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# PHILOSOPHIZER

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**Geoffrey  
Klempner**



PHILOSOPHIZER  
*Geoffrey Klempner*

'Men become what they dream.  
— You have dreamed well.'  
(Grey Owl, 1999)

## **Sphinx of black quartz**

*I am*

*I am not someone*

*I am myself*

*I am perfect in every way*

*Everything that has happened in my life*

*Is for a reason*

*That I should become*

*The person that I am*

*For my sake*

*Was the world created*

...The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. Fill my box with five dozen liquor jugs. Sphinx of black quartz judge my vow. Five quacking zephyrs jolt my wax bed. Few quips galvanized the mock jury box. My faxed joke won a pager in the cable TV quiz show.

(At least I remember where the keys are.)

My typewriter is annoyingly imperfect. The primitive computer chip can only remember half a sentence before it overloads. Ribbons are difficult to obtain and run out after a few pages. The

carriage return doesn't always go to a new line so all the words end up mashed together on top of one another in a sticky black mess.

At least it's quiet. All plastic, runs on batteries. Nice smell, too. Rubber and ozone.

Ah, the 80s.

Ah, paper. What will we do when all the trees have gone? A stupid question. We'll all be dead, of course.

In the second decade of the 21st century, the earth is in the process of being buried under mountains of scribble. Land-fill sites stuffed with rotting newsprint chlorinating the soil. Bookshops with volumes piled high like cans of beans. Philosophers have made their fair contribution to the bean pile.

Better not write at all. Writing destroys memory. Socrates knew that. It weakens the mind, making it reliant on an external prop Plato says in the *Phaedrus*. In Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* people learn whole volumes off by heart to save the last remnants of the world's literature from the flames.

An excellent idea. Let's ban writing and give all authors and would-be authors a brain wipe!

Now, where was I?...

*Tortured teenage mothers regurgitate scalded foetuses. Abyssinian rogue traders teach philosophy to injured scorpions. Crushed peppermint toy boys self-immolate in empty football arenas. Lobotomized authors dance on roller skates with crazed veterinary surgeons.*

...That's better.

From nonsense, comes sense, and from sense, nonsense. Words lined up like Lego bricks. The order is immaterial. Each word names a thought — red, white, blue, yellow. Yes, no, life, death. Out of these comes the accumulated culture of the human race.

All art is imitation, but the art of words is doubly so. Every word we use has been used countless times. Like money. The medium of exchange. For every item there is a cash equivalent and for every idea the word equivalent. 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent,' as Wittgenstein said.

Words disgust me — more than words can say. I'd rather play my penny whistle. Or sing. Wordlessly.

Words and money. Copy writers and pulp novelists paid so and so much per hundred words. You have to wash your hands after handling money, my mother taught me...

*'Jaffa cake?'*

*It must have taken a packet and half to fill the immaculate plate of orange chocolate sponge biscuits with a name that in 1970 is on the cusp of being politically incorrect. I'm afraid to disturb the symmetry.*

*'No, I'm OK, thanks.'*

*I am staring down at the plate, at the Persian carpet, anywhere but at my host's anxious eyes.*

*I wish I could put her mind at ease. But I say nothing. Why am I here?*

*Over in the corner of the living room, the silver haired woman's husband fidgets with one of those collapsible music stands that always seems to collapse when you want use them. I notice with a pang of anticipation the music sheets held tightly under his arm.*

*'Can I help you with that, darling?'*

*'I can never get these damn things to work!'*

*'We should have had Peter here. From downstairs. He's so helpful.'*

*She turns to me with a nervous smile.*

*'Can you...?'*

*I jump up, glad of the distraction. It's too dark to see here. I carry the stand over to a large double window overlooking a magnificent view of Hampstead Heath. This apartment must have cost a packet.*

*From the other end of the room, I can hear husband and wife whispering.*

*'Vicky recommended him. He must be good.'*

*'Who keeps a guitar in a cardboard box? Can't he afford a guitar case?'*

*'We could buy him one.'*

*'The fee was agreed. If he wants to spend the money on marijuana that's his business.'*

*Still struggling with the recalcitrant metal contraption, I'm sweating now. Pot? I'm almost ready to blurt out my plea of innocence, then it occurs to me that it might harm my hippie credentials.*

*'Done it!'*

*Grinning lopsidedly, I realize I still have one of the butterfly nuts between my lips.*

*'Sorry, I don't know where this goes.'*

*I hand the old lady the small metal object. Her hand retracts momentarily, then gingerly places the metal piece on a spare plate. Of course, it's been in my mouth. Idiot.*

*'Bernie and I were discussing your hair style. We saw someone just like you on Top of the Pops. He was a coloured gentleman.'*

*'That would have been Jimi Hendrix.'*

*'Aa-hh!'*

*The name obviously rings a bell. But Nat King Cole he isn't. I've stumbled into a time warp.*



*The feeling is confirmed when I start reading the lyrics on the music sheet Bernie hands me:*

*If I only had green fingers  
I would plant me a ro-ose*

*1950s Tin Pan Alley. Aunt Vicky told me the couple had a hit once. When was that? 20 years ago? 30? Yet this is the epitome of song writing. All that's wrong is the date. Last night on Top of the Pops Tim Marriot of the Small Faces was telling the girl he was sweet on that he was a 'little tin soldier' who 'wants to jump into your fire'.*

*Like fashion, lyric ideas are of a time. 'The Tin Soldier' is a children's story from way back. Somehow, it works. There's a nod in the direction of the Doors 'Light My Fire' but the theme is not sex, it's innocent infatuation. (In the recording, the last line isn't clear: does he want to 'sit' with her or 'stick' with her? Mick Jagger once commented that it was good when you can't quite make out the lyrics.)*

*Two hours later, after trying various arrangements, we finally have something on tape. We're saying our goodbyes.*

*'Sandy and I think you have a wonderful voice. Transatlantic. You could be a pop singer!'*

...From nonsense, comes sense, and from sense, nonsense. Incidents from my life laid out like postage stamps.

In some possible world, I was a pop singer. I *am* a pop singer. It's real. If possible worlds are really real as some philosophers say. This is beyond absurdity. Thoughts like these could drive you mad...

A lyric has to be about something. First the concept, then the development. You develop the theme in the same way as you would argue a point in logic. It all follows. There are still choices to make, the chance to exercise ingenuity, creativity, or take the safe, clichéd route. You learn to question your first impulse:

A pilchard made of semolina (or the colour of semolina?) is climbing up the Eiffel Tower.

An elementary penguin (what other grades of penguin are there?) is singing 'Hare Krishna' (with cymbal accompaniment? without?).

Meanwhile, the writer Edgar Allen Poe is getting a (deserved? undeserved?) kicking. Boy, you should have seen that!

— In their music and lyric writing, the Beatles kicked against every convention. And yet, the nonsense lyrics of 'I am a Walrus' have a logic, they say something.

Try putting words together at random and seeing how far short this falls of anything remotely resembling John Lennon's precisely engineered lyric. This is painting with words, like Rothko, or Pollock.

The precision, the finely tuned judgement, is there to see — if you have the eyes to see it.

But I digress.

My life doesn't make sense. It doesn't add up. But, in any case, even if it did, it wouldn't be interesting enough to write about. That's why this isn't about me, or my life. It's an investigation. A hunt.

For I know not what. Maybe the thing I see, out of the corner of my eye, or maybe not. It could be something totally different, something I've never dreamed of. Could be. Why not?

The evidence is sparse. A mostly uneventful life, the few books from way back that I've accumulated in my hump — before I lost the taste for reading. Or killed it. Could that be it? Did I kill something in me? Will this 'something' come back to life and finally take its revenge?

Logic.

Lyric writing. Novel writing. Thoughts made into words. Out of all the possible choices, there's only one way that's the right way. The word, or the

brush stroke — or the paint splash — that was necessary.

If you don't see the logic, then you don't understand, even if you think you do.

I've been bucking necessity all of my life. I cannot try anything, can't move a muscle, unless I feel it to be necessary. My life is a logical deduction from the moment of my birth.

— If that is the case then my life *should* make sense, shouldn't it? It should add up. Is there something wrong with me? Then that, too, was necessary.

Necessity isn't restriction. Necessity is liberation. Spinoza said that.

## **I am awake**

Last night as I lay in bed, on my back, head turned to one side, staring at the wall, not tired — I knew that sleep would soon take me.

When I get into bed, I usually think about a philosophical problem. That soon sends me to sleep. I keep a light on so that I can stay awake a bit longer. It hardly makes a difference.

Yet when I think about philosophy during the day, it doesn't have the same effect. Why?

That's not a philosophical question but a scientific one, a question about human psychology and physiology — an invitation to put forward a theory.

Does thinking in bed about things other than philosophy have the same soporific effect? which things? Thinking about my tax return, or house repairs that need to be done, or admin work from my philosophy school piling up on my desk are things that are guaranteed to keep me awake. That's a theory I have tested a few too many times. I already know the answer.

Maybe one day — it could be tomorrow — I will lie down, turn my head to one side, stare at the wall, and that will be the last thing I ever experience. There will be no more 'I'. When they find me, I will be flat on my back.

Here I am — again.

Another day awaits.

If these words should by some fluke survive after my death, that will be my life wrapped up. Every story has an ending — unless it's a soap opera. I got into bed so many times. I got out of bed the same number of times (or the same number of times minus one — got to be precise). In between getting out of bed and going back into to bed, I did stuff, I went about the world, I lived my life. And as I lived and did stuff, slept, woke,

did more stuff, I aged. Then, finally, death took me. The big sleep.

Getting out of bed in the morning, that's the first challenge.

For some people, the problem is mustering the physical effort, willing the muscles to move. Then there are those who find their beds too comfortable, they recoil at the thought of cold air caressing the skin. Others have a genuine reason to not want to get up, they already know that the day is going to be a gruelling one. Maybe that is the way things are for them every day — a sweat shop worker or a convict doing hard labour, say. At least there is one thing you can look forward to: going back to sleep!

I don't have any of those problems. The thing that challenges me is the thought that in ten seconds time, or however long it takes, I will be standing up, not lying down. 'Now' will be a different time from what it is *now*, at this very moment. Time will have moved on. By so and so many seconds.

For some reason that fact strikes a chill in my bones. A metaphysical fear. I have to switch off, forget, not think. Just act. And then, without thought, my body gets up, while I am carried along with it.

Why doesn't that fear always occur? Why don't I have the same worry about getting dressed, making breakfast, checking my email, leaving the house, going to the shops? All these actions take place in the normal flow of time. I am already moving through the day.

I thought of a name for my condition: chronophobia. The fear of time. Not fear of the passage of time from hour to hour or day to day, or even the surprises the future brings, but rather fear of time itself, its very nature as time. Knowing exactly what will happen in the next few seconds or minutes makes it all the more fearful. I can't explain why. I have had this fear for as long as I can remember.

But then that's the way with phobias. Some people have a phobia of baked beans, so I read somewhere. I'd rather have a phobia of baked beans than a phobia of time. Baked beans is something I could give up.

Meanwhile, lying here, I can indulge myself in the illusion that, somehow, time stands still. The patch of sunlight on the wall is moving, but too slowly to notice. My thoughts are moving too, but thought has the peculiar property of not appearing to take place in time — at least not while you are in the very act of thinking.

(Is that true of all thinking? Say, you are in a quiz show attempting to solve a maths puzzle as the clock clicks down. That seems to be the exception.)

As I lie here thinking about all these things, time comes to a stop. The world comes to a stop. That must be a reason why I like being a thinker. I can stop the clock.

The patch of sunlight has moved. I just noticed. The illusion is becoming harder to sustain. And now my eyes are drawn irresistibly to my bedside clock.

...I am up.

## **Gulliver**

*I am Gulliver*

*In the Land of Lilliput*

*And you are the Little People*

*Your squeaky*

*Boos and cheers*

*Are like the buzzing*

*And chirping*

*Of insects*

...What kind of book is this? Who is it for?



How about *me* — in an alternative universe — at the end of 1974. My father had given me Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* as a Christmas present. I'd asked for the book after seeing an article in one of the Sunday newspapers, illustrated with a drawing of a mean looking Harley Davidson. (Pirsig rode a modest Honda.) I gulped the green and orange volume down in greedy delight.

Then I looked around for something else to read and there was... nothing. Nothing that interested me. Just the familiar worthy texts piled up on my desk. Back to the grind. I could have done with this back then.

There is a reader (apart from my alternative possible self) whom I would like to please — in that way. A good many readers in fact.

To be upfront about this, I would like to see my book in paperback in London Underground tube trains. Paperback Writer. That's the benchmark. I don't have any higher ambitions than that. Then I know I will have succeeded in my aim — of writing a book that pleases. A lot.

Maybe I've got it all wrong. The last thing one should do is aim to please — what Plato called 'pandering'. He crinkled his nose up at that. No, a philosophy book should aim to make you *better*

than you were before — morally or intellectually. It should *improve* you.

Then again, there are those who would argue (arguments, arguments, arguments — don't you get tired of arguments?!) that if the improvement is too *easy*, purchased at too low a cost, then it wasn't really worth it in the first place. The first impression the book should give is to make you thoroughly *confused*. 'I don't know my way about' — that should be your first thought.

Then you have *work* to do. Work is good for you. It improves you.

The deeper the confusion — your sense of being lost and not knowing your way about — the more you will need to rely on professional helpers to sort your confusion out and tell you what to think. (They love that, of course.)

That is not what I want. If this book confuses you then it's my fault and I've failed. I want to please, and only that. I have no particular agenda regarding my reader's moral or intellectual well-being. Just get that idea right out of your head. (It might help if you relax and try to forget what you think a philosophy book should be. Don't ask me, I don't know!)

(It would please me a lot if this book helped get the reader hooked on philosophy. After that, the reader can go on to tackle the tougher books.

When you have an all-consuming interest you want others to share it too. Why not?)

Meanwhile...

You might have guessed by now that there is another kind of reader lurking in the background, who will not be in the least bit pleased by my book. In the author's imagination — not to put too fine a point on it — a reader of this second kind spontaneously combusts to a pile of sticky ash before reaching the end of Chapter One. There are quite a few of those (don't ask me for names).

Adapting Archbishop Tertullian's remark about Heaven and Hell (gleefully quoted in a footnote by Nietzsche — in *Beyond Good and Evil*, I seem to recall) the pleasure enjoyed by a reader of the first kind is immeasurably increased by that reader's knowledge of the torment suffered by a reader of the second kind.

If words could kill!

(Which kind of reader are you? Well, if you got this far...)

Anyway, I guess that's one difference between me and Pirsig. He's a nicer guy. Slightly.

If one is being scrupulously honest, at this point the author should own up that in addition to pleasing *some* readers he would also like to *please himself*. How few authors do that? (Are the rest liars? Is it out of some false sense of decorum?)

Call it catharsis — a good Greek word.

This exercise is *cathartic* for me. I need this.

I have no intention of writing an autobiographical diatribe. (How boring would that be.) My book is more of a joyful celebration. Not that I have any significant achievements to celebrate, but simply the fact I have *survived*.

Yes, that's what this is. I've got it now.

A survival tale.

But it is also something more.

In Ancient Greek times, you could learn the skills of rhetoric from someone called a sophist. (Pirsig talks about the injustice done by the history of philosophy to the Greek sophists.) Sophists wrote *demonstration pieces* to show off their skills to potential clients. (You could say that the sophists were the inventors of advertising.) A famous example of a demonstration piece is *Encomium of Helen* by the sophist Gorgias. Contradicting the popular view of Helen as the treacherously unfaithful wife who sparked the Trojan War, Gorgias uses all his rhetorical skills to make the case that Helen was in fact deserving of the highest praise.

That was not what Gorgias *thought*. Who knows what he really thought? It didn't matter. That wasn't the point.

Call this my demonstration piece. Belated, to be sure. Up until a relatively short time ago, like any sophist you could have found my contact details on the web and hired me. You can't do that now because I'm retired. (So you can put your wallet away!)

However, there is one important difference between me and Gorgias (two actually, but we will get to the other difference later). I am no longer practising as a sophist. Instead, I am posing as a philosopher.

...No, better, I am *perfecting* myself as a philosopher.

In what follows, I will *only* say what I think and believe, because that's what a philosopher does.

I have nothing to advertise, nothing to sell.

I've dabbled in irony — and it doesn't work for me.

The truth is all that matters now...

## **The deep mystery of things**

*Sometimes when I'm driving my old Ford Escort I wonder about its former owners. In all, according to the log book, there were no less than eleven before me. In its time, I suppose, the car has been the mute witness to all kinds of incidents and dramas, and, on*

*at least one occasion — judging by the welding and ill-fitting body panels — suffered serious crash damage. If I had the time to investigate, I'm sure I could find out quite a lot. Perhaps it's better for my peace of mind if I didn't. Of all the questions I could think to ask, however, many cannot ever be answered, by me or anyone else. — When I think about that fact, it sends me into a swoon. The car feels haunted, resonating with the heavy weight of its history. So many facts: where are they all now?*

...I owned the Mk3 two door version, light metallic blue. The car was sold for scrap after the engine died. I shed a tear. That was a good many years ago. The car I drive now, a white Reliant Scimitar GTE, is 40 years old, older than the Escort (if it hadn't been scrapped) by more than a decade — and still going strong. Fibreglass body. Underneath the flaking paint you can see patches of light pastel blue — the original colour when it rolled out of the factory in 1975.

I like old things.

All my computers are old. They have a history which I know nothing about. They didn't arrive in shiny boxes with photos of yuppies surfing the Internet with inane grins on their faces. They have a meaning which goes beyond their practical

utility, even beyond the fact that I love things *for* their utility, and the power that symbolizes.

The keys that I am typing on now have known other hands before mine. As have all the other keyboards attached to computers scattered around my attic study. Ghosts. The things around me, my tools and decorations and playthings, carry the weight of the past. They resonate with meaning.

There are some people who will never use anything second-hand. I can understand that point of view. You don't know where a thing has been. The previous owner might not have been a very nice person. Yet they love their possessions too...

*Philosophers, so quick to analyse, look at an object as a mere bearer of physical properties, or as a tool with a function, or, possibly, one of those rare objects that attains the status of a 'work of art', a bearer of sheer disinterested aesthetic value. None of these ways of analysing an object explain why we love THINGS. All parents know how children lust for toys. We grow up. We put away childish things. We do not lose that lust, we merely look for different things to attach ourselves to, to project our emotions onto. This is normal, not pathological behaviour.*

*Object-love is one of the most profound facts about our human relation to the world. That is something Freud saw.*

...The Freudian term is cathexis, the investment of emotional energy in some object, which can be physical or mental. In some way or other, a mental 'object' is involved, giving physical objects, the things we own and use an 'aura' whose source lies in our subconscious.

I remember a cheap plastic toy which I once found in a bag of sweets — a 'Jamboree Bag', as they were called. I might have been nine or ten. The bags were made of coloured paper decorated with a drawing of boy scouts around a camp fire. You never knew what you would find when you tore the bag open.

My toy was a tiny slide viewer and a frame taken (as I now realize) from a discarded 35mm movie print. The process of film editing produces reels and reels of this stuff — some Hong Kong entrepreneur must have had the bright idea of using these to make cheap novelties.

There was nothing special about the scene in the saturated Technicolor transparency. As I recall, the scene showed an American car parked on a main street somewhere, tall buildings, blue sky — a random image. It was the fact that this was once



real that gave the little rectangle of celluloid its emotional potency. (Maybe also because the scene was from America, hence far away? Could be.) Even now, I can feel the shudder of realization — the mystery of the real.

This relates to my childhood 'swooning' episode, recorded on the front page of my Glass House Philosopher blog...

*There is a persistent memory from my childhood — I could not have been more than six or seven — holding my head in my hands on the stairs, in a swoon. I date this as the time I first became aware of the world around me as a world. Our house, the street, the suburbs of London, the Earth and sky spread endlessly out to the stars.*

*As my head spun, I had a fleeting memory image of a girl with blue eyes and black hair, standing in front of a school desk holding a large square piece of red paper. We used a lot of coloured paper at school. Cutting it, sticking it, folding it into models. I have never been able to discover the true connection between the image and the feeling of a world revolving dizzily around me.*

...I think I know what it is now. It wasn't about the world 'being made of coloured stuff' as I wrote then. It was about *transcendence*. The girl with the

blue eyes was a vivid memory. The memory was real. But the girl was not. Not at that moment. What was real, at that moment, was carpeted stairs, the wooden bannister I was leaning against, at the end of the downstairs hallway a glass panelled front door covered by a net curtain, and the faint images of cars and houses and trees in the quiet cul-de-sac outside.

Physical objects are transcendent. We can touch them and yet in a strange way they are out of reach. Like my old Canon electronic typewriter, like my white Scimitar, like my own physical body, like memories, like time, like the world. That is their meaning, a meaning we take for granted, until we choose to focus on it.

— And when you do, it can blow your mind.

## **Know thyself**

*Am I in the universe?  
Or is the universe in me?  
The universe made me  
The universe left its  
Imprint on me  
The truth of the universe  
Is in me*

...I don't know myself, not fully. I do things that totally surprise me. Or I feel the opposite of what I expected to feel about some person or incident and can't give a coherent reason why.

Maybe it should worry me, but it doesn't. I accept myself and my changing moods as a given fact — like the weather. Too much of what made me me is in the distant past, a past I don't particularly care to revisit.

However, that's not what this investigation is about. It's *the questions that grip me* that I am after. Or questions my former selves thought about which somehow I have allowed myself to forget.

Memory is the key. Presence of mind.

'Know thyself' was originally one of the Delphic maxims, said to have been inscribed in the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. — What does it mean?

To the Ancient Greeks, the maxim, 'Know thyself' wasn't saying, 'Know who you really are inside,' or 'Question your inner motives.' The Ancient Greeks barely had any notion of an 'inner' life in the way we understand this now — as something suppressed or subconscious. In Ancient Greece, you knew a man from what he did, the role he played, the actions he performed, the things he said.

A man who failed to follow the maxim of 'know thyself' might be someone who was boastful, who had an inflated opinion about himself compared to what others thought, or rather knew. In Greek Tragedy, overweening pride, or *hubris*, is a case of false over-estimation of one's own powers, a failure to appreciate the full significance of the situation that one finds oneself in.

The classic example would be a hero like Prometheus whose *hubris* led him to challenge the god Zeus, not realizing the full extent of Zeus's power and lust for revenge — a man who 'didn't know his own limitations'.

The kind of advice one would give to an Ancient Greek would be, 'Look at the wider picture, try to see yourself as others see you,' not 'Look into the depths of your soul.' You'd just get a blank stare if you said that. (The word 'soul' comes from the Greek *psuche* — breath or life.)

What Socrates meant by 'Know thyself,' however, was very different from the accepted understanding of the Delphic maxim.

Socrates was pointing out that your soul or *psuche* has an essence which is *universal* not *particular*. In this respect you are the same as any other human being. There is a transcendent non-physical reality behind the everyday world of physical things. Your soul shares an aspect of this

ultimate reality. It bears its imprint. By looking into your *psuche*, by seeking 'self-knowledge', you will come to know this ultimate reality — which Socrates and Plato called 'the Forms'.

This is Plato's so-called 'theory of recollection'. When Socrates said, 'Know thyself,' he meant, 'Recall what you truly are.'

The non-physical world behind the world of appearances is a world of pure concepts or ideas, abstract rather than concrete, yet having a quasi-physical power over the physical world. The Forms are the source of all values, all meaning. Human beings are partly of the world of non-physical Forms and partly of the physical world. We have our feet in both realities at one and the same time.

We are torn, in fact. That's what makes the struggle to reach philosophical understanding so dramatic. In Plato's dialogue *Phaedo*, which recounts Socrates' last day in prison and his execution by being made to drink hemlock, Socrates tells his grieving friends that the body is the 'prison house' of the soul. They should be glad that he will soon be released.

We are looking now at where philosophy *started*. The 20th century philosopher A.N. Whitehead remarked that the European tradition of philosophy consists of 'footnotes to Plato'.

This isn't about some particular 'theory' — which might or might not be true. (I'll explain later why I don't consider myself to be a 'Platonist'.) It's about the idea that *there is a truth to be found* about the universe which does not involve looking out onto the world, performing experiments or putting forward hypotheses. Science does not have the last word.

There's another kind of knowledge that you can acquire by looking inwards. Not knowledge of your own personal psychology (as I've already said, that's not relevant) but something else — knowledge that we somehow already 'know' but have 'forgotten' and need to 'recollect'.

Philosophical knowledge. Or maybe 'metaphysical' knowledge. (I'll talk more about the difference, if any, later.) Whichever term you use, this is knowledge arrived at through the exercise of reason.

Philosophy is the *art of reason*.

I am in the universe and the universe is in me — at one and the same time. I am physically a part of the physical universe, but truths about the physical universe are not the only truths.

There is the vast realm of mathematics, that had only just begun to open up in Plato's time. (On the gates of Plato's Academy was the sign, 'Let no one who has not studied mathematics enter here.')

Once you understand what numbers are, how they depend upon the simple concept of 'things being in an order', you will see why  $2+3=5$  in any possible universe where things can be put in an order and counted.

The truths of philosophy, or metaphysics, are just like that — just like the truths of mathematics — in that they don't depend on how things are in the physical world. That was Socrates' and Plato's great idea. The truths of philosophy are independent of the physical world. That's how you are able to reach them by looking into your own mind.

— The universe 'in me'.

The truths I am after are universal truths. They apply to all places and all times — and all possible worlds. You could say the Greeks opened our eyes to an infinite world of philosophical truths.

But there is a fly in the ointment.

There are also universal truths of a different kind, which concern the *pathology* of the philosophical inquirer. As fallible human beings, we are all-too easily led into illogical thinking and blind alleys. We are subject to illusions that are not peculiar to this or that mind but somehow necessary and unavoidable. (The 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant was the first to make that point.)

Where do these illusions come from? Maybe it has something to do with our delicate brains and the way we have evolved, or the narrowing vision of our culture, or perhaps the very fact that we are *finite*, limited in our capacity to reason or imprisoned in our own perspective or particular senses or way of looking on the world.

I only have myself to go on. As I look into myself, searching for philosophical truths, every thought, every idea is suspect. I cannot take anything as what it appears to be.

And neither should you.

### **I exist therefore what?**

What next? Right now, I still have a wide world of choices. I can write any book, assemble the jigsaw pieces, any way I like. As for later, when the alternatives narrow down — let's not worry about that!...

*I am the philosopher in a glass house. Call it an experiment. I don't suffer from writer's block. I can pour out words till the cows come home. Lately, though, the quality hasn't been terribly high. Perhaps the presence of an audience will help me raise the standard. I have become too proficient in*



*skimming the surface, reacting to the e-mailed letters and essays my students send me, knocking off up to a thousand words an hour of 'philosopher speak'.*

*It is a lot easier to sound like a philosopher than it is to be one. Very profound.*

*The clue lies in the past. I have got to go back. Not now, though, I'm too tired. The words came to me on the bus, and all of a sudden my anxieties melted away. I will meet up with all my former selves. I will become whole again.*

...'Easier to sound like a philosopher than be one.' — How many times have I fallen into that trap? I need to keep a close watch on myself. (All those 'former selves' — they will make their appearance soon enough.)

The hardest thing to be told is, 'start anywhere you like.' One needs *direction*. — Do you feel that you need to be directed? Why? What is so bad about chance?

You make a paint mark on the canvas. Then you make another mark, then another. At some point — quite soon in fact — you find yourself making visual *judgements*. That's when necessity kicks in.

Chance and necessity, two sides of the same coin.

But that first mark... you had to hold your breath... stifle the sense of mounting panic... and *leap*.

The terror of the blank page or blank canvas. It never gets any easier, so I'm told.

Best not to think.

New students tend to fall victim to a kind of mental paralysis, awed by the vastness of the subject. Just jump in, charge straight ahead, that's my advice. Read the book your hand falls upon, read the chapter the book opens at. Let serendipity be your guide.

So?...

I need a question, any question. This one caught my eye...

*Andrew asked, 'Can you point me in the right direction to answer the following. I exist. There is no way that I can logically see that 'I' could not exist. To believe otherwise would be to accept that there are entities that do not exist, which I do not see as possible. My question is then, does this mean that I had to exist? That is not a matter of incredible chance but a certainty?'*

...It's not an uncommon feeling — the thought that somehow I had to exist, that there is no possibility that I could have failed to be me.

However, the train of thought does not end there. When I consider the prospect of my death, it seems impossible, for very similar reasons (if one can talk of reasons) that there will be a time when I am not.

What am I saying? *I* know exactly the way Andrew feels, because I feel it too. In order to be here, writing this, my father had to produce the sperm that fertilized my mother's egg, which grew into a foetus and eventually became me. If the sperm and egg had not come together, I would not have existed. But exactly the same applies to the existence of my parents, and their grand parents, their great grand parents, and so on. If any one of those links in the chain had been broken — going right back to the beginning of the human race — I would not be here today.

All in all, an incredible chance, a fantastical improbability.

It's almost impossible to believe. But let's just look at the alternative.

I had to exist. I could not have failed to have been born. How does that sound? slightly mad?

Am I willing to grant the same about Andrew? Not at all. I have not the slightest difficulty in supposing that 'Andrew' (whoever he is — he is a real person, not made up) might not have existed. Then I wouldn't have had Andrew's question to

answer. (The supply of questions and questioners is never-ending, thanks to the Internet.)

If I had to exist, but no-one else had to exist, then I must be very special. Maybe I am God? How do I know I'm not?

It's generally considered acceptable to think of oneself as 'special', in the mundane sense that one's relation to one's own existence has a unique *flavour* which is absent from one's relation to other persons. However, that hardly suffices to alleviate the sense of dizzying vertigo at the paradoxical improbability of one's own existence.

Ultimately, we are all in the same boat. That is true. The same problem applies to anyone who stops to think about it as applies to me. I can only feel the paradox in *my* own case, just as you can only feel the paradox in *your* own case. But that's no help. I fully empathise with your saying what you say, because I'm motivated to say it too. The difference is that *your* saying what you say has an obvious explanation in 'my' universe. That's why I'm not the least bit puzzled by the contingency of your existence. Why, then, can't I apply the same explanation to myself?!

I can't. That's just a brute fact. That is what it is to be the possessor of a *perspective on the world*, a subjective standpoint. Yet, strangely, this observation does seem to point to a possible

resolution. The sense of paradox doesn't go away. Rather, I get to see it for what it is: simply an inevitable consequence of the fact that I am stuck here, unable to step outside my own point of view even for a moment. There's something I can't see, not because there is any obstruction to my vision but because the very act of seeing places me *here* and not *there*.

I am not saying that we are unable to think about how things are from other points of view. Of course we are. It is built into the very nature of human language that we can imagine what it would like to be in someone else's shoes. (There is a distressing condition called autism where this mental ability is underdeveloped or stunted.)

Yet, in all this, there remains the stubborn fact that *I am the one asking the question*. I can pose your question to myself *as* a question about myself, but I can't ask your question for you.

'I am the one asking the question,' is a fundamental principle of metaphysics. Impossible though it may seem, I exist.

The one thing I *cannot* be wrong about is the fact that I exist. That's what Descartes said. Everything else is up for grabs. But what kind of a fact is that? How can it *be* a fact?

Ask yourself, don't ask me!

## Philosophers and sophists

Why *am* I here? A young man posted a witty comment on a YouTube video I'd made with that title: 'I came here out of boredom.' (You can't be too careful with the titles you choose for YouTube videos.) It made me laugh. Boredom is an interesting concept, I replied, playing it straight. It makes you aware of your existence, painfully so. Boredom is so much more revealing than existential angst, don't you think?

That shut him up.

Boredom. I have spent years and decades being bored by everything this wide world has to offer, happily or unhappily enduring every variety of boredom. One thing that doesn't bore me is the question what it means to exist. But more on that later.

By the time he or she is old enough to read, a human being has suffered a colossal weight of cultural brainwashing, sufficient to render one incapable of anything more than superficial reflection on the nature of existence. And yet, over the centuries, examples of rare individuals have appeared who were able to break free. Their work provides the essential toolkit for every would-be questioner.

It is difficult to value that history too highly. And yet, at the same time I feel choked by the dust of centuries, crushed by the weight of all those worthy treatises. Maybe it is just the sense one has at a particular point in one's life, that the only way to approach the task is to forget everything one has ever learned and start again.

I guess that is one reason why I am writing this. As I said before, I am doing this for *myself*. I need to understand what has brought me to this point in my life.

Who were those rare individuals that I just mentioned? What was it that they did? — Let's not use the word for 'that thing' yet (even though you know what it is). For there is another problem.

*Is it really possible to do this?* That's my question. Is there really any room for a different take — radically different, not just a minor inflection or some new-fangled terminology — on the nature of 'that thing'? Hasn't every move and counter-move already been tried?

Two and a half thousand years of history are bearing down. Not to mention armies of professors with tenures to protect plus an even greater number teachers still chasing that accolade from the Academy. Also not to mention the publishing companies who rely on back catalogues going back decades. Everyone knows, or assumes that they

know, what it is to be someone who 'does that thing'.

The word, of course, is 'philosopher'. What a philosopher does is 'philosophize'. The product of philosophizing is called — no surprises there — 'philosophy'. What do those terms mean? Virtually nothing. Zilch. 'I am someone who loves wisdom.' Well, yeah.

The word started out as a political label, like 'liberal democrat' or 'national socialist'. The first philosophers so-called (or, rather, so they called themselves — that was the whole point!) were perceived as secretive, subversive, potential threats to the political status quo. The primary aim of these unemployed teachers and book writers was to corrupt the young — that is to say, show those willing to listen, ways of questioning the accepted beliefs of the day. That made them a soft target. The word 'philosopher' was invented as a means of self-defence. 'Don't hurt us. You love wisdom, don't you?!

One such 'philosopher', Socrates, was put to death on charges — questioning accepted beliefs, corrupting the young — that could have been leveled at any one of his contemporaries.

Socrates' fatal error was to pick a fight with the sophists, figures like Gorgias (we've met him), Protagoras, Thrasymachus — experts in argument



and debate whom you could hire to improve your skills. You wouldn't think there was anything wrong with that, but in Plato's dialogues the sophists are depicted as holding views intolerable to any genuine lover of wisdom.

The sophists also made lots of money. Gorgias had a statue of himself cast in gold. Plato's depiction of Protagoras and his rich followers in the dialogue *Protagoras* reeks with suppressed envy.

Yet these were the best friends the philosophers had. You could hardly slip a fragment of papyrus between the philosophers and the performance coaches who followed their activities with keen admiring interest. With the foundation of the Academy, Plato effectively put an end to that historic collaboration.

Today, academic philosophy is mired in a new age of scholasticism. In the university tower blocks, professors of physics or psychology, history or English are baffled by what it is their philosopher colleagues do. They might as well be speaking a different language.

Once you've learned the labyrinthine rules of the game, it all makes perfect sense. By that time, you are probably in the final year of your doctoral program hoping to get your foot on the first rung

of the ladder of academic recognition. And so the circus goes on.

What a waste of talent.

I believe it is possible to talk about the deepest problems of philosophy without mystification or gobbledygook. There is a way to do it. However, one has to be creative. Think of this as brain surgery, only one is doing it with words. Human beings are born lacking a filter to protect them from the conditioning they will receive over the most vulnerable years of their lives. The task is to construct an artificial filter, re-program and reboot the brain. — Once that's been fixed, you're a philosopher and you're good to go.

– *END OF PREVIEW* –

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