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THE FUTURE OF PHILOSOPHY: HEIDEGGER, WITTGENSTEIN, CASSIRER

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ABSTRACT

In the past, philosophy, as it was brought to life originally by the ancient Greeks, was based on the audacious premise that the cosmos is intelligible, that human reason can come to understand reality at least in part. In the early to mid-twentieth century, however, philosophy was declared dead on both sides of the analytic-continental divide, so it seems appropriate to ask whether philosophy has a future and, if so, what sort of future this could and should be. In this essay, I first look at the claims of philosophy's demise and their philosophical milieu, focusing on Martin Heidegger, Bertrand Russell, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Then I suggest a reason for the dire forecast, namely, the aftermath of what has been called the "Second Thirty Years' War," and respond to objections that can be raised against this explanation. Finally, I indicate the sort of future that I think we should envision for philosophy.

KEYWORDS

ANALYTIC-CONTINENTAL DIVIDE. HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY. THIRTY YEARS' WAR. BRENTANO. CASSIRER. HEIDEGGER. KANT. RUSSELL. WITTGENSTEIN.

THE FUTURE OF PHILOSOPHY: HEIDEGGER, WITTGENSTEIN, CASSIRER¹

In the past, philosophy, as it was brought to life originally by the ancient Greeks, was based on the audacious premise that the cosmos is intelligible, that human reason can come to understand reality at least in part. In the early to mid-twentieth century, however, philosophy was declared dead on both sides of the analytic-continental divide,² so it seems appropriate to ask whether philosophy has a future and, if so, what sort of future this could and should be. In what follows, I first look at the claims of philosophy's demise and their philosophical milieu. Then I suggest a reason for the dire forecast and respond to objections that can be raised against this explanation. Finally, I indicate the sort of future that I think we should envision for philosophy.

WHO SAYS PHILOSOPHY IS DEAD?

Even in the 19th century, there were critiques of traditional philosophy on the grounds that it dealt with questions beyond the power of the human intellect to answer. At the same time, there were philosophers who attempted grand, architectonic schemes designed to answer all questions. The philosopher Franz Brentano (1838-1917) addressed these issues in a number of works. Of particular interest are his inaugural lecture upon joining the faculty of philosophy at the University of Vienna, "On the Reasons for a Loss of

¹ For comments on earlier drafts, I thank my colleagues at Saint Anselm College, Professors Robert Anderson, Kyle Hubbard, Thomas Larson, Joseph Spoerl, and Joshua Tepley, as well as Dr. Cyril McDonnell of Maynooth University, Ireland, Dr. Ion Tanasescu of the Romanian Academy, Bucharest, and Dr. John VanIngen of the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minnesota. Any remaining errors are my own.

² Granted, the analytic-continental divide we refer to today represents not nearly as sharp a distinction as some tend to think. Not only do philosophers on both sides of the divide sometimes take an interest in work from the other side, but also, as has been pointed out by more than one writer, the ambiguity of the terms designating the divide is less than helpful. "Analytic" vaguely indicates a method of doing philosophy while "continental" roughly indicates a place where philosophy is (or is not) done. However, because the expression is in general use and more or less understood, I adopt it freely.

Confidence in the Area of Philosophy,”³ and his essay, “On Schelling’s Philosophy.”⁴

In the former, the inaugural lecture, Brentano summarizes the arguments current in his day which were used to explain why people generally had lost confidence in philosophy. They are all echoed by arguments familiar to us now. First it is observed that philosophers generally are in disagreement with one another, and the inference is drawn that therefore there is no philosophical truth:

Where there is knowledge, there is necessarily truth, and where truth is there is unanimity, since there are many errors but only *one* truth... So far from unity and agreement on doctrine, we rather find [the philosophical world] divided and sundered in a huge multitude of schools. Thus the saying, “as many opinions as there are people,” is almost proved by this situation... In philosophy, there is conflict over the primary and most fundamental propositions; whole systems stand opposed to each other and compete with utmost vehemence. (TĂNĂSESCU, 2022, pp. 490-491)

Such diversity of opinion among philosophers hardly recommends philosophy as a path to knowledge and wisdom.

Second, by contrast with the questions raised and often answered by science, many of philosophy’s questions appear to remain unanswered after thousands of years:

Philosophy seems to strive after a kind of explanation and fundamental insight that is entirely impossible for the human intellect. . . [The natural scientist] never ventures to penetrate the actual nature of things. He never desires to explore the inner how and why of a causal connection. He

³ Franz Brentano, “Über die Gründe der Entmuthigung auf philosophischem Gebiete,” in Binder and Chrudzimski, eds., *Vermischte Schriften* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), pp.63-75. My english translation, “On the Reasons for a Loss of Confidence in the Area of Philosophy,” can be found in *Brentano and the Positive Philosophy of Comte and Mill*, eds. Ion Tănăsescu, Alexandru Bejinaru, Susan Krantz Gabriel, and Constantin Stoenescu (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), pp.489-500. Quoted passages and references are from this English translation.

⁴ Franz Brentano, “Über Schellings Philosophie,” in *Über die Zukunft der Philosophie*, ed. Paul Weingartner (Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 1968), pp.101-132. My english translation, “On Schelling’s Philosophy,” can be found in *Brentano and the Positive Philosophy of Comte and Mill*, pp.501-522. Quoted passages and references are from this English translation.

observes natural phenomena and their succession, seeks similarities between different cases and means in this way to infer general and unchanging relations among phenomena . . . Even where natural scientific explanation is regarded as having succeeded to the highest degree, it never offers more than this. . . [But] what underlies the phenomena and produces necessity we do not see, nor do we grasp it with any of our senses. If the philosopher does not have another eye for which all this darkness is light, then all his effort will be fruitless. (TĂNĂSESCU, 2022, pp. 492-493)

Science has become highly respected, and philosophy has lost status, precisely because science is modest and succeeds while philosophy is overly ambitious and fails. Examples of Philosophy's excess ambition abound, and Brentano tells us what he thinks of such things:

It is a big mistake to believe that these esteemed men have not been really richly – indeed brilliantly gifted. And it is also far from the truth to believe that they only enjoyed pointless games and did not rather exercise their minds in the most demanding way, Schelling withdrawing two items from publication, once destroying 15 already published pages. A twenty years' silence interrupting his work. Obviously, he did not throw every idea that emerged from his pen randomly at the public. Hegel was immensely well read. He assembled the widest range of information in order to cast it into the three-mirrored kaleidoscope of his dialectical method and then present it to the public in his peculiar way as a drama, in orderly categorization. Yet with this we have said everything which can be said in favor of those famous men. . . And now I am quite prepared to claim that, from a *scientific* point of view, their works completely lack any and all value. . . So, these systems, though sometimes containing truth, have not the least scientific merit. . . Therefore, if those speculative system builders, or their supporters on their behalf, desire a place among scientific researchers, it is not easy even with stern language to make them recognize that they have no right to the title. 'Nonsense,' 'arrogance,' are entirely justified in the face of such pretention. (TĂNĂSESCU, pp. 516-517)

Finally, other theoretical endeavors, such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, have had practical applications, but philosophy has not:

Thus, philosophy alone among the abstract sciences has not proved itself by practical results. If it had, then the general suspicion regarding it would not be possible. But it is possible, since it is real. And its really existing seems thereby to establish its justification. (TĂNĂSESCU, 2022, pp. 494)

In a word, philosophy is useless. And many, perhaps a majority, concur.

Brentano proceeds to answer all these claims against philosophy and to defend her in the face of them, even as she addresses the hardest questions about God's existence and immortality of the soul,⁵ but my purpose here is rather to show that 20th century denial of the value of philosophy has antecedents in received opinion during the 19th century (and no doubt earlier as well) which, remarkably, came to be accepted by the very philosophers themselves.

Let us look first at what the continental philosopher Heidegger has said about this:

The role of philosophy in the past has been taken over today by the sciences. . . Philosophy dissolves into individual sciences: psychology, logic, political science. . . Philosophy is at an end. . . What I do say is this: the manner of thinking of traditional metaphysics that reached its term with Nietzsche offers no further possibility of experiencing in thought the fundamental thrust of the age of technicity that is just beginning. (HEIDEGGER, 1966)

Note that Heidegger goes beyond skepticism about the value of philosophy to declare that philosophy is dead, "at an end," while the sciences have taken its place. One way in which the sciences may be said to have taken over the role of philosophy is that they now enjoy the prestige and respect that philosophy used to have. Part of the reason for this is that the sciences seem to answer questions and produce knowledge, something people used to think philosophy could do. Today, philosophy is more known for raising questions, largely unanswerable questions, and for dealing with issues that practical people no longer care about. In another sense, and this seems to be primarily on Heidegger's mind, the world we live in, the "age of technicity," makes philosophy both impossible and unnecessary. Impossible, because our world

⁵ Brentano, "On the Reasons for a Loss," in *Brentano and the Positive Philosophy of Comte and Mill*, pp.494-500. See also Brentano, *On the Existence of God: Lectures Delivered at the Universities of Würzburg and Vienna (1868-1891)*, ed. and trans. Susan F. Krantz (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1987), pp.146-147.

can no longer be “experienced in thought,” and unnecessary because science has “taken over.”

The analytic philosopher, Bertrand Russell tells us something similar:

...[T]hose questions which are already capable of definite answers are placed in the sciences, while those only to which, at present, no definite answer can be given, remain to form the *residue* which is called philosophy ... Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions ... but rather for the sake of the questions themselves ... because through the greatness of the universe which philosophy contemplates, the mind also is rendered great, and becomes capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good. (RUSSELL, 1997, pp. 155, 161)

Although Russell does not outright pronounce the death of philosophy, nevertheless his “residue” is hardly what would have passed for philosophy traditionally. Though certainly intrigued by questions that have not yet been answered, neither Plato, nor Aristotle, nor Thomas Aquinas, nor Leibniz, nor Kant would have been satisfied with questions that absolutely cannot be answered. For them, what is “called philosophy” in Russell’s view is not philosophy at all.

Again, the Viennese philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who worked largely in England and thus somewhat straddles the analytic-continental divide, held a similar view:

[Philosophical problems] are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved rather by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: *in despite of* an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. . . The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language. (WITTGENSTEIN, 1971, §109;119)

In Wittgenstein’s view, then, philosophy is *both* trivial *and* incapable of imparting knowledge. In effect, philosophy no longer exists, rather, as we shall

see, and as G.E. Moore tells us,⁶ Wittgenstein felt that he had found something altogether new to replace it.

Taken together, then, these “death notices” for philosophy, all dating from the early to mid-twentieth century,⁷ seem to indicate that there is no longer any point in pursuing philosophy as it has been traditionally understood, as the “love of wisdom” or as the “search for truth.” Apparently there no longer is any wisdom to love, nor any truth to be sought?

WHAT COULD HAVE CAUSED THE APPARENT DEATH OF PHILOSOPHY?

There is something of a despairing tone in each of the passages quoted above. Only Russell inserts a note of half-hearted optimism, suggesting that by the contemplation of unanswerable questions the mind might be “rendered great.” The rest is all about what philosophy can’t do, that it can’t do what it had been thought to be capable of in the past, namely, of providing an understanding of reality. It can’t deal with the “age of technicity,” all it can do is alert us to the tendency of language to make us imagine there are problems where no problems exist, and perhaps help us to “[re]arrange what we have always known.” This is depressing. This is gloom and doom from a philosophical standpoint.

Let me suggest that this phenomenon of philosophy being “at an end” is not clinical depression, not deep sadness without a cause. There is a difference between Brentano’s day, on the one hand, when the objections against the value

⁶ G.E. Moore, “Wittgenstein’s Lectures in 1930-1933,” in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions*, eds. James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordman (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), pp.46-114.

⁷ This is not to say that the “end of philosophy” is no longer a topic among philosophers. Consider this recent statement, taken from an invitation to a lecture at Harvard University by Prof. Jean-Luc Marion, May 1st, 2023: “Prof. Marion will be speaking from his latest book, *La métaphysique et après: Essai sur l’historicité et sur les époques de la philosophie*. In his lecture he will address the question of whether and how philosophy as it has been practiced for centuries in the modern age is now coming to an end. Prof. Marion forecasts the opportunity to explore new spaces within post-metaphysical thought by recruiting the expanded and expansive tools of phenomenology.” Clearly a continuation of Heidegger’s view on the same topic.

of philosophy were raised, and on the other, more recent claims that philosophy is defunct. And the difference may lie in what may be considered a normal response to horror. Consider what Henry Kissinger has written recently:

[The 'Second Thirty Year's War'] ... is the series of destructive conflicts stretching from the beginning of the First World War in August 1914 to the end of the Second World War in September 1945... The First World War exhausted treasuries, terminated dynasties and shattered lives. It was a catastrophe from which Europe has never fully recovered. By ... November 11, 1918, nearly 10 million soldiers and 7 million civilians had been killed... The human toll exacted by the Second World War ran to no fewer than 60 million lives ... Of the major European powers, Great Britain alone had preserved its prewar political institutions, but it was effectively bankrupt ... Lacking a moral and strategic vision, the present age is unmoored. (KISSINGER, 2022, pp. xix - xxi, 414)

We all live in the wake of “a catastrophe from which Europe has never fully recovered.” You might think to yourself, this doesn't really bother me personally unless I'm made to read (or watch a video) about WWI or about the Holocaust. Fair enough. But do we escape realities by not thinking about them? Has that ever really worked? If Kissinger is right, “[l]acking a moral and strategic vision, the present age is unmoored.” Unmoored, untethered, unsecured. The devastation of two world wars having left us without “a moral and strategic vision,” perhaps the environment necessary for philosophy to flourish is missing to a significant extent. Just as when a person's blood oxygen level drops below a certain point, we say that's not compatible with life as we know it, likewise, perhaps the social and cultural environment can dip below the point at which philosophical discourse is possible. Not to say that philosophy can only happen in a state of “perpetual peace.” Certainly philosophers from ancient times to the present have operated in very disruptive social, political, and military situations. But clearly there are conditions under which philosophy really can't happen. Maybe there are “no atheists in a foxhole,” but I seriously doubt that they are then and there attempting to prove the existence of God based on empirical facts or formal logical considerations.

To be sure, Kissinger's concerns involve primarily international relations and politics, neither of which is my focus here. But philosophy is not done in a vacuum. Perhaps philosophers' sense that philosophy was "at an end," over with, reduced to trivialities and incomprehensibility, was their response to two devastating World Wars which had at least threatened the end of civilization altogether. How could the same species that had recently indulged in massive, thoroughgoing and brutal genocide also claim to be capable of loving wisdom or seeking truth?

The first Thirty Years' War, 1618-1648, had devastating effects similar to but also different from those Kissinger attributes to what he calls the Second Thirty Year's War. Since I am not a historian, this will be brief. The Thirty Years' War of the 17th Century was brutal beyond expectations of warfare at the time, partly because it was religious warfare but also because armies were often made up of mercenaries who routinely resorted to plunder and burning when they had not been properly paid or provided for, something which happened frequently. In the end, it was so important to stop the hostilities that essentially the whole world order of medieval times came to an end with the Treaty of Westphalia. The Holy Roman Empire was so weakened by provisions of the treaty, and the power of local princes so enhanced, that Christendom changed completely. Together with the Protestant Reformation, this ultimately resulted in establishment of the policy, *cuius religio, cuius regio*, in other words, the religion of the prince would henceforth be the religion of the people. This was a significantly unsettling social, political, and religious transformation.⁸

Interestingly, Descartes's life roughly coincides with the Thirty Years' War; he lived from 1596 to 1650. He also completely upended the philosophical worldview. Instead of taking as his solid point of departure Aristotle's "individual man or ox,"⁹ he proposed, "I think, therefore I am"; that is to say,

⁸ Any adequate encyclopedia provides this basic information.

⁹ Aristotle, *Categories*, 2a 10 – 4b 20.

instead of presupposing the outside world, he started with the inner world, the world of thought, and his own existence was his Archimedean point.¹⁰

Archimedes sought but one firm and immovable point in order to move the entire earth from one place to another. Just so, great things are also to be hoped for if I succeed in finding just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshaken ... [A]fter everything has been most carefully weighed, it must finally be established that this pronouncement, 'I am, I exist' is necessarily true every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind. (DESCARTES, 1993, pp. 17-18)

There was a philosophical revolution in the wake of the first Thirty Year's War. Post-Cartesian philosophers adopted this new outlook.

Is something similar going on in the wake of the Second Thirty Year's War? If so, does it mean that philosophy is dead now? Or does it mean that philosophy must be revived?

KANT, CASSIRER, AND HUMANISM

The philosopher who best articulates the post-Cartesian worldview is Immanuel Kant. Here are just a few of the remarkable things he said:

- [T]he understanding does not derive its laws (a priori) from nature, but prescribes them to nature. (KANT, 1977, p.58)
- Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means. (KANT, 1981, p. 36)

[I]t is a fundamental proposition . . . that if there is to be in general a final purpose furnished a priori by reason, this can be no other than man (every rational being of the world) under moral laws. For . . . if the world consisted of mere lifeless, or even in part of living but irrational beings, its existence would have no worth, because in it there

¹⁰ See Rene Descartes, *Meditations*, "Meditation Two." Incidentally, although Descartes himself was a Catholic, the major philosophers after him in the Modern period were all Protestants except for one Jew.

would be no Being who would have the least concept of what worth is.
(KANT, 1951, § 87, pp.299-300)

Three points here, in a nutshell: 1) human understanding of nature is the product, not of mere passive observation, but rather of the active imposition of our concepts on experience; 2) the key to ethics is that a human being has intrinsic value as an end, and thus cannot morally be used as a means to an end; 3) human beings are at the center of the cosmos morally and teleologically. Human reason is the key to both science and morality. We should hear echoes here of the ancient Greek idea that the cosmos is intelligible.

Neo-Kantian philosophers continued this humanistic tradition, and the most prominent 20th Century philosopher among them is Ernst Cassirer, a German and a Jew who fled Nazi Germany in the 1930's. He developed what he called the "philosophy of symbolic forms," or an "anthropological philosophy,"¹¹ which is encapsulated in his one English-language publication, the *Essay on Man* (1944). Here is a little bit of what he had to say:

Human culture taken as a whole may be described as the process of man's progressive self-liberation. Language, art, religion, science are various phases in this process. In all of them man discovers and proves a new power – the power to build up a world of his own, an 'ideal' world. Philosophy cannot give up its search for a fundamental unity in this ideal world. But it does not confound this unity with simplicity. (CASSIRER, 2021, p. 228)

If we think back to the remarks by Heidegger, Russell, and Wittgenstein, we might notice that they all "confound unity with simplicity," even though they have essentially given up on the "search for a fundamental unity" because they have given up on the "ideal world." This ideal world is a world of concepts, of understanding, which transcends "language, art, religion,

¹¹ See Peter Gordon, Introduction to Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, p.xiv.

science,"¹² because it comprehends them, studies them, completes them. And this ideal world, in its transcendence, is the world of philosophy.

Have Heidegger, Russell, and Wittgenstein given up on the ideal world and on philosophy, because they've given up on humanity? And did the inhumanity of two World Wars make philosophy look to them like a quaint, naïve relic of the past? But philosophy, including metaphysics – by the way, their key target – is a quintessentially human activity. To wonder in various ways about the True, the Good, and the Beautiful is a peculiarly human occupation, from concern about whether one has done the right thing all the way up to speculation about our place in the cosmos. Not everyone indulges in all of philosophy, but everyone (who can be) is occupied with some of it. I think there will be philosophy as long as there are human beings. But in order keep philosophy on Plato's "upward path," (PLATO, 1969) we would do well to follow in the steps of Kant and Cassirer as we carry the tradition forward. We must value and promote the human impulse to understand, even though we fall short of complete understanding, because there will always be, "a level of generality and a kind of understanding that can be tackled only by philosophy."¹³ Language, science, art, myth, religion, history, politics, all beckon us to attend to the questions that transcend what any of them alone can address. And Aristotle's study of "being *qua* being," (ARISTOTLE, 1941) though it evolves in certain ways along with human culture, remains our recourse at that level of understanding.

THREE OBJECTIONS

First, it could well be objected at this point that the vaunted "death of philosophy" from the earlier twentieth century was just an isolated phenomenon of little long-term significance. Perhaps history will judge those

¹² Cassirer normally adds myth and history to this list. See, for instance, Cassirer, Ernst, *An Essay on Man*, p.222.

¹³ Dr. Ion Tănăsescu, Romanian Academy, Bucharest, in correspondence.

who promoted it as mere second-rate thinkers; perhaps the truth is that there have been and continue to be serious and productive philosophers whose contributions to philosophy prove that philosophy is very much alive and has been all along.

Second, it can also be objected that the social, political, and even military circumstances in which philosophy has flourished in the past have not always been what we would think of as conducive to serious thought and reflection. The Athens of Plato's day was not particularly serene or even stable, and we've already seen that Descartes worked during the (first) Thirty Years' War. It seems unlikely, then, that philosophers would have been profoundly affected, as philosophers, by World Wars I and II.

Third, it can be objected that at least since the beginning of the modern period in philosophy, there has been a tendency to see each new development in philosophy as a profound, innovative insight. Perhaps the alleged death of philosophy and its replacement by the sciences can be regarded in this light, namely, as a profound, innovative insight. If so, then either further engagement in philosophical activity is pointless, or all philosophical activity up until now has been pointless, but either way the claim itself is just another attempt to aggrandize the present and denigrate the past.

In response to the first objection above, I think it must be admitted that philosophy has continued to thrive throughout the period before, during, and after it had been declared dead by some philosophers. Among philosophers active from the early to mid-twentieth century and onward whose work certainly is valuable there are to be included Saul Kripke, Willard van Orman Quine, Roderick M. Chisholm, John Rawls, Thomas Nagel, Emanuel Levinas, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion, John Caputo, and many, many others. Yet, although it may be too soon to know whether Heidegger, Russell, or Wittgenstein, will be considered great philosophers in the future, it is by the same token too soon to declare them philosophical hacks. They were

serious thinkers responding in some way, I think, to a horrifying state of affairs in the western world.

In response to the second objection, yes, it is true that philosophy has flourished during socially, politically, and militarily turbulent times. Most of human history has been such, and it would be close to impossible to hold that philosophical thought can only thrive in times of peace. However, the wide scale, the astonishing lethality, and the civilian involvement in modern warfare are surely to be regarded as far beyond what humanity had experienced before 1914. (Perhaps only the American civil war comes close to the barbarity of WWI trench warfare.¹⁴) Kissinger summarizes this by noting the almost unimaginably vast numbers of people killed; others have noted the involvement of ordinary people in the deliberate, one-by-one execution of millions of Jews, gypsies, and other “undesirables”;¹⁵ and historians note the remarkable difficulty and hence delay in acknowledging, not just what had happened, but what had been *done* by human beings to other human beings. Many memorials in western Germany and elsewhere date only to the late 1990’s or first years of the twenty-first century. I think it wildly implausible that all this had no effect on philosophers’ view of philosophy.

In response to the third objection, yes, there is a kind of “triumphalism,” an air of superiority, detectable in philosophy roughly since the time of Hobbes. Advances in science and technology have only intensified this and encouraged the tendency always to expect something “new and improved.” My guess, however, is that the claim that philosophy is dead has little to do with

¹⁴ For detail on the horrors of mechanized warfare, beginning with the Crimean War and the American Civil War, and continuing in WWI and WWII, see Richard A. Gabriel and Karen S. Metz, *A Short History of War: The Evolution of Warfare and Weapons*, Professional Readings in Military Strategy No. 5, (Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College), pp.83-99. For subsequent developments in the devastating lethality of conventional (non-nuclear) warfare, see Richard A. Gabriel, *No More Heroes: Madness and Psychiatry in War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987).

¹⁵ See Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993, 1998, 2017), especially pp.159-223.

romanticization of the future, and quite a lot to do with the terror of the recent past.

But let us first take a look at the former, romanticization of a present, alleged insight thought to characterize the future. G.E. Moore sheds light on Wittgenstein's own sense that what he was doing was revolutionary, new, and ground-breaking:

I was a good deal surprised by some of the things he said about the difference between "philosophy" in the sense in which what he was doing might be called "philosophy" ... and what has traditionally been called "philosophy." He said that what he was doing was a "new subject," and not merely a stage in a "continuous development"; that there was now in philosophy a "kink" in the "development of human thought," comparable to that which occurred when Galileo and his contemporaries invented dynamics; that a "new method" had been discovered, as had happened when "chemistry was developed out of alchemy"; and that it was now possible for the first time that there should be "skillful" philosophers ... He went on to say that, though philosophy had now been "reduced to a matter of skill," yet this skill, like other skills, is very difficult to acquire... As regards his own work, he said it did not matter whether his results were true or not: what mattered was that "a method had been found." ... He did not expressly try to tell us exactly what the "new method" which had been found was. But he gave some hints as to its nature. He said in [the lectures given during the academic year 1930-1931], that the "new subject" consisted in "something like putting in order our notions as to what can be said about the world," and compared this to the tidying up of a room ... (MOORE, 1993, pp. 113-114)

There appear to be two contrary themes here: 1) a romanticized, revolutionary quality attributed to philosophy in this new mode; and 2) a drastic reduction in the expectation of what philosophy in the new mode will be able to accomplish. Yes, the present development in philosophy is being praised, but something else is also going on; the scope of philosophy in the traditional sense of it is being severely constricted. Why? I have suggested that the answer lies in a generalized response to the horrors of Kissinger's Second Thirty Years' War, and I think that a spirit of triumphalism, of optimism about the future and denigration of the past, is not enough to account for the claim

that the old philosophy is dead, since it is accompanied by the claim that the philosophy of the future is, if not yet dead, then already circling the drain.

So, I stand by these three points: 1) it is significant that philosophy was declared dead on both sides of the analytic-continental divide by serious and well-regarded thinkers, among them Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Martin Heidegger, the first two of whom had little or nothing else in common with the third; 2) socio-politico-cultural circumstances stemming from the Second Thirty Year's War were indeed horrendous enough to cause all kinds of wide-spread reactions, from outright denial all the way to a conviction of the death of civilization; and 3) these reactions, including declaration of philosophy's death, represent real despair, not mere triumphalism in the sense of heralding the dawn of a new day for human thought.

WHAT SHOULD THE FUTURE OF PHILOSOPHY LOOK LIKE?

In the conclusion to his book about what philosophers know, Gary Gutting tells us, "We have knowledge but not the wisdom to which our name and tradition aspire." Here we see the constricted scope of philosophy, from an analytic philosopher's perspective. And then Gutting adds, "Even so, applying philosophical knowledge to improve and revise our convictions will bring us as close as possible to this wisdom" (GUTTING, 2009, p. 242). This improving and revising, for which analytic philosophers are especially known, involves the rigorous application of logic and of the clarification of concepts. My suggestion is that perhaps this rigor, although valuable to be sure, is only part of what philosophy needs to emphasize, and this is part of the reason why, if we now end up with knowledge but not wisdom.

Another thing philosophy needs to emphasize, and the continentals are generally better at this than the analytics are, is human experience. Phenomenology and existentialism, in their various incarnations, focus closely on individual, subjective, human experience. This is philosophy in its

descriptive mode, granted often at the expense of its logical and analytic mode. Again, Gutting sheds some light by pointing out that, “A famous debate between Jacques Derrida (continental) and John Searle (analytic) ended with Searle denouncing Derrida’s ‘obscurantism’ and Derrida mocking Searle’s ‘superficiality’” (GUTTING, 2012). Gutting proceeds to show, with a variety of examples, that the analytic-continental divide is hardly a clear-cut distinction and that many philosophers cannot be decisively assigned to either side. Perhaps the distinction itself, as understood since the mid-20th century is no longer helpful, although Gutting remains convinced that continental philosophers, specifically, need to write with greater clarity.

For my purposes, I think it is useful to think of the analytic-continental divide as a split in philosophy that occurred in the early to mid-20th century as a result of the Second Thirty Years’ War because this can explain why, at least for a significant period of time, philosophers generally tended either to be logical and conceptual in their orientation or else to proceed on a more literary, imaginative, and experiential path. You could say, philosophy was broken in two, with each half missing something important that the other half retained. It is also true that neither half aspired any longer to the lofty goals set for philosophy in ancient and medieval times.

We might think that the lofty goal was wisdom itself, but perhaps that would be at least a slight mistake. As Socrates famously made very clear, philosophy is the *love of wisdom*, not its outright possession. Yet even to love something we do not possess we must believe that what we love exists and is possible to possess. I think it was this belief, faith if you will, that was shattered by two horrific world wars which constituted, among other awful things, an outright condemnation of the humanity which had somehow brought them about. Wittgenstein, with his linguistic reductionism has lost faith in humankind; Heidegger declares himself the enemy of the human endeavor of metaphysics, of onto-theology. When analytic philosophers are accused of superficiality, this is partly because they obviously believe in clarity and in

knowledge, but not in wisdom. When continental philosophers are accused of obscurantism, this is partly because they have given up on the logical defense of claims about reality and have gone mystical concerning wisdom. Consider what Husserl scholar Robin Rollinger says about philosophy as a respectable science:

Roughly speaking, the continentals reject the very idea of philosophy as a science and perhaps even science itself, whereas the analytic philosophers do not as a rule allow for any other kind of science besides what which is exemplified in its finest form in physics. It is, to be sure, of great importance not to allow philosophy to decay into the dogmatism, relativism, and mysticism of the continentals. It is, however, of equal importance not to overlook a whole dimension of scientific inquiry. (ROLLINGER, 2004, p. 272)

There is a whole dimension of scientific inquiry to be found in philosophy as practiced by the great philosophers from Plato to Aristotle, to Aquinas, to Leibniz to Kant. And philosophy that is whole is neither restricted to knowledge in the sense of scientific information or logic, nor confined to the gnosticism of a few artful initiates.

To be whole, philosophy must restore its fundamental faith in the human soul. If humanity lost its soul in the Second Thirty Years' War, then we must find our soul again. It is interesting that in places where authoritarian governments have inhibited individuals' ability to express their own views, the history of ideas can still thrive. Where this has been the case, students continue to learn what great minds of the past have thought, even though they cannot promote their own thoughts independently. Unfortunate as such a situation is, it does show that with the history of philosophy something essential is retained in spite of what is lost.¹⁶ One can appreciate the greatness of an Aristotle, an Aquinas, a Kant. This is precisely both what philosophers on either side of the analytic-continental divide have lost and what they need to regain. Reducing

¹⁶ In the late 19970's, I was acquainted with graduate students in philosophy who considered the history of philosophy to be the study of Bertrand Russell, G.E. Moore, and the like. Certainly, a much broader conception is needed, without which the sense of philosophy is lost.

philosophy to scientific knowledge or to linguistic analysis or to literature is an implicit denigration of the past, of the history of the great philosophers who dared to indulge in metaphysics, who dared to love wisdom and to desire it. Perhaps the correction is to refocus on those great philosophers.

This is exactly what Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms does, and this is why in our day I think we need to retrieve the Kantian outlook which inspired Cassirer's work. Peter Gordon, who has been especially active in the Cassirer revival, says:

Though his erudition was distinctively European his political commitments were cosmopolitan in the best sense, and he continued to uphold those commitments even when much of the world fell into darkness. It is still in darkness. But even if we now speak the word with embarrassment, humanism may be the only alternative to inhumanity. (CASSIRER, 2021, p. xy)

Humanism, faith in the human soul, is the key here. And if someone thinks this is quaint and outmoded, perhaps the response should be that only a shattered soul would think so, only a soul contaminated by the cultural fallout of two cataclysmic world wars, a fallout whose half-life is as yet unknown. Still, how remarkable it is to reflect that Plato's upward path may be pointed out to us today by a Jew who fled the apocalypse.

PERSONAL NOTE

Perhaps it would be in order to confess, at this point, that of the great philosophers from the past I am more attracted to Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas than to Kant. The reason is that the objectivist orientation seems intuitively correct to me, the "individual man or ox" a more natural starting point than "*cogito ergo sum*." My reasons are similar to those proposed by Bertrand Russell to support the priority of the correspondence theory of truth over the coherence theory,¹⁷ namely, in brief, that the coherence theory (like the

¹⁷ See Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, Ch. XII, "Truth and Falsehood," pp.119-130.

subjectivist orientation) relies for its justification on the correspondence theory (analogous to the objectivist orientation). It can be objected, too, against Kant that working with his transcendental idealism is like building castles in the sky, the ideal realm being quite literally insubstantial. When Cassirer speaks of the “ideal world” that we humans fashion for ourselves, one might therefore suspect that he is involved in Kantian idealism in the pejorative sense. Why do I nevertheless recommend the path charted by the post-Kantian Cassirer for the future of philosophy?

A key assumption of this discussion has been that history matters, that the social and political circumstances of the historical period in which we philosophize make a difference. Clearly, we live in a post-Cartesian era, philosophically speaking, and I think it's incontestable that the greatest philosopher of this era is Kant. Not that other philosophers have been unimportant, some of them are very important indeed, but he is the giant towering over them all, his adherents, detractors, and ignorers alike. Even more importantly, Kant is the philosopher who especially speaks to our post-world-wars era because of the ethical dimension of his subjectively oriented philosophy. Kant's practical imperative may well be the only antidote to the moral depravity of the Second Thirty Years' War – “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means.” And perhaps the only way of arriving at this principle was via the subjectivist path first charted by Descartes, “I think, therefore I am.” Even if one disagrees with Kant's epistemology and metaphysics – impressive, influential, and worth studying as they both are – still the moral center of his philosophy holds. Moreover, there is solid support for the centrality of human concerns to be found in the second half of the Third Critique where the purpose and the value of rational nature

are explained in such a way as to preserve the humility we must maintain in the face of philosophy's monumental task.¹⁸ The love of wisdom lives in Kant.

The love of wisdom lives in Cassirer, too, and his focus on human culture and on the human 'ideal' world continues the theme from Kant concerning the active participation of the human mind in understanding nature and humanity. Not that anyone now needs to redo the work Cassirer has done. But familiarity with his work should be as much a part of philosophical education today as is familiarity with the work of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant, and Russell, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, et al. The humanistic turn must remain alive.

It is of some significance to me that I was born in Strasbourg less than a decade after the liberation of France and the end of World War II, when Europe still lay in ruins, rationing and hunger persisted, and black markets flourished. I only know what my American parents told me about those days, and what I have read since. I cannot say that I have ever felt consciously constrained to take a dim view of humanity because of the circumstances preceding my birth. But it has been impossible for me not to notice, in the decades since then, how blithely we now accept the claim that big questions, about God and the soul for instance, cannot be addressed by serious philosophical thinkers today. This is not just the continental dismissal of metaphysics as a project confined to the past. As analytic philosopher, Gary Gutting, puts it:

The days are long gone when adequate philosophical argument had to be valid deduction from self-evident premises. We allow that a good philosophical argument may be inductive or based on premises expressing widely shared common-sense judgments. There has, in particular, been a strong recent trend to support a philosophical theory as the best explanation of various data, corresponding to the "obvious facts" about, say, knowledge, reference, or morality. But even with the most generous plausible sense of proof, philosophical arguments are not adequate to settle the great disputes about, say, the existence of God, the nature of the mind,

¹⁸ See, for instance, Susan F. Krantz, "Humility and Teleology in Kant's Third Critique," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume LXVI, 1992, 85-98.

the reality of freedom, or the basic principles of morality.(GUTTING, 2009, p.1)¹⁹

Here we see universal acceptance of its conclusion as at least a partial criterion of an argument's soundness, as perhaps it would be in mathematics or in physics. Here we have a 21st century continuation of Russell's idea of philosophy as a "residue" left over by science,²⁰ unable to answer the great questions but somehow "made great" by recognizing its impotence. So, this is not just the Enlightenment insistence on human reason as distinct from religion; this is not just Hume restricting us to matters of fact and relations of ideas; this is a loss of faith in human reason altogether, a reduction of its powers, and I think a concession to despair resulting from the Second Thirty Years' War. On the analytic side, this generally manifests as the confinement of reason to the clarification of concepts and, as Gutting says, the making of distinctions;²¹ on the continental side it generally manifests as the abandonment of reason as being inhumane, perhaps given all the careful, calculative, industrial-scale thought and planning that went into the murderous Holocaust. But maybe Brentano was right to hold that philosophy makes real progress only when the daunting questions of God's existence and the immortality of the soul are confidently addressed. And maybe something in the spirit of Kant and Cassirer might work toward making philosophy whole again, and human in the best sense.

¹⁹ See also pp.7, 224, 232-242. Here's an example from p.233: "It is not simply obvious that theistic and atheistic arguments will be inconclusive. Rather the point has been solidly established by a long and rigorous process of philosophical analysis and discussion and represents a major cognitive achievement of philosophy as a discipline. . . There is no denying that philosophers have not achieved the very enticing goal of proving either that God does exist or that God does not exist. But what philosophers have achieved is a clear understanding of precisely why successive versions of theistic and atheistic proofs are not adequate, an understanding based on truths discovered by philosophical reflection."

²⁰ Similarly, contemporary French philosopher, Jean-Luc Marion, continues Heidegger's sense of philosophy being "at an end." See note 6 above.

²¹ Gutting, *What Philosophers Know*, pp.4 and 73-101.

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