

Rethinking the task of philosophy for the 21st century

by

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Preface

We are gathered here today to once again engage in the project of rethinking the task of philosophy, or at the very least, to establish that there exists some need for doing so. The reason for this, in my view, is twofold. First, contemporary philosophy today finds itself at a dead end. The contemporary “analytic” philosophy has failed to achieve in its supremely immodest ends to dissolve or otherwise resolve the major problems of philosophy by reducing them to problems of conceptual analysis and application of symbolic logic. At the same time, continental thought has failed to live up to what I see to be its primary charter and valuable contribution to the dialectic of western thinking, which brings me to my next point. Second, philosophy has failed to enter into a critical confrontation with what Husserl called the Crisis of the European Sciences, and what Nietzsche and Heidegger call by its more familiar name, nihilism. This crisis is one which affects all levels of society and that is already in the process of bringing about the end of thinking itself.

Only a hundred years after the analytic/continental split, we find ourselves in a position where we must seriously ask ourselves what was this crisis in the foundations of philosophy, and what progress has been made in remedying it? It is not our purpose presently to provide a full answer to the former question, which would require a thorough historical account, though a partial answer will be fleshed out over the course of our present investigation. However, with respect to the latter, we must respond that the only progress we have made in addressing the crisis at the very foundations of philosophy and culture generally is that we have learned to forget it even exists.

What is common to Frege, and Husserl, is that both sought to set philosophy on the course of a secure science. The demand that philosophizing should take the form of a scientific enterprise has been likened by Martin Heidegger in his “Letter on Humanism” to judging a fish by whether or not it can thrive on dry land. It was (and in some circles, still is) supposed that this new scientific

philosophy had been achieved with the “linguistic turn.” A hundred years of practice have born out the fact that this new style of philosophy is no less immune from paradoxes and confusion than any of the supposedly inferior philosophies of the past. Indeed, it could be argued that we are more confused about the nature of reality than ever.

To listen to the contemporary thinkers of the day in either camp, one would not imagine that they were living in a time of profound crisis for philosophy, yet, this crisis persists. It is approaching a critical point of no return. It is my purpose in the following to offer some suggestions for dealing with this crisis, and this will take the form of a rethinking of the task for philosophy in an age which is coming under increasing domination by science and technology in all spheres of life. More than that however, my purpose here is to insist and draw attention to the fact of this crisis, for today it remains widely unacknowledged, or at the very least acknowledgement of it persists, but as an impolite topic of conversation. One way or another, whether or not we are active or passive agents in this movement, philosophy in the 21st century will be undergoing radical changes which are to affect the destiny of thinking for a long time to come. At the face of this critical turning point is where we are called to focus our intellectual attention in the present age.

The Pandora's Box

There can be no question that the natural sciences have inadvertently opened up a pandora's box upon global society. What has been unleashed upon the world in the cultural sphere is a dangerous new state of affairs, where, paradoxically enough, it is possible for any individual to seemingly hold any view without any danger of being “refuted.” Why should this be the ultimate result of our knowledge being finally placed upon a secure course by the natural sciences? What are the implications of this situation for philosophy? Any question which does not directly fall under the purview of the natural sciences to answer has become a no-mans land. This is simply to say that we have lost any standards at all for talking about anything besides the motions of elementary particles

aside from cultural hand-me-down's from a pre-scientific age, whose meanings we no longer are able to fully understand. A profound confusion has overtaken western society as a result of this.

Science has replaced the role of the Church in western society, but it cannot in principle carry out those same tasks which were necessary for the cultural development and cohesion of society, and so it operates in this capacity in a deficient mode. It is a point of progress that we no longer burn heretics. It is not a point of progress that we have a society which has splintered off into a kaleidoscope of different heretical sects with completely inconsummate views of how the world works, and "standards" for argument (or, at least, the simulation of argument). That the reductionistic materialism of the natural sciences serves as the fundamental ground of the contemporary worldview is today beyond any debate. However, this materialism was not meant to serve this function, and neglects many of its fundamental duties as the ground of the contemporary worldview as a consequence of its origins within the development of the natural sciences. The proper objects of the natural sciences get equivocated with what is "real" in the prevailing ideology (an ideology which is masked by the faces of a thousand heresies with no one True doctrine), rendering any non-scientific phenomena unintelligible and "unreal." This reductionism has created an unbridgeable gap between "subject" and "object," "fact" and "value," which serves the methodological purpose of keeping the sciences pure, but at the same time has the ideological impact of generating a pervasive nihilism. Human life, in short, becomes unthinkable--meaningless. This is the situation we are confronted with when we speak of the problem of nihilism.

The social aspect of nihilism lies in this. The psyche of the social body loses the ability to interpret itself in a unifying, or narrativizing way. Life and history cannot be conceived (or experienced) as other than a series of disconnected accidents. The inevitable cultural impact of this radical objectification is a sort of "ego-death" of the culture. An example of this movement can be found in the development of psychoanalysis into mere psychiatry. Psychoanalysis is an attempt to combat this nihilism at least insofar as it attempts to bring an individual into a confrontation with the fact that they are not just a disjointed set of experiences. Psychoanalysis is an attempt to bring an individual into his or her own essence, to help them uncover who they really are. The psychiatry of

today, on the other hand, is all about bringing abnormal behavior into agreement with the normal functioning of the social machine. There is no self examination, no deeper meaning to life, no greater good, just chemical imbalances which need to be resolved. If there is any aspect of society where the impact of this nihilism is any more apparent, it is in the way we have come to view and treat the psychological life of individuals. Do we treat society the same way we treat the individual? If so, what does this mean? But I digress.

In this way, the alienation and atomization of individuals in so-called “post-industrial” societies can be seen as having its true roots in the development, or rather, undermining activity of the radical ego-death of the superstructure. This, in contrast to the ordinary marxist/materialist interpretation which attributes the development of technology and mechanical industry as the primary causes of this current “crisis of modernity.” The source of alienation is rather to be found in the development of nihilism that has sprung out from the naturalistic worldview.

The problem of nihilism is the primary challenge facing culture today, for it threatens the very foundations of culture itself. I think (and, I believe I say nothing profoundly original in saying this) that this is really the main issue that intelligent neo-conservative and reactionary figures around the globe in our time have been attempting to confront. Common to all contemporary reactionary projects is a fundamental recognition that the scientific worldview suffers from a value deficiency (a phrase which is stuck inside of the scientific paradigm itself). They see this nihilism overtaking the spirits of their peoples, and they desire to roll back the clock to a time when human beings were more at home in the world. This often takes the form of religious fundamentalism, tied together with revivals in nationalism. The benevolent lie, or the myth must be reconstituted in order to attempt to hold society together. Liberal society sought to do away with such social myths in order to establish a society finally founded upon a purely “rational” basis. However, this conception of rationality was too narrow, and has plunged us into a seemingly intractable nihilism. From this perspective, it might even be possible to be sympathetic to the Straussians--the key word here being “might.”

In a way, the neo-conservative solution is rather ingenious, because it takes advantage of this situation where everything has lost its ground in order to assert the things which used to be grounded,

in order to throw up an appearance or simulation of ground. The hope is that eventually after long repetition everyone will forget that the Pandora's box has been opened. Nihilism supposedly is problematic because, as Sartre says "If there is no God, then everything is permitted." The neo-conservative solution is to say in response to this "If everything is permitted, then so is God."

There is an obvious problem with this solution. This problem is that despite its best intentions the neo-conservative solution still cynically accepts the basic premises, and plays by the same rules as every other position under the influence of nihilism. To quote Martin Heidegger from his *On the*

Question of Being:

No one of any insight would today wish to deny that nihilism in its most diverse and hidden forms is the "normal condition" of humankind...the best evidence of this is provided by the exclusively re-active attempts to oppose nihilism that, instead of entering into a critical encounter with its essence, undertake a restoration of the past. They seek salvation in taking flight, namely, in taking flight from any insight into the metaphysical position of the human being as worthy of question...

This is what I mean when I say the Pandora's box has been opened, not only has nihilism been unleashed, but there is no way to really put it back into the box. Any attempt to reconstitute society on the basis of a new mythology is ultimately doomed to fail. We are not capable of believing with our whole hearts anymore in such myths. At best, we can only manage a mere simulation of this kind of belief. Culturally, we are already stuck in nihilism. The ego-death has already taken place, and it cannot simply be reconstructed through a going backwards and veneration of broken idols and dead flags.

The influence of nihilism is clearest in this respect, it is a salient feature of postmodern belief that our beliefs and their justifications are in general profoundly superficial. It is taken for granted that questioning them will only lead to confusion and aporia, and never clarity or knowledge, so in general this is never undertaken outside of the academy. In our present age, questioning has been replaced by googling. In what group is this more clearly exemplified than in the present stock of American reactionaries? They have taken this epistemic cynicism, which is essential to nihilism, to such extremes that any reference to objective facts has largely been erased from ideological discourse. Listening to the radio or watching television for an hour should be enough to support this claim. They

develop a matrix of platitudes around their ideologies whereby they already know what to say about everything they may encounter and always prefer splitting reality in half to cutting it at the joints. So called “liberals” may be no less guilty of this, though they are often less given to myth making (the myth of American destiny, the myth of the red menace, etc.) “liberals” are nihilistic in a much cruder, more obvious sense of the term. For the contemporary reactionary, every issue is conceived of in a Manichean way as a battle of good versus evil. Every recalcitrant fact is rejected and interpreted as a lie, and this is possible precisely because “everything is permitted.” Nihilism opens up the space for a superficial simulation of political discourse to pass itself off as real.

In a way, this movement of nihilism (which is by no means the final stroke, though the end, the zero-point, draws near) must also be seen as playing the final act in the myth of Pandora. At first, Pandora was curious as to what was inside the box, and, in spite of all the authorities warning her not to open it, she opens the box. She achieved her goal of learning its contents, but was mortified by the horrors she had unleashed upon the world, and, at the critical moment, she decides to shut the box. This is what neo-conservatism is about, trying to shut the box before anything else gets out.

However, it must be remembered that in shutting the box, Pandora does not save mankind from more horrors. The horrors have all been released. Shutting the box turns out to be an even more disastrous mistake than opening it in the first place had been, because, what she traps inside the box is, of course, hope. This is what the neo-conservatives, who are the only ones to even recognize nihilism as a problem today, have failed to realize. The hope for the future is not to come from trying to glue together the shattered remains of the past and recreate a pre-nihilistic society. Myth can no longer wield the power it once did in a post-scientific age. The only hope for the future we can have is to come from within the Pandora’s box itself.

Philosophy is useless

I had one of those terrible encounters recently where one is cornered into admitting that one does philosophy for a living to a non-philosopher. They recounted to me an anecdote which I believe is very telling, and which I would like to start off by sharing. It just so happened that this person, when they were in college, took an introduction to philosophy course which was taught by an Englishman. He started off the class by asking his students a simple question, "What is philosophy?" He gave the students about 5 minutes or so to think it over, after which he provided the correct answer: "Philosophy is useless."

What is the significance of this story? The first thing I would like to point out is that the position of this professor is one which is only not uncommon among the public, but also within the academy, especially within philosophy itself. While one might not be willing to admit that the style or branch of philosophy one works in is useless, the charge is often levelled against the remainder of philosophical thought that it is at best useless, and at worst complete claptrap or madness. The origins of this situation are to be sought in a development which began in the 19th century and was consummated in the unfolding of the intellectual history of the West in the 20th century. We are not here to give an account of how we got here, but rather of where we are to go, now that we have arrived in this situation. The arbitrary turning of the historical odometer provides a convenient excuse for intellectual "spring cleaning." It is my thesis that the time has come for us as philosophers to engage this task in a serious way.

The fundamental question we are asking then, is "what should the task of philosophy be now that the 21st century has arrived?" This question must be formulated in terms of what peculiar problems we are facing today as philosophers. After the 20th century, we now find ourselves in a kind of universal state of aporia, accompanied by a lack of focus that has not existed since the time of the pre-socratics. Philosophizing in the west has had the rug swept out from underneath its feet. Every era heretofore has had certain premises and problems which could always be agreed upon and served as the starting point for philosophical debates which were able to progress given this starting point.

However, now every question is up for dispute, and this has given rise to certain customs which create a situation where at the same time none of them are up for dispute, for the sake of maintaining a semblance of professionalism. All of this in spite of the fact that, as Richard Rorty says “nowadays we are all commonsensically materialist and utilitarian.” Philosophy’s attempt to break from the tradition and set itself on a firm, unbiased footing (with the linguistic turn in the anglosphere, and the phenomenological/psychoanalytic reduction in the continental tradition) has plunged it into this state of absolute confusion. Is it indeed possible to break this deadlock, now that we are buried under a century of this new tradition?

In order to approach an answer to this critical question, several other questions, in my opinion, must first be raised. First, we must question concerning the situation facing philosophy today. This first question should be formulated not in terms of the philosophical problems we are facing today, but rather the question must be formulated in terms of “What dangers does philosophy face in the 21st century?” It should have already been established that philosophy faces an internal threat--we profess the uselessness of our profession daily. In addition to this internal threat there is today an external threat which poses itself for philosophy, and this is not of no philosophical relevance either, as certain political and cultural conditions have always been necessary for the existence of philosophy and have determined the style and manner in which philosophy has been conducted. The conditions for the possibility of any meaningful or productive philosophizing are being eroded daily.

Also, we must raise the question of what philosophy can be, within the historical context of the contemporary era, insofar as our pedagogical task here is to set philosophy on a new footing to meet the challenges posed to thinking by the 21st century. Along with this question there is a new question particular to our present age which must also be raised. It has become dubitable that there is any value whatsoever for the individual and for society as a whole that people be wise, and furthermore, that wisdom is even possible. This attitude is symptomatic of the contemporary stage of nihilism which is fast approaching (or, which perhaps has already arrived at) the zero-point which Heidegger discusses in “On the Question of Being.”

The Danger facing Philosophy: Who Thinks today? What is Called Philosophy?

Already in the famous 1966 Der Spiegel interview Martin Heidegger declared that philosophy had been replaced by “cybernetics.” This is a statement that today we must take deathly seriously.

Philosophy has been dealing with an identity crisis ever since the scientific revolution seems to have resolved most of the great traditional (metaphysical) questions which philosophers used to investigate in favor of the atomists. The result of this has been a turn towards the social sciences in what is called continental thinking and the so-called “linguistic turn” in the analytic camp. The result in both cases, though decidedly more in the latter than the former, has been an abandonment of the tradition and history of philosophy in favor of new projects which as of yet have failed to yield much of great value in my view. The linguistic turn has failed to put philosophy on the course of a secure science. This is evidenced by the fact that every generation of analytic philosophers comes up with a new set of key “problems of philosophy” to play around with and ultimately discard once no consensus has been arrived at. The only thing keeping together the pretensions of scientificity in the analytic camp at this point is its herd mentality. With the failure of the linguistic turn, we must raise the question of how to move beyond this disastrous misstep. Are there more ancient philosophical themes that can be recovered and returned to, despite the wild success of the natural sciences and the fact that we are all today supposed to be democrats? What are the new philosophical issues we will have to raise after we have abandoned the linguistic turn?

These are issues which will be treated more in detail in the second part. The external danger faced by philosophy in the 21st century is not the advance of modern science as some sort of rival to philosophy. Philosophers are often of the attitude that what goes on outside the ivory tower is of little consequence to philosophy as a discipline. I shall here launch a defense of the opposite thesis, that in our time thinking is being beset upon by several potentially fatal dangers which must be combated if philosophy is to survive the 21st century. It might be legitimate to raise the question of whether or not

this poses a sociological rather than a philosophical issue. In any case, it is an issue which directly concerns philosophers and how we are to practice philosophy in the new era.

The dangers I am speaking of are (1) the total mobilization and domination of technology and operationalism in contemporary culture, and (2) the problem of reductionism and nihilism. We shall address (1) first. There are two aspects to this danger, how we are allowed to think and what we are allowed to think in the present age.

It might have been more appropriate to say of the first aspect, that it concerns how we are *not* allowed to think; how we are disincentivized and discouraged from thinking. The time where reflection and thinking are no longer necessary for self-sustenance has arrived in the west. This is something which should give every philosopher great pause. Philosophy itself has always been the preoccupation of an isolated elite literati class, but it has always, until now, found some way to trickle back down into popular culture, and the effect of the broader culture upon philosophy itself ought not to be underestimated either. The project of philosophy is often set by intellectual trends in the broader culture, Christianity in the middle ages for example, or secularism in the enlightenment era. Philosophers can take no credit for these shifts in the basis upon which our thinking is grounded. They were rather the result of historical movements which began with the broader culture, including the common people. We are entering a world-historical era where philosophers and intellectuals in general are about to become increasingly detached from society as a whole unless something changes drastically.

The effects of technology upon thinking are most obvious in the realm of political discourse. Political discourse in the United States at least is something which rarely occurs face to face anymore. It has for the most part retreated into the lawless land of cyberspace, if people bother to engage in it at all. This situation serves not only to lower the level of public political discourse, but also to put a freeze on the dialectical development of ideas. The only movement of ideas in our public discourse is ultimately towards increasing simplification and increasing leveling down. The final formula for our

popular ideology has been discovered in the newest instantiation of neoliberalism, which reigns unquestioned in popular media and therefore in the popular consciousness. Insofar as this ideology is increasingly becoming simplified to the point where its superficiality immunizes it from proper criticism, it could be properly said that we are entering into an era where we encounter not ideology itself, but merely a semblance or virtual simulation of ideology.

It is possible today to track the train of thought of popular consciousness through the popular media. What gets revealed by this process is that we have entered a strange set of affairs where popular consciousness has grown mostly dependent upon the media. When the media speaks, the popular consciousness echoes. Whereof the media is silent, the popular consciousness is also silent. The media performs the function of not only giving us “common sense” but of giving us also a set of issues which “common sense” has its “common sense” attitudes about. There is supposedly widespread cynicism about the media today. However, this does not change the fact that whatever remains of political discourse in this country is dominated by topics of the media’s choosing, and carried out under parameters that the media sets for the most part.

The situation of contemporary Americanized humanity is to be positively drowning in common sense on almost every subject. Before the advent of the internet, it would have been a productive practice to if say, one was trying to buy a guitar, to go around to different music shops and see where one could get the best price. Now the situation has completely changed. With the advent of the internet, prices nationwide conform to the same standard. The same thing may be said of opinions. Whether they come in the fox news/am radio style of neoliberalism or in the msnbc/npr flavor of neoliberalism is of absolutely no importance. The debates we have with each other are effectively all but scripted by the media whose job it is to process, sanitize, and feed us back our own common sense.

One of the tasks of the philosophers of the present in each case must be to immunize themselves and develop strategies for resisting this technologically dominated order intellectually. The sort of domination we have just finished describing is nothing less than an insidious, invisible form of intellectual slavery, which will ultimately corrupt every level of our thinking if we allow ourselves to

get too carried away by the current of information and common sense which we are currently plagued with today. The principal danger here is that thinking in the future will be running completely on autopilot at every level, endlessly regurgitating the same opinions over and over again, never viewing any setback as a recalcitrant experience which requires a fundamental rethinking of one's system of beliefs, always and endlessly performing the same ideological backflips to justify neoliberalism over and over again until the end of time. Nihilism threatens to turn the current web of beliefs into an impenetrable fortress, and therefore bring about an end to thinking itself. This is the future we face unless we find some way to unfreeze public discourse.

Technological domination of thinking poses itself as an existential threat to public discourse and to philosophizing itself. The second great existential threat which philosophy must face up to in the 21st century is the threat of nihilism. We have already characterized most of contemporary philosophy as being nihilistic, but what does this mean? Nihilism was formulated originally by Nietzsche thusly, that the highest values devalue themselves. Contemporary philosophy is nihilistic insofar as it is complacent in this movement. It will be argued in the following that the compartmentalization of philosophy which has occurred since the linguistic turn and the particularist/materialist reductionism which is still in fashion are all symptomatic of nihilism and threaten to perform the task of nothing less than thinking philosophy out of existence, insofar as it becomes methodologically uncouth to do anything that remotely resembles genuine philosophizing.

Though the problem of nihilism was first to be explicitly formulated in the 19th century, it was first addressed much earlier by Plato, in dialogues such as *The Republic*, *the Gorgias*, and others. The enemy back in Plato's time, as it is now, was nihilism. Plato was the first philosopher to understand the intimate connection between particularism, materialism, and nihilism, which he characterized as opposed in general to genuine philosophy. What form does our contemporary philosophical nihilism take? Much of analytic philosophy does not know what to make of universals, other than by analogy to mathematical set theory. Particularist reductionism and anti-essentialism are in vogue among even these intellectuals who pride themselves on being more "rational" than their

continental counterparts, a claim which undoubtedly has Plato rolling over in his grave. The scientism of much of analytic philosophy is found to be at the root of this nihilism. Although this is an illusion which is shared by fewer and fewer philosophers, analytic philosophy still operates at least as if it were under the pretension that the linguistic turn had put philosophy on the course of a secure science (whether this happens as a matter of mere habit, or it is genuinely believed to be the case is often unclear.) Philosophers are to narrow their focus to ever more manageable problems in the hopes that eventually they will get something right, once and for all. The only problem with this is that, as we have said earlier, instead of clarifying and resolving the problems of philosophy once and for all, the linguistic turn has only had the effect of multiplying problems and making them even more intractable. We have arrived at agreement on a few issues. Everyone today is a materialist, thank god, and we have also figured out that “snow” is “white” iff “snow” is “white.” Philosophers who are thus enamoured with this conception of philosophy as a science have inadvertently operated to advance the movement of nihilism. The entire field of philosophy today stands as a testament to the transitoriness and arbitrary nature of human opinions, all of which today stand upon a supposedly superior rational materialist foundation without any danger of contradicting each other.

The nihilism is even more apparent when one draws one’s attention to the way the analytics study ethics. It is a universally acknowledged truth that all values are completely groundless and based upon merely “subjective” intuitions. The current best going contemporary theory of ethics is the theory of “moral perception” which attempts to construct a scientific methodology for ethics by drawing an analogy between the scientific method of observation and the sort of observation that allegedly takes place when we observe ethical situations in the real world. Supposedly, our ethics get more refined, closer to some “objective” sense of truth, the more we observe such ethical cases. All intuitions and opinions over time will ultimately come into conformity with the average, harmony, and human flourishing is to ultimately be the result of this. Where nihilism impacts this theory of moral perception is that it completely fails to make the distinction between appearance and reality, and therefore treats of the veil of appearances as all there is. It is not believed that we can get past what immediately appears before us in the phenomenon of our “moral intuitions.” Our moral intuitions are

automatically assumed to be the best we could have, given the “evidence” at our disposal although little argument is ever given for this. These intuitions are not subjected to scepticism and criticism, but rather are allowed free rule and free reign over our thought process. After all, if they turn out to be incorrect, they will surely be refuted by the evidence, will they not? Rather than a science of morals, the end result of the moral perception theory is a science of conformity with the common sense view. This type of averaging out or leveling down is symptomatic of nihilism, but what it really comes down to is the ultimate rejection of the moral reality in favor of a pseudo-scientific attention to empirical datum.

Underlying all nihilism is the complete disregard for the distinction between appearance and reality. The linguistic turn belies such a disregard, as does Husserlian phenomenology, both of which do not belong to the same historical epoch by coincidence. Under nihilism the world of appearance is affirmed as all that there is. No truth. Only a multitude of different points of view. And why should it not? Is it not from the senses from which springs all of our scientific knowledge? Paradoxically, this perspectivism is exemplified collectively by the failure of analytic philosophy to reach a consensus on any issue despite the fact that it is supposedly the way of philosophy which stands over and against any such relativisms about the truth. In practice, it is the most relativistic of all hitherto philosophies. Nothing is true (besides of course, such trite observations as “snow” is “white” iff...) therefore, everything is permitted.

Richard Rorty was quick to point out this shortcoming of analytic philosophy, that it would never ultimately “get it right” in the way that it pretends to be doing. However, his pragmatist solution also betrays the same analytic fixation with limiting philosophy to its “proper scope,” an impulse to, at least if it is shown that it is not possible to get things right, to never say so much that one might be getting things wrong. This is ultimately the endgame of analytic philosophy, to put philosophy on the course of a secure science, and if this proves to be impossible, to wipe all thinking clean from the face of the earth, so that nothing may stand in the way of the perfect rational functioning of the machinations of science and industry. A perfect whirring over and over again roars out of the heart of

the ultimately rational technological society, and besides this...silence. In order for philosophy to not be consumed by this silence in the 21st century it must abandon this self-defeating tendency.

Philosophers have always traditionally served as the curators and guardians of the wider culture. Since the secularization of the west has been completed this vital role of philosophy has been abandoned and neglected. This task that has been abandoned by philosophers has been picked up in recent times by popular economics. The common people look to neoliberalism and its marketplace analogies in order to seek guidance on issues such as what constitutes the good life. Again, any cursory examination of the public discourse which is supplied ready-made by mass media is enough to support this seemingly outlandish claim. Everywhere we are entreated to look at the corporation as the model for how we are to manage our lives, which question gets translated into a question of how we are to manage our finances. Any philosophy of the future must confront the dangers which we have just finished outlining above, and do so in a decisive way, if the future of human thought is to be secured in the coming century. This will entail a return of philosophers to their traditional roles as the curators and guardians of culture. What culture does there remain for there to protect, however? Does the necessity of this task not further entail the necessity of a wider reformation in ideology and in values? Is it possible that this reformation should usher forth from out of the spirit of philosophy itself?

What is Philosophy? What is left for Philosophers to do?

Philosophy is an almost invisible part of contemporary intellectual life. Most people outside of philosophy departments have no clear idea of what philosophy professors are supposed to contribute to culture. Few think it worth the trouble to inquire.

-Richard Rorty, *Naturalism and quietism*

We should do well to take comfort in the fact that few think it worth the trouble to inquire what it is precisely that philosophers are today busying themselves with. Philosophy finds itself at the beginning

of the 21st century stuck in old habits left over from a bygone era when we were still under the pretension that we could still actually put philosophy on the course of a secure science. This project has amounted to a total loss. This is widely acknowledged and yet this has not yet necessitated a rethinking of what the task of philosophy ought to be. Perhaps it is the case that philosophers like to think their work so important that it would take the likes of a Kant or a Descartes to cause a revolution in the way philosophy is done, when in reality all it would take is for we philosophers to start openly admitting to ourselves that we have collectively gotten off on the wrong track. We no longer serve the function of the curators of the wisdom of the western tradition. The tradition is viewed as nothing more than a long series of mistakes, and we sanction neglect of its study on these grounds. However, what are we to do now that we view our own epoch as just exemplifying another mistake in this long series of crude blunders? How is philosophy to move forward in the 21st century? What questions will it raise? What cultural contributions should it, and can it make? Is there not necessitated a fundamental restructuring of the way that philosophy is conducted?

It has already been explained how many of the challenges philosophy will face in the 21st century will have to do with its relationship to the wider culture, which is fast “disappearing,” and further, becoming optimized for the neo-liberal project of total global market hegemony, material and ideological. This suggests that to a certain extent, philosophy will have to, at least in some areas, “deprofessionalize,” which will take the form of opening up philosophy to wider audiences. In nihilistic society the worldview is rounded out by the natural sciences concerning matters of fact and neo-liberal popular economics concerning matters which are of value to life. Cultural commentary and criticism is seen to be entirely lacking from the public discourse. In my view, it is the prerogative of intellectuals of any stripe to step in to fill this gap, although it must be said that the present stock of “public” intellectuals has failed utterly to enter into a critical confrontation with the problems we have here set forth. Philosophers have a special priority concerning this task in the sense that we are supposed to have useful contributions to make to discussions about our values and beliefs. The task of philosophy is nothing more than the questioning, and refinement of values and beliefs. This activity is

not only beneficial for the vitality of the intellectual community but for every human individual and for society as a whole. Moving forward, it might be good to see the development of an extensive “popular” philosophical literature that would step in to perform these sorts of functions.

The pragmatists so far have been the only camp to offer forward an alternative project for the future of philosophy. The pragmatist project is ultimately a deflationary and reductionistic one. Philosophy is to be, according to the pragmatist program, an exercise in determining which turns of phrase are more or less useful socially. Philosophers return to the task of curators of culture, but in a deficient, castrated mode. This pragmatist project will be insufficient to meet the dangers facing philosophy in the 21st century on the grounds that it fails to enter into a critical confrontation with nihilism. It tacitly accepts this nihilism and diligently goes about its work within the narrow confines set for thinking within the coordinates of this nihilism. A philosophy of the future which also affirms the need to uncover the truth and to break past semblances to an understanding of reality is called for. But what form, at this late stage, could such a philosophy possibly take?

Does this pragmatism not, in seeking to abandon dubious, airy metaphysical speculation, perform this rejection of metaphysics tacitly on the grounds that such speculation is unnecessary precisely because the correct metaphysical formula (that of the natural sciences) has already been arrived at? Why should this scientific metaphysics not offer itself up as a possible area for philosophical investigation? This is because the natural scientists are supposed to have the “final word” on what their findings mean and what constitutes scientific matters of fact. The scientific worldview cannot be rejected at this late stage, nor should it ever have been. However, this does not mean that the era in which philosophical reflection and investigation can yield productive results for us has ended. The philosophy of the future cannot escape the fact that it has the natural sciences as its historical background and as its basis for its worldview. As in the middle ages, when christianity asserted itself as the new ground from which philosophy was to arise and return to, we now have the secular world of the natural sciences to serve this same structural role in our contemporary worldview.

Philosophy is to be set once again on a new footing, but this is to by no means miraculously turn philosophy into a science. Philosophy is a way, a practice. What will we have to gain from going along the way of philosophy in the 21st century? In confronting the problem of nihilism, we have recognized that the natural sciences are incapable of exhausting the totality of what is called the truth. In nihilism, we suffer from an affliction where every part of the worldview is cut off from its sustenance in the core of the whole of the worldview. The task of philosophizing in the 21st century is then nothing less than to make possible once again this life giving process whereby the worldview has the ability to nourish itself and to be healthy for life. Critical to this development is the rejection of the materialist reductionism which robs all non-scientific matters of fact of their truth, and therefore we must make the presupposition of truth at every level of existence. We must learn to rediscover truth. I cannot here enter into a lengthy discussion of what this will ultimately wind up looking like. We are buried today under a mountain of simulations, illusions, and false ideologies which serve to almost entirely mask the truth from us.

What has cast its great shadow over our intellectual faculties is nothing less than nihilism itself. In order to overcome nihilism, the truth must be reaffirmed and it must be sought out. We are supposed to be more knowledgeable about the world than ever before in the history of humankind, and yet who really knows anymore what it means to be a “wise” person? Can there even be wise people in such an environment as we now find ourselves entangled in? If we fail to break out of this veil of illusions, we will fail to enter upon the way of true philosophy.

We can only venture a guess as to what the philosophy of the future might look like by negating the premises of the philosophy of the present. If philosophy is to enter into a critical confrontation with the problem of nihilism, and to set this problem before itself as a task, then this will necessitate a rejection of the reductionistic materialism which has plagued the intellectual class of the west. This does not suggest a rejection of science in any way, but simply an acknowledgement that the sciences do not exhaust the extent of all possible knowledge, and furthermore, that the methods proper for the investigation of the mechanisms of material bodies do not serve as a model for investigation

concerning all truth. The connections between all aspects of knowledge, which acknowledge at the same time their inherent differences, must be for the first time sought out and outlined.

It will be complained that such philosophical investigations into the truth will be groundless, and that somehow the only way philosophy could pursue this course would be for it to come into contradiction with the natural sciences. There is nothing behind this attitude besides scaremongering and prejudice. A full defense of this position is not possible at this point however, because the philosophy of the future has yet to arrive. Here we are merely speculating about what sort of direction the philosophy of the future will have to take, and since we have not yet gone along this way, whether or not these concerns will prove to be justified is completely unknown to us. It seems preposterous to suppose that the only two alternatives for philosophy at this point are nihilistic reductionist materialism and new agey, metaphysical mysticism, especially when there is such a long tradition of genuine philosophy that operates outside of both of these paradigms in search of the truth. There is a common prejudice today that views this tradition as rendered primitive and useless by the advances of Galileo and Newton. Perhaps there is some truth in this, but more truthful still would be to see the stupidity and primitiveness of our own contemporary “philosophizing.” It is still too early to judge what will be recovered from the past and what will be consigned to the flames, as it were. However, a re-evaluation of the philosophical tradition, which has lay neglected and misunderstood for so long, is necessitated by the opening up of this new era of philosophy in the 21st century. What will be of value to us from out of this tradition in the future will only become apparent once we choose to see this tradition and understand it on its own terms, and once we are able to break out of our nihilistic, reductionist ideologies which far too often lead to misunderstanding and abuse of the tradition of western philosophy.

The time has come for philosophy to once again re-evaluate itself and to rethink what tasks should be considered proper to it. The current philosophical deadlock will not be broken until this rethinking and questioning of the task of philosophy is taken up seriously as the only authentic task for contemporary thinking. This undertaking should not be conceived of as laying the groundwork for the

philosophy of the future, for this foundation has already been laid by history itself. This work will instead take the form of an uncovering of the possibilities that lie open for the development of philosophy which we currently do not allow ourselves to consider because such investigation and speculation is methodologically uncouth, or otherwise we are inhibited by a poverty of imagination which afflicts many after years of dedication to academic scholarship.

How are we to set about reading the tea leaves of history? Many will object that we are beyond the time where philosophy should entertain such pretensions of grandeur; that the history of philosophy teaches nothing if but that one must avoid taking on large tasks in order to avoid falling into error. I take a thoroughly dismissive attitude towards this stance. There stands much work to be done in the coming years and little precious time to do it. The true error in our present age would not be to bite off more than one can chew, but rather to fail to enter into a critical confrontation with the principal challenges facing philosophy today.

What does history have in store for philosophy? Everything in this question hinges on whether or not we philosophers can rise to the occasion and enter earnestly into a critical confrontation with the cultural crisis of the west, or whether we will continue to ignore this crisis and thereby maintain the semblance of the absence of this crisis.

Philosophy is currently afflicted by overprofessionalization and overspecialization. In an academy which increasingly came to model itself after the natural sciences, philosophy has lost its way. While compartmentalization and a microscopic focus increase our knowledge in the natural sciences, the same trend has only produced confusion and ignorance in philosophy (Which must be differentiated from scholarship about philosophy, for which such specialization seems entirely reasonable up to a point.) The distinct branches of philosophy cannot be adequately investigated in isolation from each other, and in principle they never are. There exists implications for epistemology in ontology, for ethics in metaphysics, even aesthetics stands in connection to all the other fields of philosophy. The illusion of compartmentalization in philosophy is a result of the movement of nihilism, which understands only a manifold of appearances with no underlying reality, no unifying

superstructure, the affirmation of the Many over and against the One. In one sense, a return to “systematizing” appears to be necessary. However, according to our thesis, we already operate under a system, the contemporary secular worldview. To attempt to begin from nothing and thereby create a philosophical system from scratch is on the one hand ill-advised, and on the other hand impossible, for all creative activity necessarily makes use of the materials provided to it by a pre-existing culture. In order to make genuine progress in philosophy, what must be taken up is the task of explicating and uncovering the system under which we are already operating, which attempts to pass itself off as “unsystematic.”

This will only be the first step however. Once this system has been explicated and laid bare, a criticism of this system must be undertaken. This is because this system has been revealed as being afflicted with the malady of nihilism, which it is our task as philosophers to enter into a critical confrontation with and thereby seek a way out of, insofar as nihilism presents itself as the negation of philosophy and threatens to bring about the end of thinking. Through this process of criticism, what is useful within the system will hopefully be maintained, whereas what is damaging, useless, and false will be purged and negated.

Once this criticism has been completed, I expect that we may come to find that under the pernicious influence of the nihilistic system we currently operate under that we have grossly misinterpreted the content and the value of the global philosophical tradition. We should hope that once we have arrived at a position of relative clarity concerning our contemporary hermeneutic situation that this will make possible a new understanding and reappropriation of the wisdom of the past. After we are able to arrive at an authentic understanding of the meaning of the history of philosophy, once we have broken out of the incestuous seclusion of the present, only then will the groundwork for the philosophy of the future be laid bare, and the task of philosophy in the 21st century be made clear.

We are here approaching the limits of our current speculation, for much hangs upon things which will not be decided upon until the clarification and criticism of the contemporary worldview, and the intensive rereading of the history of philosophy are both complete. The task we have presently set

forth before philosophy, once undertaken, would radically alter both our relation to philosophy past and present, and thus set forth a radically different future trajectory for philosophical inquiry. If this project is carried through, the only thing that is certain is that it will usher in a new era in the history of philosophy. What form precisely this philosophy of the future will take remains to be seen, and it very well may be the case that this new era will never arrive, and we shall continue proceeding down the current path of nihilism and technological domination which will lead to the end of thinking. It may be supposed that this development as well may usher in a new era, although certainly one of a radically different kind than the one which would be ushered in by a rethinking of the task of philosophy along the lines we have presently illustrated. The only thing that remains certain is that the 21st century will ultimately be a time of drastic changes, whether for better or for worse. To say anything further would be to venture beyond the scope of our present reflections. What comes next is to take up the task of securing a place for philosophy in the 21st century, and to begin to search out for solutions to the problems and dangers currently facing our field.