Congratulations on Doing the Impossible: On the Death of Philosophy

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"The Death of Socrates," by Jacques-Louis David (1787)

> It turns out the end of the world isn't always an ending. Sometimes it's a transformation. Like when dinosaurs became birds. (Horizon Forbidden West, 2022: see, e.g., Wikipedia, 2024)

> "There was one very important thing about your quest that we couldn't discuss until you returned."
> "I remember," said Milo eagerly. "Tell me now."
> "It was impossible," said the king […] "but if we'd told you then, you might not have gone." (Juster, 1961)

Where did philosophy *go*?

One possible answer is, "philosophy hasn't gone anywhere lately; it's been dead for a long time." Back in 1854, when Henry David Thoreau published *Walden*, it was already time for Thoreau to declare that

> there are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live. To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates. (Thoreau, 1854/1957: p. 9)

According to Thoreau, philosophy dies if everyone, including professors of it, stop trying to live by its light.

Thoreau, of course, sought to resurrect the concept of philosophy as a practicum by going into the woods, living there, and putting that experience in writing. This is shocking, and in the aftermath of *Walden*, it has seemed necessary to many people to "expose Thoreau" by following him out to the woods and symbolically putting him and his project to death. Kathryn Schulz, writing for *The New Yorker* in 2015, protested violently against Thoreau and his book:

> *Walden* is less a cornerstone work of environmental literature than the original cabin porn: a fantasy about rustic life divorced from the reality of living in the woods, and, especially, a fantasy about escaping the entanglements and responsibilities of living among other people. (Schulz, 2015)

It is interesting, and relevant to what follows, to note that Schulz's article is a histrionic mixture of rhetorical moves. She includes *ad hominem* passages where she mocks Thoreau's actual behavior in Concord, Massachusetts;[1] she complains about Thoreau's supposed dishonesty throughout *Walden*; and she also engages angrily with the *ideas* in *Walden*, primarily by caricaturing them. She is not only like many other middlebrow postmodernists—that is, driven by an insane need to read something "seriously" (her term) in order to demolish the public's esteem for it—she is, ultimately, a victim of her own willingness to try anything, and everything, to rid us (at last!) of Henry David Thoreau.

It's not clear whether her problem with him is that he's wrong, or that he's a liar, or that he couldn't accomplish *exactly* what he set out to do. These are obviously not logically compatible claims: for instance, if *Walden* is a fictitious autobiography, that doesn't invalidate all of Thoreau's ideals, since they are meant to be read as transcendent

[1] Schulz writes, for instance, that Thoreau was "lured [back to Concord] by his mother's cookies" (Schulz, 2015), following in the grand tradition of Philip van Doren Stern, who liked to introduce new literary editions of *Walden* by elbowing the reader, so to speak, with the story of Thoreau's mother helping him with his laundry. Schulz also writes, as if we have infinite patience for irrelevant slanders, that Thoreau "was not found particularly likable" at Harvard (Schulz, 2015). Accordingly, this essay is dedicated to my wife, who is doing our laundry as I write these words. It's also dedicated to my mother, who just tried to FaceTime me, and is now waiting for me to finish philosophizing so I can call her back.

universals. Likewise, if those ideals are self-evidently worthless, then it really doesn't matter whether he lived up to them or not. Schulz resembles the evasive fellow who borrows a kettle in Sigmund Freud's book *The Interpretation of Dreams*. (He claims, simultaneously, that the kettle is defective, that he has already returned it, and that he never borrowed it in the first place.) Everything that *might* be bad about Thoreau, to Schulz, *is* bad—all at once.

Her "kettle logic" goes further still. Schulz doesn't believe in *Walden's* popularity. "Like most canonized works, it is more revered than read," she writes, before adding another 6,000 words, all so people won't read a 19th Century philosopher they aren't reading. Freud diagnoses such multifarious, irrational polemics as the expression of an irresistible wish. Schulz wishes for a magic trick: behold! The author who makes her feel judged shall now disappear!

Her task is a hopeless one. This is partly because Jack Kerouac, who will never go out of print, has already given us another version of *Walden*. It's his novel *The Dharma Bums*. Unlike *Walden*, Kerouac claims to be writing fiction, although any "serious" reader will guess that Kerouac's novel is a thinly veiled account of real events. We can't read *Walden*, apparently, because Thoreau was somewhat less of a shut-in than he claimed. We *can* read *The Dharma Bums*, however, even if Kerouac was a drunken lout—which he was. It's an easy road back to *Walden* from there.

It's also useless to defame Thoreau because he's not unique in speaking about himself in terms that seem applicable to everyone. That's how *all* philosophers talk. Whenever people read about someone following the dictates of their conscience, they ask themselves, "do these same laws apply to me?" In other words, philosophers are simply leveraging an ineradicable part of our response, as readers, to any text we identify with. That's why real philosophers (including poor "canonized" Thoreau) have to be put down, like mangy dogs, *over and over again*—all merely to win a very temporary victory against the universal, itself, as a category.

Frankly, though, Schulz is a little too clear about her intentions. There are smarter ways to get rid of philosophy. You can divide it up, and then conquer it with specialists. You can bury it in jargon. Or you can simply replace it with something that tastes similar, like the aspartame in Diet Coke. Real philosophy is holistic, lucid, and universal, turning lived experience into transcendent metaphysics. Our modern alternatives to it, including the entire genre of "self-help," aren't even trying for those laurels. They are, instead, mysteries reserved for the initiated. Remember that bestselling book about manifesting your desires? The title is revealing. It was called *The Secret.*

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I don't want to try to do all of these dangers justice in one gigantic post. Let's take them one at a time, starting with modern attempts to redefine philosophy as a specialized, salaried pursuit. The (real) philosopher Robert Hanna quotes the same exact passage I did, from *Walden*, at the beginning of his article "Six Studies in The Decline and Fall of Professional Academic Philosophy" (Hanna, 2022). Hanna asserts that the decline of philosophy is the result of "the vocational vices of academicism," which are "(i) dogmatism, (ii) esotericism, and (iii) hyper-specialization" (Hanna, 2022: p. 49). I would, for my part, probably stop short of putting all the blame for these things on academia. "Hyper-specialization," for example, is a basic feature of all modern capitalist economies; our educational institutions merely follow suit.

But Hanna is right about the nature of the problem, and the "dogmatism" he's attacking isn't the dogmatism of Thoreau, that grumpy, would-be hermit who believes we should be happier and more authentic than we are. It's a kind of dogmatism that arose when academic institutions began to profit by amplifying, distorting, and reifying disagreements between philosophers. These are thinkers who had been, at one point, engaged in valuable conversations with each other. But their supposed "civil war" became so deeply engraved on the public record of philosophy that even now, when nearly all the original combatants are dead, we continue to segregate their ideas.

I'm referring, of course, to the divide between "Analytic" and "Continental" philosophers.[2] There are many ways of characterizing this divide. It separates subjectivist philosophers, like Soren Kierkegaard, from rationalists like Gottlob Frege. Frege saw mathematical relationships as symbols of perfect objectivity, and he refused to discuss epistemology any other way. To Kierkegaard, logic is merely a tool for exploring the unique content of individual consciousness. The more complete and consistent our world appears, the more personal and incommensurate it is.

Another way of putting the matter is this: Continental philosophers arrive at disparate "truths" by puzzling over the manifold, unstable nature of human experience without necessarily making any totalizing, universal claims about it. To each his own monad. You can shelve Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* right next to Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* without expecting either book to illuminate, or diminish, the other.

[2] This essay was produced in a facility that processes Analytic and Continental philosophy together. They are part of a single great enterprise.

Analytic philosophers, on the other hand, are constantly quarreling about the fundamentals of logic. They love taking exception to each other's work, because all of them agree that truth is unitary, consistent, and comprehensible. Don't blame the world, says analytic philosophy. The world's an unchanging formal system; it's our fault if we haven't been rigorous enough to describe it in full. One day, reality will appear to us, and *be*, a single chain of interconnected, consistent propositions. When Ludwig Wittgenstein writes, in the opening to his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, "the world is that which is the case" (Wittgenstein, 1922/198: prop. 1, p. 31) he is not merely putting everything, all at once, into good logical order. He is uttering a prophecy: "there should be time no longer […] the mystery of God should be finished" (Rev. 10:6-7). Analytic philosophy is the fierce, waning brotherhood of those who share Wittgenstein's faith.

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Perhaps you are reading this, and thinking, "I understand the difference now. Analytic philosophers are idiots." (Or, if you *are* an Analytic philosopher, you're thinking that I'm the idiot.) But the distinctions I have been summarizing here are only true in the limited sense that people really do believe in them. I learned about "Analytic philosophy" from Richard Rorty, who was a professor of mine in college. He would constantly bemoan the way analytic philosophers sought to erase thousands of years of valuable experiments, including Thoreau's "living deliberately," in favor of an up-to-the-minute "state of the discipline." He mocked analytic philosophy for fruitlessly trying to achieve consensus; they want to unify human understanding, he would say, while they drown us in a sea of disputation. Analytic philosophers, Rorty asserted in one memorable lecture, only blur the most uncontroversial features of rational thought by splitting hairs about it. And, he added, most of them can't write to save their lives.

Rorty was right, on all counts, but he was also cherry picking a mere handful of philosophy's besetting problems. Everything wrong with the discipline, it seemed, was thanks to the hard work of those infuriating "others," the damned Analytics. But taking this position forced him to define analytic philosophy as if *was* something consistent, with only diehards in its ranks. In fact, as Hanna argues in the article quoted above, analytic philosophy is currently defined in "six overlapping but still saliently different and non-equivalent senses" (Hanna, 2022: p. 51). It has no real essence; how you define it depends on which thinkers you intend to lump together.

Hanna himself runs into this problem of labels, himself, simply because he attempts to link analytic philosophy to all the famous philosophers who helped to invent it. For instance, he calls the first irruption of analytic philosophy the "Logical Empiricist, aka Logical Positivist, doctrines of the Vienna Circle, whose most important members or

fellow-travelers included" Kurt Gödel, Alfred Tarski, and Willard Van Orman Quine. He adds Bertrand Russell to the mix, along with Russell's impossibly brilliant protégé, Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, according to Hanna, is "the most important book in classical Analytic philosophy" (Hanna, 2022: p. 52).

The *Tractatus* is certainly one of the most spectacular works of modern philosophy. However, the most *important* work of Analytic philosophy is the *Principia Mathematica*, written by Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead. This is ironic because the *Principia*, for the most part, wasn't innovative. It spends a huge amount of time restating Frege's techniques for quantifying logical definitions. The reason Russell and Whitehead became celebrity philosophers, in a way that Frege himself never did, was a function of history moving swiftly and favorably around them. A couple decades, nothing more, separated Frege's book *The Foundations of Arithmetic* from the *Principia*. But those decades were enough to see the work of Georg Cantor, who invented set theory, disseminated throughout the world.

Russell used Cantor's set theory to stress-test Frege's symbolic system of logical operators, and (in 1901) discovered the so-called Russell paradox (the "set of all sets which do not contain themselves"). This paradox appears, on its surface, to merely reveal some kind of flaw in the "rules" of the game Frege was playing by enumerating logical operations in order to do arithmetic with them. Ultimately, however, Russell's paradox is a much more profound discovery about the incapacity of sets to "contain" (i.e., describe and delimit) themselves logically, which forced Russell and Whitehead to create a multi-level system of sets—dividing sets according to the types of functional "call" they would, or would not, be allowed to make on other sets.

From our perspective, in the 21st Century, Frege's work looks naïve because of the Russell paradox—and, in fact, has been mothballed under the name "naïve set theory." Russell and Whitehead's work looks, from a certain ruthless perspective, equally naïve. As Hanna writes,

> Despite its triumph and triumphalism, in fact classical Analytic philosophy was seriously theoretically hobbled in the 1930s and 40s by Kurt Gödel's profoundly important first and second *incompleteness theorems*…which, when they're taken together with Alfred Tarski's *semantic conception of truth*, bearing further witness to the categorical distinction between truth and logical proof, collectively amount to a logico-mathematical 1-2 punch that permanently KO'd the classical Frege-Whitehead-Russell logicist project for reducing mathematics to logic. (Hanna, 2022: pp. 52-53)

Hanna's point is that "[an] organicist wave crashed upon the rocky shores of early 20th century Analytic philosophy and was lost" (Hanna, 202: p. 54), because organicists like Henri Bergson were bitterly decried by Bertrand Russell, who had built his institutional power and celebrity megaphone on an (apparently) successful masterstroke: the *Principia*. From Hanna's point-of-view, Russell should not have been given the acclaim he received, considering the dubiously ambitious nature of his effort to limit all truth-claims to provable, sequential mathematical operations—an effort that was finally smashed to bits.

But by whom? By *Gödel, Tarski,* and *Quine*, all of whom responded specifically to the work of the Analytic logicians, and had been counted among the faithful (see Hanna, 2022) until their own work convinced them of the flaws in the *Principia*. There is no question in my mind that Russell could be, at times, a repressive force who prevented other, more "speculative" philosophers (including the organicists) from reaching wider audiences. But I would strongly object to the idea, popularized by Richard Rorty and backed by Hanna, that the project of Analytic philosophy was based on an impossible, dogmatic logicism that took an entire body of philosophical work down with it when it was finally disproven.

First of all, Russell's paradox already contains the seeds of the self-referential statements Gödel later used to disprove Russell and Whitehead, as is obvious from the paradox's linguistic form, "This set (I) is (am) the set of all sets that do not contain themselves." For this reason, *and* because of Russell and Whitehead's stronger formulation of the rules Frege invented for manipulating sets, the Incompleteness Theorems *never come into existence* without the precedent set by the *Principia*.[3] It may have been wrong, but it was a necessary error to make *en route* to the truth.

Second, the analytic philosophers were, with a couple unfortunate exceptions, mostly *not* logicists for their whole lives. In 1929, about a decade after a definitive break with Russell, Whitehead published *Process and Reality*, a work that expanded upon both organicism and phenomenology. Scratch him off the list. Ditto Gödel and Quine, for reasons discussed above. But even Ludwig Wittgenstein was not limited by the mathematical constraints of number theory, a fact articulated beautifully by none other than Bertrand Russell. Here's Russell on Wittgenstein:

> Mr. Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said, thus suggesting to the sceptical reader that possibly there may be some loophole through a hierarchy of

[3] The same thing is obviously true of Tarski's method of creating multi-level sets for verifying truth-claims within sets, which was really just a refinement of the typological hierarchies that Russell and Whitehead established to prevent logical impossibilities from arising within their system.

> languages […] The totality of possible values of *x* which might seem to be involved in the totality of propositions of the form *fx* is not admitted by Mr. Wittgenstein among the things that can be spoken of, for this is no other than the totality of things in the world, and thus involves the attempt to conceive the world as a whole. (Russell in Wittgenstein, 1922/1981: p. 22)

Russell is referring, of course, to the series of propositions that lead Wittgenstein to his final, famous conclusion: "What we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence" (Wittgenstein, 1922/1981: prop. 7, p. 189). Not only does Russell's "loophole" obviously foreshadow Tarski's work, but it also potentially allows a set to describe its own unresolvable uncertainty, a potentiality that would be reached and fully described when Gödel invented "Gödel numbers," which are computable sets represented as integers. As we will see, this had unbelievably important implications in a wide range of fields, including computer science, neurobiology, and systems theory.

Russell is also able to foresee, albeit with rather abject terror, the possibility of infinitely recursive hierarchies:

> These difficulties suggest to my mind some such possibility as this: that every language has, as Mr. Wittgenstein says, a structure concerning which *in the language*, nothing can be said, but that there may be another language dealing with the structure of the first language, and having itself a new structure, and that **to this hierarchy of languages there may be no limit**.[4] Mr. Wittgenstein would of course reply that his whole theory is applicable unchanged to the totality of such languages. The only retort would be to deny that there is any such totality. The totalities concerning which Mr. Wittgenstein holds that it is impossible to speak logically are nevertheless thought by him to exist, and are the subject-matter of his mysticism…I do not see how any easier hypothesis can escape from Mr. Wittgenstein's conclusions. (Russell in Wittgenstein, 1922/1981: p. 23)

That means that in 1922, when Russell wrote his introduction to the *Tractatus*, Russell was fully aware of Wittgenstein's mysticism, which clearly moves beyond logicism towards a mystical reckoning with totality that recalls Immanuel Kant's category of the "noumenal" and Kant's definitions of the "supersensible." He was also aware of the implications for his own work: "The totality resulting from our hierarchy would be not merely logically inexpressible, but a fiction, a mere delusion" (Russell, in Wittgenstein, 1922/1981: p. 23). Russell is using "our" abstractly here—he is not deliberately referring to himself and Whitehead—but he is also inadvertently announcing the impending death of the mathematical totality he had attempted to adduce in the *Principia*.

[4] Boldfacing mine.

The same problem that plagues any attempt to create a "totality" of languages, and higher-level metalanguages to verify those languages, is equally fatal to any attempt to create a totality of sets. In other words, Russell was one step away from using Wittgenstein to demonstrate the interchangeable nature of linguistic and mathematical logic (which Tarski would go on to codify), and then using the infinite regress of metalinguistic truth-claims to prove that no set can express a totality (which Gödel would prove nine years later). Consider this: the resurgence of interest in Kant that has enlivened recent decades of philosophical research is already foreshadowed by the *Tractatus* itself, which abounds with Kantian language and concepts.[5]

Furthermore, the path to this renaissance of interest, in which this blog itself participates, does not primarily lead through the "outsider" history of Continental philosophy, which continued the projects of organicism and transcendental critique during the reign of logicist analysis. Continental philosophy in the first half of the 20th Century was largely willing to replace Kant with one of his successors, G.W.F. Hegel. Hegel did not preserve in his own work very many features of Kant's transcendental critiques, although he draws heavily on Kant's system of perceptual boundaries and modalities to describe their dialectical "sublation."

Instead, it was Kant's relevance to 20th century mathematics and natural science that brought him back into vogue. Kant's writings helped expand our ability to apply recent scientific discoveries more broadly. The long list includes discoveries made by structural linguists about the logic of syntax and language acquisition. Kant made it easier to knit together the logical structure of language with the fact that language could not be acquired by children if it were not present *a priori* as a substratal, innate capacity (and limit) of the human brain.[6] Even more crucial to this Kantian renaissance was the work of physicists Albert Einstein and Werner Heisenberg. Einstein's Theory of General Relativity and Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle both suggest limitations on our ability to arrive at *any* empirical description of the universe as a totality, limitations that later provoked key mathematicians and scientists to return to Kant in a mood of wonder and admiration.

So much for Rorty's idea that analytic "scientism," and the adjacent positions of the logicists, were poisonous to the 20th Century reputations of philosophers from bygone centuries. What about Russell's hostility to organicism? Well, first of all, it is quite possible

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[5] See, for example, "Each thing is, as it were, in a space […] I cannot imagine the thing without the space" (Wittgenstein, 1922/1981: prop. 2.013, p. 33), which succinctly re-states Kant's "transcendental exposition of the concept of space," in *The Critique of Pure Reason.*

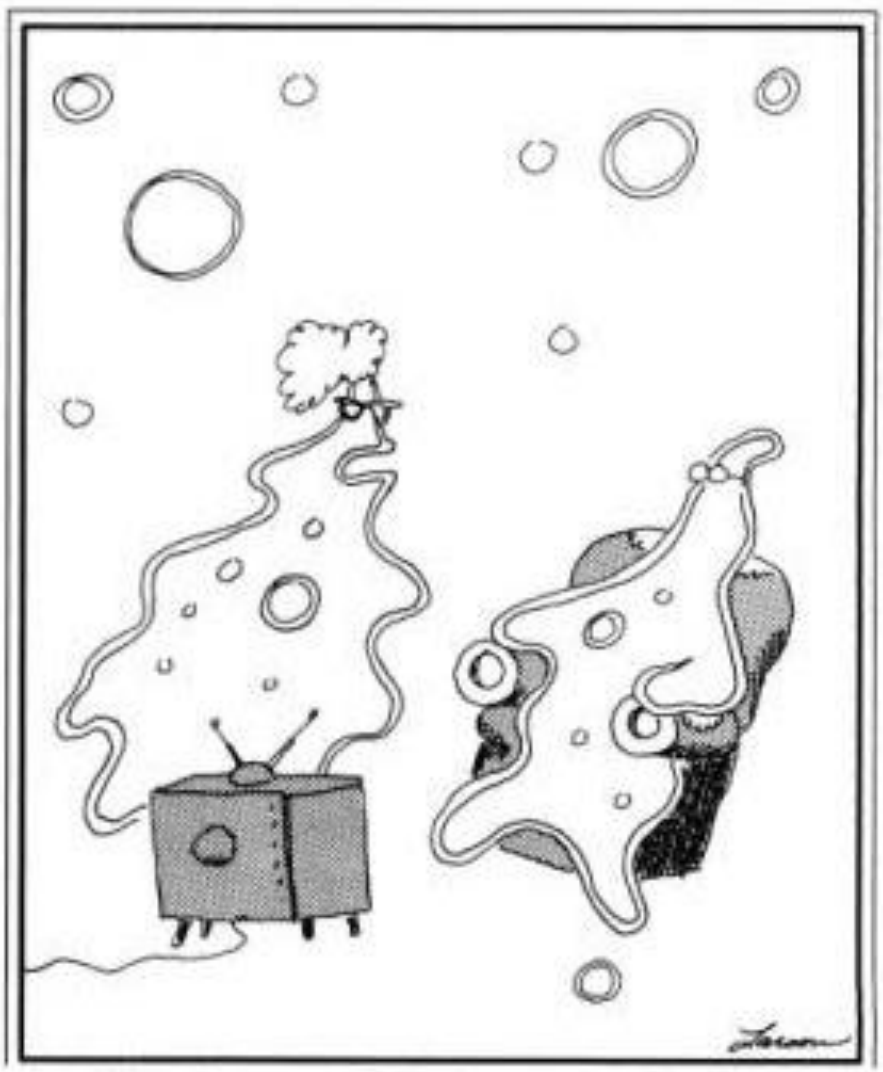
[6] I am thinking of work by structural linguists like Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Levi-Strauss, as well as Noam Chomsky's famously groundbreaking work on language acquisition.

to overstate Russell's success. Organicism did not fail to thrive, as Hanna's own psychological analysis of Russell's motives incidentally shows: "it's also clear from Russell's correspondence and other biographical evidence that he was jealously annoyed by Bergson's great fame during the first three decades of the 20th century" (Hanna, 2022: p. 54). Also, Russell was right to be suspicious of Bergson. Bergson was not some kind of intuitive *savant*, or even a purely speculative bootstrapper like Rene Descartes. He was trying to be scientific, which is why he attributed many features of consciousness and organic life to an *élan vital*, a "life force" posited by 19th century scientists who did not have the tools to describe life as a system with emergent properties. There is no such thing, however, as the *élan vital*, and Bergson faded into obscurity when vitalism was abandoned by the scientific community at large. He is mostly known today thanks to the enthusiastic reception he received from Marcel Proust, who incorporated his theories into a great novel, *In Search of Lost Time*. This is probably a shame, since Bergson's work speaks eloquently to unsolved problems raised, within neuroscience, by researchers like Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (*Flow*) and Daniel Kahneman (*Thinking, Fast and Slow*). Nonetheless, surely organicism's embarrassing debts to the muddy sidetrack of vitalism counts as a mistake equal to, or greater than, the Gödel-shaped hole in the side of the *Principia Mathematica*.

Moreover, organicism's great comeback would arrive in the most unexpected way: through the intervention of an American mathematician, Norbert Wiener, who invented cybernetics in the 1940s, and the work of Austrian biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy. Today, cybernetics is a subdivision of "systems theory," a gigantic edifice that expanded Bertalanffy's preliminary "General Systems Theory." Systems theory became the foundation for ecological science, communications theory, information theory, chaos theory, complexity theory, computer science, and artificial intelligence. Today, dozens of cutting-edge theorists have built bridges connecting quantum theory, the discoveries of Einstein and Isaac Newton, systems theory, and the modern technologies indebted to them (the transistor, the microchip, etc.). That's how, in 2024, we can see that a version of Tarski's semantics of truth (for example) enables us to create the error correction algorithms, and hierarchized processing of information, that detects and corrects quantum noise in electric currents and quantum computers.

Even more exciting, advances in cybernetics and (organicist) systems theories have made possible promising speculations about the nature of consciousness, especially the work of Douglas Hofstadter, who synthesized systems theory with Gödel's incompleteness theorem (in *Gödel, Escher, Bach*) to explain how living organisms can use the logic of self-reference to become "aware," figuratively or literally, of their own existence, limits, and entropy. Even the *élan vital* may eventually return, transfigured, as the "allostatic responses" that enable living systems to subsist, reproduce, and shield

themselves over time. If it does, however, it will bear the imprint of analytic (and post-analytic) theorists like Kurt Gödel and Alfred Tarski, none of whom could have achieved what they did without standing on the shoulders of "idiots" like Bertrand Russell. If you'll pardon the joke, they did more than just a supreme job of error correction on Russell and Whitehead. Their work suggested that uncertainty, noise, and incompleteness could be predicted and transformed into technologies that help us understand and preserve life, information, and the global environment. Putting such impossibilities to work has already transformed the world, and modern researchers and thinkers are still using them to expand the frontiers of knowledge today.



"Stimulus, response! Stimulus, response! Don't you ever *think*?"

Fig. 1: Gary Larson's anthropocentric take on allostasis: vitalism's last, great hope.

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Conclusion: The Philosophical Incompleteness Theorem

To say that the work of Analytic philosophers, their students, and their critics, helped lead to advances throughout science and mathematics may appear, at first, to be irrelevant to the history of philosophy as an institutional field in its own right. It is *absolutely* relevant to this history, however, for the following three reasons:

It gives the lie to the idea that Analytic philosophy "disappeared" without a trace after its mistakes were finally laid bare. When it was proved "impossible," Analytic philosophy did not disappear; it was transformed by contact with other fields of learning. Like the dinosaurs, specifically the little therapods, evolving into birds.

Some of the most important applications of the work done by Analytic philosophers leads, inexorably, to problems that "Continental philosophers" with organicist sympathies also faced and could not solve by themselves. Modern biology, neuroscience, and environmental science, for example, all rely on definitions of organisms and systems that combine ideas from both sides of philosophy's civil war.

Consider, once more, Russell's frightened, insightful reaction to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Consider Whitehead's own later shift towards a more phenomenological and holistic philosophy (in *Process and Reality*). The story of philosophy is, or used to be, marked by an endless chain of fruitful collisions…it was only through collaborative networks of scientists, mathematicians, philosophers, and others (including artists like Proust) that our current, greatly expanded understanding of the universe emerged.

Therefore, when philosophy descended into civil war, not only did its own internal complexity suffer, but the "side" of Continental philosophy was deformed into, among other things, a sentimental and relativistic attachment to the entire canonical history of philosophy. Everything, one felt, that had been so severely marginalized until the 1960s, probably had some kind of claim to the truth, in the same sense that literature can be fictional and also "true." This makes for good philosophy courses—Rorty's course, at Stanford, introduced me to Kierkegaard, for instance, along with Kant and Hegel—but it is also a dead-end. Performing the greatest hits of the philosophical canon is no substitute for arguing, in the present, about the nature of the universe. Philosophy cannot survive without a continuing interest in the universal truth of its own propositions.

We have to remember that Hegel, for example, did not perceive *himself* as a wild theorist or a lazy syncretist. His "magnum opus," *The Science of Logic*, both tries to be and is an early expression of logicism. Bergson did not want to be wrong about the *élan vital*. Wittgenstein did not want to be obscure or haphazard, though his work can seem like it is both things, a lot of the time. One of the most deplorable features of modern philosophizing, such as Robert Sapolsky's *Determined*, is its willingness to decorate its own theoretical limitations with a relativistic shrug. Sapolsky cheerfully mentions that many of his friends disagree with him about the nature of free will, but he does not let this bother him very much. Similarly, in *The Big Picture*, physicist Sean Carroll talks about religious faith as something other people have, something he admires but chooses to eschew. One *should* be bothered. That's what makes Thoreau such a refreshing companion: not a broad, genial spirit, but a lot of prickly moralizing. Thoreau aims in our general direction at all times; thank God for that.

It should not come as a surprise to us, either, that the study of what cannot be known, cannot be expressed, and cannot be totalized would lead us towards other proving-grounds, in a wholly different sphere than scientific objectivity or technological progress. I am referring, of course, to the living proof that philosophers give us by making committed decisions about how to live. There are, generally speaking, two overlapping models in philosophy: the work of self-fashioning and the life of principle, and the path of objective, academic analysis. Neither can exist without the other. Deprive him of his truths, and Socrates becomes as useless as Diogenes: a rebel without a cause. Divorce the conduct of life from the problems of philosophy, and the result is not merely uninspiring, but actively in error. It fails the test that Hanna calls "a strict evidential appeal to human experience, which I call 'the criterion of phenomenological adequacy for metaphysical theories'" (Hanna, 2022: p. 66). The feeling of emptiness that haunts the *oeuvre* of the logical positivists springs from their inability, in most cases, to go beyond a shabby rationalism in their diffident attempts to explain the ethical foundations of their considerable labors.

There was one notable exception to this generally woeful lack. Before I tell that story, however, I want to acknowledge the importance of Quine's work to the undoing of Analytic philosophy *and* the problem of how to live. In his response to the Vienna School of logical positivism, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," first published in 1951, Quine rejected the positivist distinction between "empirical" observations and "Analytical" judgements, which the positivists based on a distinction between unchanging, starry constellations of rational, propositional thinking, and the verifiable—but logically equivalent, and indeterminate—results we get when we measure active processes taking place in the world. The logical positivists weren't inventing this from whole cloth; the distinction is already foreshadowed in Aristotle, in his theories of causality and accident.

It also resembles, very closely, Kant's distinction between Analytic and synthetic judgements. Quine's article, which many people read as the "last word" on the Analytical/empirical dichotomy, was (like Gödel's work) not merely critical, but also generative. Quine advanced the concept of interconnected "webs of belief." These were based partly on correspondences between our ideas and our experiences, and partly on the human desire for a coherent set of beliefs and ethical precepts that remain—despite our best efforts, and sometimes even *because* of them—only partially grounded in the vagaries of our contingent, fallible, and mortal lives.

From a neuroscientific standpoint, Quine's "webs of beliefs" are thought-provoking forerunners to modern research into bias, decision-making, and the categorization of long-term memories. (Much of this work was taken further, but not far enough, by Daniel Kahneman, in the book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*.) But from an ethical standpoint, it is sufficient to remark that Quine's theory of experience and belief holds open a space for those insuperable ethical divergences produced by differences in individual experience, including the cultural, economic, and political heritances that form the backdrop of each life. Such divides can never be fully dissolved by words. They can, however, be acted out, according to each individual's necessarily distinct ideas about which ethical principles to believe in, and how to realize such principles in action. Quine's cautious attitude towards human fallibility, in which respect he is a better reader of Kant than his enemies, is also a reminder that the project of philosophical discourse enjoins us to fight our battles on paper, while allowing each person to live out his beliefs, as much as possible. The opposite of sentimental relativism is not absolutist intolerance, but an ongoing conversation among the living and the dead.

It has never been the case that the line between philosophical belief and outward behavior was an easy one to draw. What makes Socrates so fascinating, as a character preserved for us by Plato, is precisely how surprising he is. He is absolutely committed to searching for "the Good," but he approaches it with irony and a delicate sense of restraint.[7] In Plato, one finds many rather direct statements about "the good," but an enigmatic figure stands behind those words at all times, and often chooses to behave in ways we might never have guessed. Returning from Athens to a somewhat nearer era, there was once a young man, of aristocratic birth, who came from a rich and prospering family. He became a philosopher, but his work was interrupted by the outbreak of the First World War, where he served (on the Kaiser's side) and won three different medals

7 See, for example, Socrates's demure behavior at the drunken orgy of the Symposium; his refusal to join Euthyphro in condemning Euthyphro's father, who has committed manslaughter; and his decision to enrage the citizen's tribunal assigned to his case in the course of the Apology.

for the bravery he displayed as an artillery officer. Historian and biographer Wolfram Eilenberger sums up his life afterward like this:

> A return to the old world of Vienna would have been unthinkable for him even had that world still existed. Neither war nor philosophy had freed him from the riddle and the misfortune that he was to himself. He returned from the war transformed but by no means clarified. In order to combat the remaining chaos within him, he spent long months in the Italian POW camp at Campo Cassino drawing up the most radical plan imaginable. First of all: signing over his entire fortune to his siblings. Second: never again philosophy. Third: a life of honest toil—and lasting poverty. (Eilenberger, 2020: p. 41)

Anyone suffering from the misapprehension that *Walden* ought to present, for our delectation, a direct correspondence between the life Thoreau lived and the words that he wrote, ought to keep the examples of Socrates and this admirable young man both in mind. For, as Eilenberger paraphrases his remarks to one teacher and mentor,

> A good life is based not on objective grounds but on radically subjective decisions. It cannot be meaningfully said what a good life consists of; it must show itself in real, everyday execution. (Eilenberger, 2020: pp. 40-41)

He was talking to Bertrand Russell. The young man's name was Ludwig Wittgenstein. The work of holding up the *Tractatus* and finding, inside of it, the key to his life, remains to be done even now.

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