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SOME PRECONDITIONS
OF UNIVERSAL PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUE

ABSTRACT

Our own era is widely viewed as a golden age of intellectual tolerance when compared with the persecutions of yesteryear. But in fact, this tolerance serves to mask a fundamental indifference of one perspective to another. Each world view is seen as a personal opinion, walled off from others and immune to challenge or alteration by them. This article blames the current situation in part on the triumph of critical philosophy since Kant. In closing, several concrete and even whimsical proposals are made for remedying the situation and restoring a more wild and fruitful form of intellectual combat of a kind that no longer exists.

Key words: analytic philosophy; continental philosophy; critical philosophy; intolerance; metaphysics; tolerance.

The Middle Ages are widely remembered as a period of rampant intolerance in intellectual history. Minute subtleties of theological dogma served as grounds for harassment and excommunication. The solemn edicts of bishops were followed by public executions, with Dante and other rebels driven across Europe in bitter exile. Polemics against “the Moor” and “the Turk” went hand in hand with outbreaks of violence against Jewish neighborhoods. The mood of the Renaissance can be painted in much the same way: Campanella spent most of his career in a dungeon; Bruno was gagged and burned following his betrayal to the Inquisition. In our time, the situation has changed. Nobody reading this paper stands a realistic chance of ever being murdered for their philosophical ideas. Traces of this past only come to our attention when Khomeini orders the death of Salman Rushdie, who hides from the clerics with the help of 1990s British police officers—a grotesque historical collage. At my home institution in Egypt, we encounter milder versions of this tradition that the West hopes to leave behind. Several faculty members have had literary works banned from use in their seminars, while a younger colleague, an American convert to Islam,
narrowly escaped a farwa from religious authorities in response to his remarks in the classroom. While I join with my peers in regretting these incidents, I would like to suggest that there is a silver lining to all of these infamous occurrences. Although intellectual persecution is usually the result of stupid authoritarian behavior, it nonetheless suggests an atmosphere in which the consequences of ideas are taken seriously. In this paper, then, I would like to describe a sense in which all of these persecutors are closer to the ideal model of universal dialogue than we in the tolerant and apathetic West. What we can take from them is not their intolerance, but their sincerity.

It is widely believed that the present day is a golden age of cross-cultural ferment, one in which imperialism is falling and all world cultures emerge onto the stage with equal dignity and new opportunities for their voices to be heard. Anyone in Western academia issuing blanket denunciations of Hinduism or African medical history is now widely (and justly) accused of being a bigot or a fool. Only a clumsy scholar would ever be caught dead appealing to the innate, essential character of the Carthaginians or Scythians as an explanation of their historical fate. As opposed to the former tendency to heap all praise upon the victors, it has now become even fashionable to devote one's career to studying minor figures or cultures. But is this really a golden age for the interbreeding of world philosophies? Clearly, it is not. There is now much more room in the contemporary university for enthusiasts of Islam, East Asian philosophy, African philosophy, and Tibetan Buddhism than there used to be. But these are treated only as noble sub-disciplines, as museum exhibits frequented mostly by those who are experts in the language and historical background needed to master them. The direct impact of these traditions on the dominant strains of analytic philosophy, or on the Heideggerian/Derridean current of Continental thought, has been close to zero.

But let's return to the intolerant Middle Ages for a moment. Here we find one of the greatest cases of cultural cross-pollination in world history. Early Medieval Christian Europe, probably no more or less intolerant than most of its contemporary civilizations, was already marked by a bizarre fusion between Platonism and the originally Hebrew cult of Jesus. This dual inheritance became even more complicated at the beginning of the last millennium, when an Arabized version of Aristotle began to creep through the Iberian peninsula toward Paris, then as now the port of entry for new trends in Western philosophy. Amidst the famous Medieval atmosphere of killings and the revocation of Holy Sacraments, Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas had the courage to fight for a scandalous hero—the Mohammedan Aristotle of Ibn Rushd. Let it be noted that they did so at far greater personal risk than any of us assume today when we teach pornography or gay studies. Islamic philosophy was not a "specialty" for these Medieval giants, who could barely read Greek, let alone Arabic. Instead, it was approached as a potential dose of truth, a truth that transformed Catholic philosophy and ultimately the Catholic faith with a fresh Arabian wind.
As if to repress the trauma of this startling synthesis, the Church vacated its initial angry suspicions by later fossilizing Aquinas into a statue, a hero of such apparently numbing orthodoxy that only a few enthusiasts can appreciate his daring today. In any event, the Catholic Church today owes much of what is greatest in it to a risky hybrid mating with an alien force.

Despite our own era’s reputation for open-minded tolerance, I would guess that nothing of this kind is happening today. We are unlikely to see a Mormonism transformed by encounter with Zen, or a theory of democracy tempered by the bitter wisdom of Chinese history, or an experimental physics renewed by a return to Empedocles. We in the West are also unlikely to see any truly serious outbreaks of censorship, despite exaggerated worries over the activities of be-nighted rural school boards. How many great works is it necessary to read secretly these days? The only author I can remember reading in hiding during my student years was Sade, that lucid devil of a literary stylist. Now, it is no longer difficult to find university seminars on Sade, where he is read with a kind of posturing aloofness by jaded suburban hipsters, rather than with the more appropriate mixture of terror and sublime laughter that he, like Nietzsche, ought to evoke. None of us would want to argue that any book, no matter how threatening, should be excluded from its place in the public sphere. At the same time, perhaps forbidden works are only neutered when they are treated as safe literary products rather than as dark challenges to our world. I worry that to end the concept of a “dangerous book” is to end the prestige of books altogether.

Why does so little offend us anymore? And why, despite our unparalleled openness to the authors of all times and traditions, are we less able than ever before to be truly transformed by these authors? In the remainder of this paper, I will suggest that the central disaster for any possibility of true communication between different cultures is the “critical” turn in modern philosophy. In the wake of this turn, the model intellectual is an incredulous debunker, an observer far too clever to be duped by any particular belief about much of anything. In their fear of risking any “dogmatic” or “naïve” statements about reality itself, philosophers have locked themselves away in the ghetto of human access to reality, into a people-centered realm that leaves the external world to the exact sciences. This is true of both the Anglo-American obsession with language and the postmodern Continental hang-ups of textuality and power. But it is equally true of the more prudent, historically oriented philosopher, who insists that every philosophy be read only on its own terms, and only after scrupulous lifelong work on the original sources. The one figure missing from this circus is the most important one of all: the rigorous, ambitious, systematic philosopher, who can hardly be found in the world today. In what follows, I will point to five shortcomings of contemporary philosophy that have reduced systematic philosophy to the endangered species list. This having been done, I will offer a number of specific proposals that might help make the twenty-first century one of the greatest hundred years of philosophical dialogue the world has ever known.
If anything unites mainstream analytic philosophy and mainstream Continental philosophy, it is their deep indebtedness to Kant. The general tendency of Kant’s “Copernican Revolution” is well known, and does not need a detailed summary here. Free-wheeling dogmatic metaphysics is rejected, as it only drums up visionary proofs at a moment’s notice on any topic from angels to souls to the infinity or finitude of the universe. In opposition to this, Kant’s critical philosophy places the things themselves at an unbridgeable distance from the human mind. Having been isolated in this way from the things, we humans now set up camp in the realm of appearances, and ask only about the conditions that must hold good for all such appearances to emerge. In general terms, philosophy abandons reality in itself, since all that can be asked about anymore is our access to reality. This revolution has been discussed so often that we often forget that it really does saturate our day-to-day lives, to such an extent that we are almost unable to imagine any alternative. The first alternative that comes to mind is nothing more than a sheer reactionary movement—which is precisely the way in which today’s Thomists, Platonists, and handful of Leibnizians are usually viewed.

Metaphysics gives way to theory of knowledge; the key to philosophy becomes finding the fulcrum-point around which all other knowledge should pivot. Philosophy takes root in the kingdom of the transcendental, which began as a glittering palace of criticism but now comes to feel more and more like a ghetto. This ghetto of human access takes many forms. It may involve the idea that painstaking analysis of propositions is the key to humbling any wild claims about the world as it really is beyond appearance. It may consist in the idea that the conditions of reality are socially or textually constructed, and that it is laughably naïve to go looking back behind the network of significations to find any real world. It may also consist in the notion that each philosophical system or world religion is a self-contained and inviolable whole that must be exhaustively studied, but never straightforwardly “rejected” as if it were reducible to a series of arguments. In all such cases, philosophy believes it occupies a special transcendental throne, even (and especially) when it claims to have dispensed with “master narratives”. Whatever happens, it knows it holds a permanent ace in the hole that will allow it to outfox any statement ever made by its opponents. But in truth, it has only two motives for occupying this position: fear and arrogance.

The fear arises from the great success and public prestige of the natural sciences, whose results begin to pile up so rapidly that no non-specialist can easily keep abreast of the latest developments in more than a few of its dozens of branches. If philosophy is to remain a fundamental discipline, it knows that it cannot allow itself to be threatened by the thousands of pieces of new data that drift in with every month’s journals. For this reason, it wants to set up a special
transcendental preserve that science cannot touch, a zone that science cannot possibly outflank since it will contain the very “conditions of possibility” to which any science will have to be indebted. Science will be exposed as a set of propositions to be appraised by a theory of reference, or as a Machiavellian power game to be unmasked. It is tempting to ask about the psychology behind these strategies. Daniel Dennett is undoubtedly wrong to chuckle about us poor philosophers, forever pushed out by the more accurate scientists as soon we move on to some virgin terrain. After all, this phenomenon could easily be reversed to say that the scientists simply limp along after the philosophers, like convenience store owners rushing in like cattle after the dashing explorations of La Salle and Dubuque. But I find Dennett’s sarcasm refreshing, since it nicely illuminates the presumed split between transcendental and empirical, ontological and ontic, that lies at the core of almost every major contemporary philosophy. Although it may seem like Continental philosophers live in greater fear of scientific encroachment than their analytic rivals, this is not really true. Just try talking to a mainstream analytic philosopher of language about Churchland-style neurophilosophy. They will tell you quite dismissively that the firing of brain cells has nothing to do with fundamental philosophical questions.

At this point, the arrogance of critical philosophy is visible as well. After renouncing all claims to speak of the world as it really is, philosophy begins to convince itself that its tiny ghetto is better than the stars and seas and deserts beyond. The philosophy of language dismisses the findings of brain chemists; Heidegger makes the sweeping claim that science does not think. Philosophy has nothing more to tell us about rocks, insects, comets, or souls? “Well, good riddance anyway. It’s your own fault for expecting us to discuss these things. How naïve you must be.” Specific philosophical questions about objects are thrown to the empirical sciences with an attitude of smug effrontery, just as sour milk is left behind the garage for the stray cats to lick up. Fear and arrogance: these are the two classic symptoms of an inferiority complex.

The split between objects and the conditions of access to them was forcefully attacked by Quine in his classic essay “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”. Science will have to be allowed to enter the inner sanctum of the transcendental realm after all, since it proves impossible to draw any feasible distinction between analytic and synthetic statements. But Quine oddly assumes that the joke is on philosophy alone, which is simply not the case. In his interpretation, the empirical sciences get off without even a slap on the wrist when the barricades are broken down; philosophy will have to accept an even smaller role than before, while the sciences won’t have to change a thing. This is not my view, and more importantly it was not the view of Francis Bacon, Aristotle, or any of a host of other seminal thinkers on the philosophical status of the sciences. For the post-Kantian division between philosophy and science not only relieved philosophy of the burden of learning anything from the sciences; it also allowed the sciences to get away with philosophical murder, operating with hand-me-
down concepts of atomic theory and efficient causation that represent only a small part of the total legacy of Greek thought. Strange as it may seem, the natural sciences live in the same mixture of fear and arrogance toward philosophy that is directed toward them, as can sometimes be detected in irritable interviews with specific scientists. The reason for this is the "critical" divide that has been artificially constructed between the human and natural realms. As philosophers, we still tend to think roughly as follows: "The real world is still forever inaccessible, and in fact there may not even be such a thing. If the laboratories want to try some experiments on the world anyway, and can invent some products we'd like to buy—fine, as long as they don't try to tell themselves they're really thinking. That's our job." If we think of the external world is anything at all, we think of it as a bland plateau of mindless causality, easy to calculate with numbers, but not of any real philosophical merit. The real action in philosophy takes place in the transcendental realm of people. But this attitude is precisely the problem. There is a philosophical mystery in causation that is every bit as great as that of the conditions of human access to it. No philosopher can overcome the split between reality and appearance who does not directly seize the problem of causality and attempt an original solution. What does it mean for one event to cause another?

None of this is meant as an attack on Kant, surely one of the greatest philosophers who have ever lived. But it is meant to suggest that the Copernican Revolution is no longer a liberating idea. Indeed, it has become a prison in which philosophy is now suffocating to death. The transition from the philosophy of reality to the critical philosophy of access was obviously useful for clearing away many of the arcane and out-of-control debates over numerous time-worn metaphysical problems. In its more contemporary version, as the critique of "onto-theology", the Copernican Revolution has been useful for derailing the pretension that certain entities within the phenomenal world can be regarded as privileged incarnations of a hidden transcendent world. But it is no longer refreshing to suggest that philosophy can say nothing about the things themselves, and certainly no longer refreshing to say that there is no such thing as the things themselves. Although still widely celebrated in some quarters as the very cutting edge of our time, as the very shibboleth of progressive thinkers, these ideas actually grew stale many decades ago. They only serve to impede the possibility of any universal philosophical dialogue, by shutting out reality as the ultimate common background of our thinking. Yesterday's revolution is never tomorrow's. Those who prepare to fight the last war (that is, against "naive realism") rather than the next one (that is, against the tyranny of human access) have generally been the losers in world history.

In my view, the central problem is the exaggerated ontological status granted to human beings, an exaggeration for which I will sketch a philosophical antidote several paragraphs from now. But let's begin by considering one of the greatest of Kant's heirs: Martin Heidegger. For Heidegger, the structure of hu-
man existence is one of “thrown projection”. In simpler terms, this means that humans occupy an ambivalent standpoint, finding themselves enmeshed in a world that already exists, while also partly rising beyond this world and seeing it “as” what it is. In this way, humans have already risen beyond the world to some extent; our explicit theoretical knowledge merely augments this initial form of raw transcendence. But such transcendence is a double-edged sword, because if to transcend the being of the world is to know it, it is also to become absorbed in the countless entities that dance along its outer surface. The transcending animal is also the “ontic” animal, hypnotized by the superficiality of beings rather than the depth of being itself. The world itself is a total union of significance, and only human transcendence rises above the world and shatters it into a series of independent, tangible districts. To encounter beings in our daily functioning is to rely on them. When we encounter them explicitly, we do not grasp the beings themselves, but only these beings “as” revealed in such and such a way. That is to say, we encounter beings only in the light of some project that illuminates their being for us in a very specific, even one-sided way. Thus, the key opposition for Heidegger is between reality on the one hand, and how reality appears “as” reality to human transcendence on the other. In this way, the Kantian dualism between phenomena and noumena is largely retained (with several important provisos that do not concern us here). No human being can ever grasp the very marrow of a specific object’s being. The shovel appears quite differently to me in different moods or situations, and even more differently to construction workers or to gravediggers. The reality of the shovel withdraws behind any of these apparitions, all of which can be undercut when the shovel malfunctions, reminding us of the insistent brute shovel-reality that never fully emerges into view. To repeat, transcending humans never encounter any object directly, but only through the lense of the as-structure. With some qualifications, this is still not very far from Kant.

But here we encounter Heidegger’s most decisive error, and indeed that of the entire Kantian tradition. Given that humans never encounter objects directly, but only by means of a certain conditioning perspective, why assume that the things themselves are able to encounter one another directly without the deformation or exaggeration of perspective? When a rock smashes a window, it encounters the hard surface and fragility of the glass, but is unable to encounter its transparency or its stickiness, which mean little to a rock. When a junked car is pushed into a lake by vandals, the car encounters the water as a viscous obstacle during its slow descent to the bottom, and eventually also as a corroding-force. But it never takes note of the toxic residues in the lake, which are important only to living organisms. Some might object that inanimate objects never “encounter” one another at all, but this is clearly false. These objects clearly affect one another, inflicting their blows upon one another. Obviously, human consciousness is something extra above and beyond this. But the difference between human and inanimate is not one that can be explained at the rudimentary
ontological level of perspective. When my house bursts into flames, this event has a different significance not only for me, my visiting nephews, and the firemen, but also quite a different impact for all of the different entities populating the house: mice, frail photographs and wine glasses, sturdy structural beams. As Leibniz, Whitehead, and others have already seen, there is no difference in kind between my staring at a piece of paper and a flame destroying it. Both encounters are modes of relation, and any special human cognitive properties cannot be specified at this most embryonic level of ontology, as Heidegger and Kant believe they can do. In other words, the distinction between phenomenal and noumenal, or being and the as-structure, occurs not just in the human realm, but at all points of reality. When a meteorite strikes the moon, it hardly matters that these objects are not "conscious" of one another. They have to appear to one another in the sense that they affect one another. And they never appear to one another in the totality of their being, but only in a limited, perspectival way. The encounter takes place between phenomenal moon and phenomenal meteorite, undoubtedly according to certain categories by which they can have mutual effect. But the real moon and real meteorite remain as hidden from each other as they are from us.

This reality of a thing must lie far behind all of the relations into which it enters, since it is always capable of still further relations. A rock cannot be defined by its interaction with the trees and mountains and other rocks that it smashes against, any more than it can be reduced to my own encounter with it "as" rock. There will always be an inscrutable, dark surplus to this rock beyond any of its relations with anything else—whether human, vegetable, fungus, or inanimate. Instead of an opposition between the distant unknowable world and a human who understands that world in a certain way, we are left with something like an opposition between substance and relation. But with this step, we have left the bounds of critical philosophy, the philosophy of human access. We are back outside in the world again, now that the transcendental/critical human projection of the real world in particular ways is shown to be only a special case of a global ontological strife between substance and relation. The important point here is that the interaction between objects (animal, plant, or inanimate) does not belong to a theory of knowledge or of language, because it also includes many simpler events, such as the rustling of grass in itself and the freezing of hailstones in themselves. But contra materialism, this interaction also cannot be clarified by natural science, because we have seen that the substance of a thing is an essence or form that lies deeper than all of its relations, and therefore cannot be adequately explained as a piece of matter gifted with certain "emergent properties". Numerous fresh problems and insights arise from such a philosophy of objects. But this is a paper about dialogue, not metaphysics, and enough has been said already to that purpose.

The whole point of this digression has been to establish the oppressive dominance of the critical paradigm in philosophy, which (I will argue below) is
at the root of the poor state of philosophical dialogue today. The untenable split
between the world in itself and human access to that world must end. Further, it
cannot end in a one-sided way feared by philosophers, in some sort of trium-
phant reduction of everything to matter. It is not just a question of materializing
the mind, but of mentalizing matter as well, in the name of a return by philoso-
phers to reality itself. But how does such a return avoid lapsing into old-time
pre-critical metaphysics of the kind that Kant overthrew? Put briefly: it avoids
dogmatism by maintaining Kant’s central insight of a reality that withdraws
from all perception and all relation. It also refuses to identify this reality with a
pampered elite of monadic points that are supposed to be real in a way that
other things are not—that aristocracy of substance in Aristotle and Leibniz
which includes natural kinds like horses and ducks, but excludes pinwheels and
the Dutch East India Company. No, the dark withdrawing substance is every-
where: at the heart of diamonds and wood, cakes and machines, human souls
and international corporations. Instead of the old dogmatic metaphysics that
claims to make pronouncements beyond the bounds of perspective, we need a
kind of guerrilla metaphysics that works in a different way—namely, by extend-
ing the war between dark reality and its phenomenal appearance from the tiny
province of six billion human beings to the swarming world of all the trillions
of entities in the cosmos. For the conflict between phenomenon and reality
plays itself out over every square inch of reality, and not just in the single gap
between humans and world.

Other than a mere reactionary movement, the only alternative to such a guer-
rilla metaphysics is an ever-increasing critical irony and pointlessly chic specu-
lative apathy. I have promised a series of practical suggestions in this paper.
Here is the first: a return to metaphysics, to a philosophy concerned with reality
and not only with human access to it, is the first precondition of universal phi-
losophical dialogue. Barring this, all those who have not yet made the critical
turn (whether that of Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, or Derrida) will only look like
intellectual fossils, gullible laggards who are not sufficiently up to date and
hence not worth listening to. And this is precisely what is going on with the
status of non-Western philosophy today. Its detractors cannot be sure what to do
with it, because it seems to lack sufficient epistemological sophistication. Its
supporters harm it by wanting it to be treated tenderly, as an autonomous but
tender flower from another culture that must be appreciated on its own terms,
perhaps out of fear that it will not survive any roughhousing with the big boys.
But reality itself is a great leveling force. Once we shift the terms of the argu-
ment back to the world itself, we can no longer skate by on the arrogance of
having performed a hypercritical reflexive move that the Chinese and Arabs
have missed. Suddenly, what will become important again are clear observation,
penetrating originality in our conception of the world, and time-tested wisdom.
To pick up this thread, one of the worst by-products of the critical turn in philosophy is that all non-critical philosophy comes to be seen as pre-modern, and hence as fundamentally naïve. No philosophy is allowed to step forth as a science unless it first performs the dazzling pirouette of reflecting on its own conditions of access to whatever it discusses. Adopting the critical/transcendental/ontological/linguistic/deconstructive stance becomes a kind of initiation rite, a professional membership badge. Instead of talking about reality, which all humans share and all are able to weigh in on, we are first compelled to talk about method. And clearly, anyone who makes direct pronouncements about the world will immediately be bludgeoned by the critical philosopher, who will insist that they first “define their terms” or avoid speaking “ontically”. When reality is downplayed and our method of approaching it becomes the central theme, we necessarily find ourselves awash in technical terminology that shuts out the uninitiated of our own culture, to say nothing of those societies who never made the transcendental turn. Philosophy becomes the cliquish province of a cadre of urbane specialists too shrewd to repeat the gaffes of those who simply venture philosophical views of the old-fashioned kind. Without a unified and unifying reality at its disposal, philosophy becomes atomized into independent terminological communities. It becomes almost impossible even to communicate with those who have not followed the same preliminary methodological rituals as we have. For example, for all the talk of the end of the analytic/Continental divide in American philosophy, these groups still speak very little with each other, still have utterly different heroes, and still face vastly different career prospects. But both groups would have an equally difficult time communicating with anyone not sharing their precise methodological habits. Try to imagine Derrida having a serious conversation with an Islamic fundamentalist cleric, Quine talking shop with a Zen master, or John Searle hammering out arguments with Meister Eckhardt. To repeat, when the point of reference is no longer the world itself, the terminological regime of each specialized community of researchers takes on this role.

Some readers might object that we are in the midst of a mighty renaissance of historical studies in philosophy, with unprecedented curatorial and publishing resources now committed to all aspects of world philosophy. In response, I would say that the renewed fashion for the history of philosophy is too antiquarian in spirit. The scholar of neo-Platonism today is someone who may indeed have a genuine love for his subject, but it is unlikely that he actually believes in the world soul, in reincarnation of the human spirit, in the power of music to unite us with the One, or other major Plotinian themes. Neo-Platonism is not a philosophy that he adopts in his everyday life, nor even one that he necessarily feels to be capable of utterly transforming contemporary philosophy. This philosophy is more like an atmosphere, or a town he likes to visit—a town which
he is now better able to visit than the rest of us, by virtue of his acquired language skills and historical background. He becomes a specialist eminently qualified to answer specific job advertisements, but not one whose ideas can ever pose a threat to those who see themselves as occupying the cutting edge of critical philosophy. Which leads me to make a second practical suggestion: no one should specialize in an author whom they do not feel to be fundamentally right about the world in some way. Obviously, not all scholars of Ibn Sīnā should have to be Muslims, which is just the sort of parochialism this conference is trying to counter. At the same time, no one should waste their time working on him if they view him only as a historically significant museum piece. Unless a scholar is convinced that Ibn Sīnā, Plotinus, or Fichte has a vital lesson to teach philosophy in the present, and can clearly articulate what that lesson is, he should look for something else to work on.

As soon as an author is no longer viewed as a transmitter of potentially true or useful ideas, he begins to be seen as an interesting historical crystallization from another time and place. And this opens the gates to the professionalized specialists, who too often become temple guardians who will not stand for the expression of opinions by any uncertified reader. Who would have the courage today to write a book on Aristotle without knowing any Greek? Although this practice is not to be recommended, there is no reason why a major interpreter of Aristotle might not arise who is simply hopeless with that language; Aquinas and Ibn Rushd apparently knew little to nothing of Greek and still outstripped us all as readers of that philosopher. Furthermore, despite the obligatory fashion of denouncing all translations as inadequate, the vast majority of available translations are reasonably good, and many are simply excellent. There is little use dithering over the difficulties of translating a certain German or Japanese or Sanskrit word into English. The primary motive for mastering foreign languages should not be the supposed untranslatability among tongues, but rather the simple unavailability of all that we want to read in our own language. I insist on this point because Continental philosophy has been plagued in recent years by the tedious recitation of German terms from Heidegger or Kant that already have perfectly adequate renderings in English. It is not by knowing German that one becomes a master interpreter of Heidegger, but by having sufficient depth of understanding. And this leads us to another important precondition of universal philosophical dialogue: we must all be recognized as competent to discuss any author we have read, not simply the ones in which we have specialized, and not simply the ones we can read in the original language. After all, no one will have the time, let alone the talent, to learn every language. In more general terms, we should put an end to all unspoken certification processes and licensing procedures by which specialists exclude non-specialists from discussion of their philosophical heroes.
As a variant of my second complaint, the dominance of critical philosophy tends to reduce any opinions about the real world to a matter of faith. It is not only the notion of a divine science that is now discredited, but any philosophical science of anything beyond the human sphere at all. This deadlock further ensures the irrelevance of other traditions to our own. Under such conditions, the intellectual traditions of Europe, China, India, and Syria can only look like a colorful diversity of cultural viewpoints, rather than as impressive traditions that have earned their keep through the hard work of staring reality in the face and coming to grips with it. In this sense, it can be said that historicism began as a mind-expanding virtue, but has now become a poisonous vice. If our own culture and another are simultaneously reduced to the level of faith, this may seem tolerant and democratic. But what it actually does is coddles both us and the others, failing to recognize the extent to which our philosophies' cultures are obliged to transform one another. It simply gets everyone off the hook—and with no further possibility of the marginalized culture having something real and true to say where the others have fallen into superficiality and error, intellectual power simply mirrors political and economic might. There is a way of recognizing others that amounts to disarming them, and that is what happens when we view the coexistence of many traditions only as diversity, and not as potential conflict and transformation.

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As a general rule, when discussing the coexistence of multiple philosophical traditions, too much attention is paid to their past, and not enough to their future. We look around us and revel in the existence of several ancient traditions of wisdom from which to choose. And as long as we are not bigots, it is easy to feel an almost paralyzing respect for all of them. But from a certain standpoint, there is nothing ancient about these traditions at all. We really only have a few thousand years of human civilization behind us, which with any luck is only a tiny fraction of the time allotted to our species to exist. There is nothing at all ancient about the Upanishads or the Egyptian Book of the Dead if we reflect for a moment on the millennia of hunter-gatherer culture that preceded them. All of these works—to say nothing of Greek philosophy—may as well have been written yesterday. The world is still young, and undreamed-of philosophies are yet to be born. And the numerous intellectual traditions that exist in the world today have no eternal right to continue to exist in their present forms. Who does not adapt, perishes.

Which leads us to yet another precondition of universal philosophical dialogue: the various world traditions must be seen for their limitations as well as their strengths. We will all look equally primitive 5,000 years from now. Each
of us is no doubt an adherent of some powerful and subtle ideas, but also of
others that are marked by superficiality and immature formulations. Some of
these defects haunt not just individuals, but entire traditions. The ultimate
purpose of dialogue should be not just mutual respect, but mutual transforma-
tion. Was Catholicism really complete before the emergence of Aquinas? Then who
says it’s complete now? And what is the use of a Chinese or Indian philosophy
that cannot be coaxed into developing indigenous weapons for a response to
Heidegger? Of an Islamic philosophy that is content to have its golden age in
the past rather than inciting a new one?

To this end, not only tolerant dialogue and sometimes edgy strife will be
needed, but actual fusion as well. This must not take the form of eclectic col-
lage—the synthesis must actually work. Knowing how to do this will be the
work of individual brilliance, and cannot be planned out in an instruction man-
ual. But one way to guard against collage is by insisting that the differences
between traditions be noted as extensively as their agreements. As we have
seen, the usual method of insisting on such differences today is a bad one—a
scholar simply insists on the untranslatability of a specific French or Tibetan
term into English. Too often, this proves to be no more than linguistic show-
boating. The deepest differences between traditions, just as between different
thinkers in the same tradition, will be illuminated by returning once more to
reality itself. Instead of treating a given tradition as a petrified ethnic unit that
only the specialists are qualified to judge, it should be viewed as a conceptual
model of reality that triumphs at some points and collapses at others. One tradi-
tion is best used to show the points of collapse in the other, and not simply to
show how at bottom they both agree. Notice that comparative discussions of
any two philosophers always tend to be weaker the more they stress agreement,
and the more thought-provoking the more they stress ultimate incompatibility
on certain issues. When this happens, a choice is forced, and one author or the
other, one tradition or the other, is forced to learn new virtues if it wishes to
survive. But we will never have to feel threatened by non-Western philosophies
as long as we believe ourselves to have landed safely beyond a critical divide
that separates us from the naive and the religious.

I have argued that the critical revolution in philosophy, by shifting the focus
from reality to the sophisticated problem of method, fragments the intellectual
world into a myriad of insular professional communities. One result of this is
the now oppressive dominance of the university in intellectual life, which is
mirrored by a paradoxically decreasing influence of the university on life as a
whole. The climate of specialization has created a world in which professors
write resume-stuffing articles in a vacuum, far removed from the emerging vital
impulses of the future. Plenty has already been written about the drawbacks of
specialization in academia, and I am in general agreement with many of the remedies that have been proposed (broader undergraduate education, an end to the “publish or perish” reign of terror, occasional rotation of faculty into courses in which they are not experts, and so on). But instead of covering this ground yet again, I would like to confine my closing remarks to a handful of more unorthodox suggestions. If I am right, these could be enough to breathe some fire into the lungs of that newborn baby, twenty-first-century philosophy, its character and destiny still so unclear.

1) Replace all foundation grants with huge essay prize competitions. Under the current system, a handful of fat cats grab the majority of the spoils, whether through political connections or simply by making timely choices in what to publish about. Inevitably, foundation fellowships will be awarded on the strength of someone’s career so far, which is not always the same as the strength of one’s work. We need to find a way to shift the emphasis from having a brilliant specialist’s career to doing brilliant work. This can be done, in part, by reappropriating all available grant money into a series of essay competitions on themes of pressing significance. These competitions must be available to the entire public, and not just to Ph.D.s or to dues-paying association members. This might lead to a few annoying entries by cranks, but it would also open up the chance of a dark horse riding in from the night to save us all, rather than the current system which encourages years of cultivating favors from the powerful.

The names of the essay prize contestans must obviously be kept secret. But instead of having them be “anonymous” essays, I would strongly urge that they be submitted under pseudonyms, which could be chosen in such a way as to add color or subtlety to the work submitted (cf. Kierkegaard’s “Johannes de Silentio” or Bataille’s “Lord Auch” or Bruno’s “The Nolhu”). The prize amounts should be staggeringly high, perhaps as much as several years’ worth of salary, so that the victorious authors might immediately set to work following up on whatever striking ideas gained them the prize. This whole process would add an electricity to academic life that is now sadly missing, with our predictable ritual of allowing the fattest CVs to grow even fatter by awarding grants to those who have already received many grants in the past, and so forth. There could be a dramatic public ceremony in which the winners were announced, similar to the Nobel Prize festivities today, which attract so much interest. Winning entries would be chosen, not on the basis of taking a safe middle course that offends no one, but according to the criterion of daring and originality of conception. The question in the minds of the judges should be: which entry comes closest to disrupting our current sense of the world and forcing us to think things over in a new light?

2) All reference letters should be abolished. There may be cases where prospective employers need to be alerted about a potentially disruptive personality that does not show up on paper. But otherwise, the reference letter game has long since grown into a scandal. In addition to the profession-wide humiliation
at having to ask for them at all, such letters only encourage obsequiousness and conformity by young people, killing their spirits by placing them in a constant state of anxiety, lest they should accidentally offend the all-powerful referees who control their economic future. Scholars should be judged by their work, and not by where some mentor guesses that they might or might not land in the pecking order someday.

(3) Publishers should not ask about the professional credentials of prospective authors. Editors should be confident enough in their own judgments of excellence that they should not exclude a totally uncredentialed author from the ranks of potential manuscript submitters. Here too, the primary goal is to reduce the influence of the usual university food chain, and to restore focus to the actual quality of someone’s work.

(4) Finally, we need to find a way to speed up the publication process. The current process of refereeing and preparing books has become almost ludicrously slow in the United States. The prestige of philosophical correspondence should be revived, along with the central role of pamphlet-sized works à la Leibniz. But for this to happen, it is presupposed that a sufficiently lively set of issues will have emerged to warrant the increased speed of publication and dissemination. The internet already makes this technologically feasible; what is lacking is the will to do it.

Numerous other suggestions for reform come immediately to mind; perhaps these will be sufficient to suggest the sort of thing I have in mind. The general idea is to increase the power of courageous and colorful outsiders at the expense of specialist insiders who establish an empire in their discipline and jealously maintain it by cultivating generations of obedient assistants. By taking the funding power away from established review boards and making it a matter of a powerful blind-reviewing prize committee, an element of refreshing unpredictability would be added to academia. Finally, by focusing on the actual quality of a person’s work rather than on their position in the hierarchy of the powerful (reference letters, golden CVs), the dominance of insular specialists would come to an end, and universal philosophical dialogue would prosper at the hands of those willing to risk a staged combat between the ideas of different philosophers or altogether different traditions. The measuring-stick in such combat can only be reality itself, not the cultural conditions of human access to that reality. Although I have no wish to be burned at the stake, I would also prefer not to work in a profession in which there was never any real combat over fundamental principles. Nor in one which confined itself to a ghetto of preliminary declarations about language and knowledge, and left to other disciplines the task of exploring the world in itself—bananas, crystals, windmills, Buddhas, cypress groves, volcanoes, grandmothers, dolphins, and coins.