots of girls went to college, and my parents were more than ready to send me, if I wanted to go. But we did not live in that part of the social world where college is considered more or less inevitable. It was a real choice. And I decided that I did not want to go. Since no one in my immediate family had been to a regular four-year college, my picture of it was basically of another four years of high school, and my experience of high school did not make that seem attractive. I thought I knew exactly what I wanted to do instead, although I didn't know the word I am about to use. I wanted to be an autodidact. While in high school, I started to put that plan to work. I bought a set of "Great Books"—I still have them, in my office at Harvard—and started to plow through them. Among them were some works by Plato and Nietzsche, and when I read those, I knew that I was home. By that time, I had been thinking about philosophical problems, and occasionally even writing down what I thought. But I did not know that that's what I was doing, since I had no idea there was a discipline with a name where that's what you

did. I still didn't have any conception that you could make a living by doing philosophy, but it was still an exhilarating discovery just that it was *a thing*.

My parents said that if I wasn't going to college, I had to get some job training. So I enrolled in Moser Secretarial School in downtown Chicago. I never graduated, because I couldn't pass the speed typing test, which required you to type 60 words a minute for ten minutes with no more than three errors. I don't think I can do *anything* with no more than three errors. I did score an early feminist victory when I persuaded the school administration that we ought to be allowed to wear slacks rather than skirts to school when the temperature was below zero. When I had completed all the requirements except for that speed typing test, I just left and I got a job. I went to work as a secretary for the American Bar Association, right across the midway from the University of Chicago. The other young woman working in the office was the wife of a Chicago law student, and I became friendly with the couple. One result was that I began to form a different picture of what college would be like. At the same time, during this period, I was trying to teach myself philosophy, and becoming increasingly aware of how difficult the subject is. I began to realize that I needed teachers. So much for being an autodidact. These things came together, and all of a sudden I wanted desperately to go to college.

My parents and I knew nothing about fellowships and things like that, so we assumed that my options were limited to state schools in Illinois. It was midyear, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign was not accepting students at midyear that year, so I went to Eastern Illinois University. My parents were delighted that I was going to college, but, like the parents of many of you, they were not so sure about philosophy. So I told them that I was going to study library science as well as philosophy. And I actually did take one course in it,

quite an interesting course on children's literature. Eastern Illinois was a comfortable place for me to get used to this new world. I think there were only twelve philosophy majors, so we were close to each other and we got a lot of attention from the five or so professors. Still, after a couple of years I felt ready for a wider range of more demanding courses than you could get at Eastern, so I transferred to Urbana-Champaign.

The attention and help I got from my professors there was absolutely amazing. Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is a large school, but Dick Schacht, Dave Shwayder, B. J. Diggs, Lou Werner, and Tom Nickel, in philosophy, and Chip Burkhardt, in the History of Science, all had plenty of time for me, and made it clear that they did. Much as I loved the subject, it would never have occurred to me to try to go to graduate school without their encouragement. At that point in my life, I was exceedingly shy, and could certainly not picture myself as a college professor. To stand up and speak in front of a class seemed like something entirely beyond me. And the truth is, I never did decide to be a philosophy professor. It still seems a little unreal to me that that's what I did. What I decided, as I was finishing college, was that I wanted to go on studying philosophy, and the way to do that was to go to graduate school. Things just went on from there. At the point when I was applying to graduate school, the job market in philosophy was considered bad— although it is much worse now—and when you applied to a graduate program, the school sent you a letter that basically said, "Don't come, we can't guarantee a job." This did not worry me at all, because while I was in college, I had done temporary secretarial work during the summers, and several of the companies that used me as a temp had offered me a permanent position. I was a trained secretary, so I figured I could always find work.

I still remember the moment when I asked one of my professors where he thought I should apply to graduate school. When he said “Princeton,” I almost fell off my chair. In those days Harvard and Princeton were considered the two best programs, and I had no idea of aiming so high. My main interest was ethics, and this was 1973, so if I was going to aim high, of course I had to try my luck at Harvard. I had spent a fair portion of the previous year lying on the floor of my dorm room reading *A Theory of Justice* with rapt fascination. I thought it would be a dream come true to study with John Rawls. I was right.

## 2. My Own Career

Although it was long in the telling, the misadventure of my secretarial career took up less than two years of my life, training included. I had managed to get through high school in three and half years by taking extra classes, and I did college the same way, so when I went to graduate school, I was pretty much the same age as everyone else. I went to Harvard as a graduate student in 1974 and left in 1979. I did not finish my PhD until 1981, but in those days it wasn’t difficult to get a job before you were finished. My first job was teaching the Aristotle course at MIT while I was still a graduate student. Their regular classical philosophy professor had left suddenly, and Martha Nussbaum kindly recommended me to them. That was fascinating. My students—there were only six or eight of them—were nearly all young male physics students. They hated Aristotle’s *Physics*, which they saw as full of falsehoods, but when we got to the *Metaphysics* they were delighted, and said, “This is just like what we do.”

My first regular job was at Yale, where I stayed only one year. Yale at that time was torn apart by the conflict between so-called “analytic” and “continental” philosophers. Since I worked on Kant, I think I was regarded acceptable to both sides. The conflict was taken to

ridiculous extremes—to hear some of the people at Yale talk, you would think analytic philosophers knew nothing at all about the history of the subject and that continental ones had no facility for logic. I still remember going to the department office one morning to find an announcement in my mailbox telling me that the junior faculty had been disenfranchised from departmental votes. That was supposed to keep us from getting embroiled in the senior faculty's quarrels. I've never been able to figure out how that was politically possible, because the junior faculty had had the vote before, but we did not get to vote on the measure that disenfranchised us. The whole business did not prevent me from enjoying Yale, where the students were wonderful, and Harry Frankfurt and Ruth Marcus extremely supportive.

The following year, I moved to the University of California at Santa Barbara for personal reasons. Things did not work out for me there and I soon decided to leave. I went on the job market again in my third year and had a number of offers. Some of my colleagues at Santa Barbara decided they should try to keep me, so they put me up for tenure. This was two years after I had received my Ph.D. They got as far as sending out for letters, and the department recommended me for tenure to the university, although not with the unanimous support of the philosophy faculty. We will never know what the administration would have done with the case, because in this instance I managed to make what I still regard as a good decision. It occurred to me that if I actually got tenure at Santa Barbara in my third year out, I might find it difficult, psychologically and professionally, to leave. So I asked the department to stop the process before the issue was resolved, and they did.

I then moved to the University of Chicago—in 1983—where I taught for eight very happy years. Chicago is one of the most resolutely, thoroughgoingly intellectual places I have ever been. The undergraduates there were generally speaking from a lower place in the social

hierarchy than the ones I would later encounter at Harvard, and they were hungrier. Many Chicago undergraduates strongly identified as intellectuals, while for the Harvard students, being an intellectual is just one of many ways of being interesting. The Chicago students used to wear a tee shirt that said “Eat, Drink, and be Merry, for tomorrow you may live in Plato’s Republic,” and I think most of them knew what it meant.

I spent 1989-1990 in California, visiting for a semester at Berkeley and two quarters at UCLA. Both were attractive departments. But as a result of the visit, I decided that I was committed to Chicago. So I returned to Chicago, and bought the most beautiful apartment in Hyde Park.

Six months later, I got an offer from Harvard. In those days, a senior offer from Harvard came out of the blue—you were not told you were under consideration. I realized later that Joel Feinberg had had made an effort to tip me off, but he worded it so carefully that I did not understand him. One night I was rather dejectedly watching the news, waiting for the announcement of our involvement in the Gulf War, which was expected to come that evening. The phone rang and it was Warren Goldfarb, calling to offer me a job at Harvard. People were afraid to fly during the Gulf War, and when I went back to Cambridge on my courtship visit, I was one of only three people on a huge jet plane.

The choice between Chicago and Harvard was a hard one. I loved Chicago, but Harvard was very strong in moral and political philosophy. Rawls was retiring, but Tim Scanlon was there, and a lot of the best graduate students in moral and political went there. I went to Harvard, and was only tempted to leave once, when I was offered the White’s Chair at Oxford in 1995. I had planned to retire more or less this week, but I didn’t like any of the options for teaching that the pandemic left us with, so I retired from teaching in June of 2020.

I've found every part of the job to be rewarding in its way. I've especially enjoyed advising graduate students on their dissertations. So I'd like to take this occasion to thank the students who have worked with me for the great pride and pleasure that working with them has given me. They are among the good company to which the title of this lecture refers.

### 3. Diversity in Philosophy

I've read most of the other Dewey lectures, and almost everyone has something to say about the lack of diversity in the profession. This will be the right moment for me to talk about that, because next I'm going to talk about Rawls, and among his other achievements, Rawls had a substantial influence on the success of many women in my generation in philosophy.

Like nearly everyone else in the profession, I have spent my life being perplexed and frustrated by the fact that more women do not go into philosophy, and that conscious efforts to identify and overcome the problem have met with so little success. During my time in the profession, the position of women in philosophy has changed enormously, but the percentage of women in the profession has not changed very much at all. I believe that among professors, it's still under a third. Let me give you a sense of the way our position has changed. When I first went on the job market, in the late nineteen seventies, and I was doing campus visits, if the school I was visiting had a graduate program, I would ask about their women students. At several places the response was something like, "We did have a woman a couple of years back, I wonder what happened to her? Did she get married or what?" There were almost no women on the senior faculty in the more prestigious departments, so that later, in 1991, when I was offered a senior position at Harvard, it was regarded as something of an event. Yet by the time I became chair at Harvard, in 1996, there were women professors in most of the more well-



regarded programs. As most of you know, the idea that being chair of an academic department is holding a position of power and influence is largely imaginary. Still, it seemed notable that around the same time I became the chair at Harvard, there were women taking the chair of a number of good departments. I think it was around the same time that Susan Wolf became chair at Johns Hopkins and Barbara Herman at UCLA, for instance. More importantly, in those years the work of women who did philosophy began to be taken more seriously. In all of these ways, women have become much more central, much less peripheral, to the subject since the 1970s and 1980s. But the *percentage* of professional philosophers who are women has hardly gone up at all. I am not going to offer you any hypotheses about why this is, because you have already heard them all, and I have nothing original to say on the subject. Of course, the numbers are even worse for people of color and the members of other minorities. Once, when I was the chair at Harvard, a dean who was in charge of diversity issues called me to talk about the representation of various minorities in philosophy. At one point, she asked me what percentage of philosophers were Native Americans. I said, "I'll have to get back to you on that one," and telephoned the APA. After talking to them, I called the dean back. I said, "The APA thinks there are five Native American professors in philosophy." She said, "Five percent?" I said, "No, five."

Still, when I went to Harvard as a graduate student, the underrepresentation of women in philosophy wasn't a big issue for me. For one thing, Harvard was not one of those places I described a few minutes ago, where people could only vaguely remember having a woman graduate student once. A third of the graduate students in philosophy at Harvard then were women, and that had been true for some time. There were also women on the faculty. During

my time as a student, Martha Nussbaum was a junior professor there and Susan Wolf held one of Harvard's temporary positions, a so-called folding chair.

And the truth is that in graduate school I met with much more class bias than sexism. In those days admissions to programs like Harvard was not as democratic as it is now. Although Harvard accepted two people from the University of Illinois in my class, that was unusual. At first some of my fellow graduate students thought it extremely funny to say to me: "So, you're from the University of Illinois. Isn't that the place that has a *cornfield* right on campus?" It was indeed the place—the cornfield is an experimental field run by the Agriculture department—but some of my fellow graduate students just found this hilarious. One of the older male graduate students once took me aside and said, as if sympathetically, "Coming from Illinois, you are probably extremely intimidated by the fact that most of the other students here are from places like Princeton." I wish I could report that I responded with some witty rejoinder, but it's been 48 years and I'm still trying to think of one.

#### 4. Studying with John Rawls

I wanted to talk about diversity issues before I talked about studying with Rawls, because although Rawls's most important influence on philosophy was his ground-breaking work in political philosophy, he was also enormously influential as a teacher and advisor. Among his most notable accomplishments in that capacity is the number of women who were destined to become well known in philosophy on whose dissertation committees he served. Other women who worked with Rawls either as main advisor or as a committee member include—I'll list them alphabetically—Elizabeth Anderson, Claudia Card, Hannah Ginsborg, Jean Hampton, Barbara Herman, Marcia Homiak, Sharon Lloyd, Michelle Moody-Adams,

Susan Neiman, Onora O’Neill, Adrian Piper, Sybil Schwartzbach, Nancy Sherman, and Erin Kelly. Why was Rawls so successful as a teacher and advisor to women? Some of it of course was for the same reasons that he was successful as an advisor in general. As we all know, one of the more striking differences among the members of our profession is the character and quality of their influence on students. Some brilliant intellectuals nevertheless fail to attract students; some seem to overshadow and cripple them; some demand that their students sign on to their own research program, and produce clones. Jack Rawls managed to inspire his students without inspiring imitation in the bad sense; to be supportive without easing up on standards; and to evince a respect for the minds of his students which helped us to develop a respect for our own minds. But there was also something else. During the period which I am talking about, the nineteen seventies, women encountered a variety of attitudes among their teachers and senior colleagues. Some of them were old-fashioned—a little flirtatious, a little patronizing, a little uncomfortable with the relationship. Some of them were aggressively committed to helping women students to flourish. They meant well, but you were never allowed to forget that you were a woman, and that they thought of you as someone who needed encouragement. Rawls was neither of those things. He was like someone from the future—it really did not seem to make any difference to him that a student was a woman. I believe that one reason that women flourished working with Rawls is that we were allowed to feel that we were philosophers, not “women philosophers.”

##### 5. Thinking in Rawls’s Company

Rawls usually taught two lecture courses every year, one on moral philosophy and one on political philosophy. The political philosophy course was the one in which he developed

the ideas of *A Theory of Justice* and the other works that followed it. During the time I was at Harvard, the moral philosophy course evolved from an eclectic course, often devoted to issues in moral psychology, to a course in the history of ethics. Many of the graduate students who studied with Rawls ended up doing history-based work in ethics rather than political philosophy. This may have been partly because Rawls's own achievement in political philosophy was so overwhelming. It wasn't something you wanted to compete with. But I think it was even more because Rawls's attitude to the history of the subject was so inspiring.

As I suppose most of you know, the influence of the analytic movement on moral philosophy during the early years of the twentieth century was in some ways unfortunate. Moral philosophers in the early part of the twentieth century did what we now call "metaethics" in the most narrow sense, and they deliberately refrained from engaging in normative theory or practical ethics. As the century went on, against the background of two world wars, the social and political turmoil of the 1960's, and the war in Vietnam, this metaethical focus seemed increasingly scholastic and unsatisfying. In the early 70s, Bernard Williams complained that "Contemporary moral philosophy has found an original way of being boring, which is by not discussing moral issues at all."<sup>1</sup>

In these conditions the publication of *A Theory of Justice* was a revelation. Rawls showed how the methods of analytic philosophy could be brought to bear on important political and economic questions, with direct practical implications. It was read not only by philosophers, but by lawyers and economists and political and social scientists. One of philosophy's old ambitions, the ambition to make headway with questions about what is just and good and right, was suddenly alive and kicking again.

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972), p. x.

Furthermore, Rawls had done this by looking to the classics of the tradition of moral and political philosophy for help. This was important because it was common at that time, and in some quarters still is, for philosophers to suppose that doing philosophy, and doing the history of philosophy, are two quite different activities, which lead to two quite different approaches to the classics of the subject. In fact, when I first went on the job market, several interviewers asked me, with obvious perplexity, which of these two things I thought I was doing. According to those who think of things this way, the historian of philosophy is primarily a scholar, whose aim is to reconstruct the philosopher's position as exactly as possible, or, if it developed and changed over time, to chart these changes accurately. On the other hand the systematic philosopher, as opposed to the historian of philosophy, is interested in assessing the correctness of the view. Systematic philosophers were supposed to be committed to the principle that if a view depends upon implausible premises or leads to inconsistencies, it should be—in Hume's famous words—committed to the flames.<sup>2</sup> Some twentieth-century philosophers believed that the classics of our subjects fit that description, and should be set aside. Some still do.

Rawls's attitude towards the tradition was very different from this. In his courses in the history of moral philosophy, Rawls always started by saying: "We are not going to criticize these thinkers, but rather to interpret their positions in ways that make the best possible sense of them, and to see what we can learn from them." I had been exposed to this attitude before, since my undergraduate ethics teacher, B. J. Diggs, taught an ethics course in which we studied

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<sup>2</sup> David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section 12, Part 3, p. 165. In *David Hume: Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding the Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Reprinted from the 1777 edition with Introduction by L. A. Selby-Bigge; third edition with text revised and notes by P. H. Nidditch. Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1975.

Aristotle, Hume, and Kant, guided by the idea that we had important things to learn from all of them. Rawls's philosophical work demonstrated the fruitfulness of this approach. His early papers have long footnotes in which he comments on the historical sources of the views he is discussing. By the time he wrote *A Theory of Justice*, the influence of his work in the history of ethics on his own ideas is not quite as explicitly present in the text, but it is there. As Rawls himself says in the Preface to *A Theory of Justice*, he turned to “the traditional theory of the social contract, as represented by Locke, Rousseau, and Kant” to construct an alternative to utilitarianism.<sup>3</sup> Rawls had seen in the history of our subject a *resource* for dealing with contemporary philosophical problems. I think it was this fact, this possibility, that captured the imagination, and shaped the careers, of many of Rawls's graduate students.

## 6. More Good Company

I have said that while I was a graduate student Rawls changed his moral philosophy course to a course in the history of ethics. In 1977, he devoted the course entirely to Kant, and I was his teaching fellow. So it fell to my lot to try to explain Kant's ethics and what Rawls was saying about Kant's ethics to the undergraduates. Professionally, I was born in that course and I have lived in it ever since. I have taught a course on Kant's ethics pretty much every other year for the whole of my career, and when I returned to Harvard in 1991, I did it under Rawls's old course number, Philosophy 168. I guess I am still Rawls's teaching fellow.

From the time I first started studying philosophy, I have been most attracted to the work of Aristotle and Kant, and tried to work from them. There are two reasons for this. One is that I have always been concerned about the problem of how there can be determinate

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<sup>3</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition, 1999, p. xviii.

ethical truth, how ethics can be “objective” as people often put it. I reject substantive realist accounts which try to ground ethical truth in values or reasons which are supposed to exist independently of us. Aristotle and Kant both ground ethics in practical reason and this seems to me to be a better solution. The other reason is that Aristotle and Kant both locate their ethical theories within complete philosophical systems, essentially theories of everything. They are committed to the thesis that your views about ethics are connected in all sorts of important ways with your views about everything else, and their work is responsible to that fact. To me this seems both right and wonderful. The first few drafts of my dissertation, written under the guidance of Rawls and Martha Nussbaum, were an ambitious attempt to compare and contrast these two attempts to ground ethics in practical reason. Eventually Rawls told me that the project was too unwieldy and that I should choose one of them, either Kant or Aristotle. The final product was a considerably more modest attempt to explain why we should regard the categorical imperative as a principle of reason.

Besides continuing to work on Kant and Aristotle, I’ve also done quite a bit of work on Hume. In fact the project I carry out in *The Sources of Normativity* originated in the material that is now in the chapter on Hume. Another thinker I’ll mention as having a big influence on me is Plato, although that influence took longer to bear fruit. For many years my attitude towards Plato’s works, especially the *Republic*, was much like the attitude that many religious people have towards the Bible. I regarded it with great reverence, but I did not see how to put it to any practical use. When I wrote *Self-Constitution*, however, I did finally find a way to use the *Republic*, since I was able to exploit Plato’s comparison between the city and the soul to discuss the role of self-unification in the constitution of agency. Among more recent philosophers, besides Rawls, I have been most influenced by the work of Thomas Nagel and

Bernard Williams. Among other things, they were also philosophers who found interesting ways of drawing on historical figures.

## 7. Why Approach Philosophy Through Its History?

Why would anyone want to work in this way, working from these historical figures? Earlier I mentioned the prevalence of a view according to which you are either doing philosophy or doing the history of philosophy, and those are supposedly two different things. If you are doing history of philosophy, you try to figure out exactly what a past philosopher's view is. If you are doing systematic philosophy, you try to figure things out for yourself. You might read the classics to see if what they say is plausible or implausible from our point of view. But you might also decide that the problems the philosophers of the past were addressing were simply not the same as our problems, and so that the classics are of only peripheral philosophical interest to us.

I think this bifurcated view of the subject is totally wrong. In the first place, I think there is a core set of philosophical concerns that all of the books we recognize as philosophy are engaged with. These concerns are ineffable, not in the sense that they cannot be expressed at all, but in the sense that they are expressed in different ways in different historical periods and traditions, and there is no privileged or right way to describe them. But there are common concerns at work in all philosophy, and if you work at it, you can get sufficiently inside of a past philosopher's view to recognize the point at which he is responding to the same basic concern that is bothering you.

The second thing that is wrong with the bifurcation is the idea that there is some fixed thing that a past philosopher thought, or maybe a series of fixed things if his view evolved,



and the historian's job is just to describe that correctly. A complex philosophical system is not primarily a set of dogmas. It's a living, breathing, evolving entity with a certain point of view, and its own distinctive method of solving problems and adapting to new circumstances as it goes on, in much the same way a living creature does. And the moment at which the philosopher who originated that system stops working on it—because he or she dies, or gets ill, or just runs out of steam—that moment is usually arbitrarily related to what's going on in the philosophical system, in the same terrible way that death is so often arbitrarily related to what's going on in a creature's life.

Let me try to pull these two thoughts together and make all this a little more concrete. Sometimes someone comes to me and says, "look, in this paper you said so-and-so, but in that paper you said such-and-such, and those claims contradict each other, they can't both be right." Sometimes it's because I've changed my mind, but more often it's because there's a contradiction or a tension in my ideas, something I haven't noticed or worked out yet, and now I see that I've got to resolve it. Now, I could get killed by a bolt of lightning at exactly that moment, and then there would be no fact of the matter about what Korsgaard's view on the disputed point is. There might even be several interestingly different ways you could develop my story from there. The great philosophers of the tradition were brilliant thinkers, but they were still just people. In most cases, they didn't stop working when they did because they were done, they stopped working because they were interrupted. If the philosophies they left behind them are like living creatures with a point of view and a distinctive method of going on, then they can be resuscitated, and put to work on new problems that their originators never considered. Why do this rather than just figuring everything out for yourself? A better question is why we should figure out everything for ourselves when our predecessors have

already figured out so much. Of course, one of the reasons I work from these established theories rather than trying to figure everything out for myself from scratch is that I think they are brilliant, insightful, fruitful, views. It is an exquisite pleasure to feel that you've got far enough inside of a great philosopher's mind to see some of what he or she saw. Studying the great philosophers of our tradition is a way of thinking in *very* good company.

#### 8. Thinking in Kant's Company

In spite of my admiration for him, for the first few years of my post-dissertation writing life, I did not quite think of myself as a Kantian. It wasn't that I thought Kantianism was wrong; I just wasn't fully committed. Instead, I thought it was worth seeing how far you could keep generating useful and plausible results by interpreting and developing Kant's ideas. One day, however, I realized that I had more or less talked myself into it. At the point at which I began to think of myself as agreeing with Kant, disagreeing with him became much more fraught. I know that Kant was a very smart guy, and therefore that when I disagree with him, there's a good chance that I'm that one who's wrong. Yet sometimes there is just no way to avoid it.

So far, I have found two main areas of disagreement. First, Kant is sometimes careless in his handling of the notion of action. This is unsurprising, for until the mid-twentieth century, philosophers did not give much specific attention to the notion of action, and nearly everyone handled it carelessly. Actions are supposed to be the things that agents choose, but does the agent choose to do a certain act for a certain purpose, or does she just choose the act, the purpose having been thrust upon her, say by the strength of her desires? Actions are supposed to be the things that are, in the first instance, right or wrong, but when we talk about

an action in that sense, do we mean to include both the act done and the purpose for which it is done as parts of the action, or do we just mean the act that is done? Is it wrong to “say-something-untrue” or is what’s wrong to “say-something-untrue-in-order-to-deceive” or is what’s wrong to “say-something-untrue-knowing-that-you-will-deceive,” whether deceiving is your purpose or not? What is wrong is the action, but how much of all this is included in the action when we deem it wrong?

Relatedly, Kant sometimes writes as if there could be actions governed only by hypothetical imperatives, but that cannot be right. On the best interpretation of Kant’s theory, the end is part of the action, part of the maxim on which the agent chooses to act. Hypothetical imperatives don’t tell us to act on our desires, they tell us to take the means to our ends whatever they are. According to Kant, you can’t act without an end, so some other principle must be at work in order to determine the end. There is no such thing as acting just on a hypothetical imperative.

Then again, according to Kant, actions are supposed to be either free or unfree, autonomous or heteronomous. But if an action is supposed to be a movement determined by the agent herself, rather than by forces working in her or on her, how can an action be unfree and still *be* an action at all? Sometimes the problems created by these unclarities are easily resolved by cleaning up the text, but some of them go right to the heart of Kant’s system. I tried to address some of these issues in *Self-Constitution*.

Another thing I think Kant was wrong about is his view of the moral standing of non-human animals, the issue I took up in *Fellow Creatures*. I’ve been a vegetarian for almost the whole of my adult life, since I was 24, and became a vegan more recently. Kant’s views about animals are well-known, so over the years people have often asked me how my attitude

towards animals and my Kantianism fit together. I was confident that they did, but I did not really start trying to explain how that might work until 2005, when I decided to take it as my subject for the Tanner Lecture at Michigan. The result was *Fellow Creatures*. In that book I advanced a theory of the good that is more Aristotelian than Kantian, and that's what I'm working on now.

## 9. Practical Philosophy

*Fellow Creatures* is partly a work in practical philosophy. Another practical issue I've written several papers about is when it is permissible to tell lies. This kind of philosophical work—work on directly practical issues—is in my view some of the most difficult work philosophy has to offer. I've always rejected the idea that metaethics, normative ethical theory, and practical ethics are things that you can do separately. People sometimes call practical ethics “applied ethics.” That phrase evokes a certain picture: It's as if someone doing normative ethical theory might establish a principle, and then someone else might pick that principle up and apply it to problems, without knowing much about the normative theory from which it came. I don't believe that's right. The concepts in terms of which the principle is formulated have their home in the theory that generated it, and the theory that generated it determines a lot about the correct use and implications of those concepts. Sometimes this works in obvious ways because the concepts themselves are technical and specific to the theory. You have to know what Kant meant by “end-in-itself” before you can know what's involved in the duty of treating someone as an end in itself. But sometimes the tie to theory is less obvious. In some theories, which we might characterize as Platonistic, the concepts are meant to function as ideals, whose application to objects is always a little aspirational. In other theories, especially

more empiricist ones, the concepts are actually meant to fit the contours of the natural objects to which they apply. Suppose there is a principle that says we must respect the choices of adults. In a theory whose concepts are idealizing, what that means is that we must respect the choices of people of a certain age whether they fully exhibit all the properties of an adult or not. In a theory whose concepts are more naturalistic, what it means is that you must treat people in a certain way *if* you decide they actually have whatever properties you suppose define an adult. Again, some concepts have unexpected dimensions. In *Fellow Creatures*, I wrote about the difference it makes to certain practical problems whether you regard a person as the atemporal subject of a life that is rolled out in time, or whether you regard the person as someone whose existence is itself temporal and coincident with her life in time. Kant's theory involves the first, atemporal conception of persons. For all these reasons, you cannot do practical ethics well if you simply try to leave theory behind.

#### 10. Problems in the Profession

I now want to say a little about how the profession has evolved since I've been in it. I am going to sound the alarm about this question, and I will not be the first Dewey Lecturer to do that by a long shot. For most of my career, philosophers prided themselves on maintaining a higher standard than most of the humanities. We published less than people in other areas, but we thought what we published was higher in quality. We firmly held out against the idea that people should publish a book before tenure. Young philosophers, we thought, should give their ideas a preliminary airing by publishing journal articles and benefitting from the response. A book could come later when the view was developed in light of those responses, if indeed a book was warranted at all. You should write a book only if you had

something rather big to say. We held over-professionalization in contempt, as something vulgar, and told our graduate students not to think about publishing, but to concentrate on making their dissertations as good as possible. Maintaining this position involved fighting a constant war against deans who measure things in terms of quantity and tend to take books as the unit of achievement, but we fought that battle successfully for a fairly long time.

But for some years now we have been losing that battle, and the cost is very high. Young people are expected to produce an absurdly large number of papers, preferably published in refereed journals, in order to get tenure, or even in order to get jobs. Some people even try to publish papers in order to get into graduate school. The papers are supposed to be blind reviewed, and these days many referees for journals require that papers should respond to the extant literature on the topic, whether responding to the extant literature enhances the author's argument in some way or not. Because the sheer mass of the literature is growing exponentially, people draw the boundaries of their specializations more and more narrowly, both in terms of subject matter and in terms of time. The extant literature necessarily becomes the recent literature, which is a philosophically arbitrary category. Big, systematic philosophy of the sort we find in Kant and Aristotle, philosophy that is responsible to the ways in which one's views in one area fit in with one's views about everything else, has become nearly impossible, because someone trying to do that kind of work would supposedly have to know the literature in too many different areas.

These changes are not making philosophy better. Pressuring everyone to publish more does not make the work better, say by producing a healthy competition. Instead, it produces an increase in the number of journals, ready with open arms to publish all these papers. I also have some doubts about how helpful the system of peer review is in philosophy. For one

thing, philosophy is not like the sciences, where there's a fairly widely accepted method, and your peers can check whether you applied that method correctly or not. In philosophy, our methods themselves are as much up for discussion as anything else. But whether you agree with that or not, increased expectations about how much people should publish is undercutting the value of the peer review system. Too many people trying to publish too much means that the journals have to find too many referees, and cannot limit themselves to recognized experts in the subject. And of course on the other side, it means that many philosophers get a burdensome number of requests to referee articles.

For most of my career, nobody thought that an invited contribution should somehow count less than a peer-reviewed one, say when reviewing a tenure case. And once people were well-established in the profession, they sometimes got enough invitations so that they could place a lot of their work without much outside review. I don't see that as, in itself, a problem. Rather, the problem with this way of doing things is that it can help to foster the existence of an old boy network, which may arbitrarily exclude women, people of color, and people from less prestigious schools from getting a hearing.

There is no getting around the fact that the people who are established in an academic field at any given moment have the power to determine a lot about what happens next. That fact is not regrettable. That power is abused when, consciously or unconsciously, it is used to re-enforce an old boy network. But it is also abused when, consciously or unconsciously, peer review is used to exercise too much content-control over what gets published. Forcing authors to respond to the recent literature is an example of that. Of course if you don't want to respond to a reader's comments, you are free to try your luck at another journal. But for an untenured person who is required to publish a substantial quantity of papers in order to be eligible for

tenure, there's a limit to that freedom. Peer review can be used as a way to enforce a kind of conformity that is not appropriate to our subject. I take it seriously that philosophy is a subject in the humanities, or as one might say on the "Arts" side of "Arts and Sciences." Like artists, we go for expressing universal truths, but in an individual voice. I think that many young people in philosophy right now feel that they are not being allowed to find and express their individual voices.

### 11. The Audience of Philosophy

There's a lot I could say about all this, but the other thing I wanted to talk about is the effect of these developments on philosophical writing. It's a notorious fact that a lot of philosophical writing is awful. This is not a new problem; it's one that has been with us for a long time. But I think over-professionalization is making it worse. To understand why, I think we have to understand why philosophical writing tends to be bad in the first place.

I first began to think about this when I began to go around giving colloquium talks in other departments. Often I would meet philosophers whom I had only known in print before. And I was constantly surprised to find that in their questions to me, many of these philosophers seemed more imaginative, more speculative, more playful in their thinking, than they appeared to be in print. Was this just because they were more willing to go out on a limb when they were talking about someone else's ideas? Or does the very act of committing your ideas to paper somehow clip your wings?

I believe that much of the trouble with philosophical writing springs from the author's failure to strike up the right kind of relationship with his reader, his audience. Above all, much philosophical writing is *defensive*. Many philosophers try to write in what you might call perfectly



true sentences. A perfectly true sentence already contains all the qualifications it would need to make it perfectly true. It is unassailable. But it is often therefore unintelligible. What you should do is write something that is clear, and striking, and makes an immediately vivid impression on the mind, so that the reader can get hold of it. Then you can add the qualifications later. That's more like the way we think, and it's the way we should write. Why would someone try to write in perfectly true sentences? It's because he's afraid of his reader, whom he thinks of as ready to pounce. He thinks if the reader catches him saying something that isn't unassailable, then for sure he is going to get assailed. Actually, the opposite is true. If your reader knows that what you say needs qualification, he now has a narrative expectation. He is waiting to see if the needed qualifications are about to come. You have his attention, so you have made him a better reader.

The current state of the profession exacerbates this kind of defensiveness. When the first hurdle your paper has to pass is a conference or journal referee, it is natural to start thinking of that referee as your audience. And then defensiveness can actually seem warranted, since the referee probably really is looking for reasons to accept or reject your paper, and not just trying to understand you.

Another feature of the contemporary landscape that leads to bad philosophical writing is the yearly conference on the same subject, attended by all the same people. When you start thinking of the participants of your yearly conference as your audience, the chance that you will become unintelligible to anyone else are extremely high, for you are tempted not to explain anything that your yearly conference members already understand. In this way, philosophy is becoming increasingly esoteric. That's the last thing philosophy should be, because philosophy

is not a subject. It's a discipline, designed to address the various forms of philosophical perplexity to which any reflective human being is subject.

Philosophy is very hard, but it is not inevitable that philosophy should be esoteric; we just need to keep in view a certain conception of our reader. Our reader, our proper audience when we write philosophy, is not a journal referee, looking for a reason to reject our paper. Our reader is not a harsh philosophical critic, eager to catch us out in contradiction. Our reader is not someone who is unwilling to entertain a surprising hypothesis long enough to see where it goes. Our proper audience in philosophy is a reflective human being who is puzzled and confounded by her own condition, and who seeks understanding, meaning, and moral clarity. Philosophy is so difficult that we are afraid to try to address ourselves to readers conceived simply as human beings prone to philosophical perplexity. But if you think about it, you'll realize that you understand the needs of that reader, because that reader is you. This is why I believe that when we write philosophy, we should shut out the inner voices of the journal referee and the harsh philosophical critic and the impatient skeptic. Instead, we should try write things that we ourselves would find it rewarding to read. Only then do we have any hope at all of reaching the readers to whom philosophy should aim to speak.

## 12. Philosophy Young and the Old

From my point of view, the most heartbreaking feature of the contemporary philosophical landscape is that some very talented young people are leaving the profession, or being driven out of it, because they want to produce work more slowly and reflectively, and to produce work more truly their own than they can under current conditions. Or worse, some

young philosophers are coming to think of *themselves* simply as hot young professionals whose business is to crank out as many published papers as possible.

I enjoyed being a young philosopher, and I want young philosophers now to enjoy it too. There is a kind of freedom to philosophical writing that is not like anything else, and it is, or should be, exhilarating when you first find yourself doing it. And to end this talk back on a more positive note, I enjoy being an old philosopher too. In fact, one of the things I have always loved about philosophy is that so many of the great philosophers of the past did their best work when they were old. That means that we can always hope that our best work is still ahead of us. So on we go.