
Goals, Origins, Disciplines

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In 1894 Wilhelm Windelband, who was Professor of Philosophy at the University of Straßburg, gave the annual Rector's Address to the assembled members of the university. He took as his topic the structure and classification of the sciences.¹ It is superficial, he claimed, to try to divide the sciences by reference to their subject matter into sciences of nature on the one hand and sciences of spirit (or culture) on the other. A physical object like Mont Blanc or a species of plant or animal can be the subject of aesthetic analysis and evaluation, but such analysis is not part of natural science. Similarly, any human artistic activity has a psychological and eventually a neuro-physiological or biochemical basis, but this does not make a study of the brain activity of Michelangelo while he was painting part of "the humanities" (as we would call them). Neither is it the case that there is some specific method or set of characteristic methods used by the natural as opposed to the cultural sciences (or vice versa). Precise observation is equally important everywhere, and the basic forms of logical inference and evidentiary argumentation are similar in all scientific disciplines. Nevertheless, Windelband argued, there is an important distinction between the two basic kinds of "science"; it is merely that the distinction is not in terms of methods or subject matter but in terms of goals or aims. Sciences, after all, are systematic human constructs, and most organized human activity is guided by some goal or other. We categorize things in different ways depending on our different purposes. A practical field guide to identifying things that fly in the night sky in a certain region of the earth might appropriately include both

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owls and bats, although according to another classificatory system which is widely used in biology, owls and bats do not belong very closely together because the first are birds and the second mammals. The field guide is not wrong to include bats and owls (though it would be wrong if it asserted that bats belong to the biological order *aves* or owls to the order *mammalia*). Similarly, a survival manual might perfectly reasonably group together some kinds of mushrooms and insects in one chapter, "Things humans can eat," and distinguish them from a group containing poisonous mushrooms and other "Things humans cannot eat" in another chapter, even though this division cuts across recognized biological categories.

One reasonable human goal is to learn to deal with the world by recognizing the recurrent regularities it exhibits. Sciences with this goal Windelband called "nomothetic." All mushrooms that look like *this* are poisonous and if you eat them you will become very ill indeed, and perhaps die. On the other hand, as human beings we are interested not only in laws, regularities, and recurrent features of the world, but also in certain striking singularities. So, for instance, we are interested not just in the ways *Mrs Dalloway* is one more novel exhibiting the features all other novels exhibit, but also in what makes it different from other novels or even unique. An account aimed at exhibiting the singularity of an object or event was to be called "idiographic."

The period of the Second German Empire (1871–1919) was in any case a Golden Age for the discussion of classificatory problems. This is probably not unconnected with certain aggressive imperialist ambitions that were widely entertained by the political classes of the time, which in turn were mirrored in the dominance of neo-Kantianism.² Kant was notoriously almost pathologically obsessed with intellectual (and moral) tidiness, with making sharp and clear distinctions that would allow one to divide the world up into easily cognizable objects and sectors. For the neo-Kantian the question of the autonomy, distinctiveness, and principles of division of dif-

ferent kinds of human activity was of the very greatest concern. Sometimes these were nothing but turf wars, but sometimes more substantive issues were in play. Thus, the discussion of economics between the so-called Historical School and the followers and associates of Carl Menger had ostensibly to do with the role that institutions and history should play in the study of economics, but that disagreement clearly mirrored differences in the conception of the way economic development would, could, or should take place. Could the industrial structures of Manchester simply be replicated in Germany, or would economic development need to take a very different course given the differences in history and institutions between Germany and Britain?

Windelband, of course, writing in late-nineteenth-century Germany, did not have at his disposal the concept of “the humanities,” but would have had to speak of the *Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaften*. Actually his Rectoral Address is entitled “Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft,” though at one point he also refers to *les belles lettres*. Even if one cannot take seriously Windelband’s specific theory about the nomothetic and idiographic, his point that what is at issue are disciplines as human constructs, not simply unvarnished, contrasting blocks of material, is well taken. When we talk about the humanities we are talking about a set of disciplines, human constructs, and we can undertake the construction of these disciplines in a variety of different ways, and also classify the kinds of constructs that result in a variety of different ways.

Windelband’s two basic questions, then, are what sorts of things do we as humans generally want to know about, and why? One way of trying to answer these questions is by observing that there is a strong human tendency to want to know about the origins of things, as if this allowed one a special access to understanding them. What is probably the oldest extant document of Western literature provides several instances of this tendency. In the *Iliad* (book 6, lines 119–236)³ Homer describes an encounter on the field of bat-

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tle between two warriors who do not know each other. Before they fight, one, the Greek Diomedes, son of Tydeus, asks the other, who turns out to be an ally of the Trojans named Glaukos, who he is (τίς δὲ σύ ἐσσι, φέριστε, καταθνητῶν ἀνθρώπων;). Glaukos replies by embarking on a genealogy reaching back five generations, which contains a series of elaborate narrative accounts of what his father and grandfather and various of his ancestors did at various points in their lives:

High-hearted son of Tydeus, why ask of my generation

[τίη γενεὴν ἐρρεῖνεις;]?

As is the generation of leaves [γενεή], so is that of humanity.

The wind scatters the leaves on the ground, but the live timber burgeons with leaves again in the season of spring returning.

So one generation [γενεή] of men will grow while another dies. Yet if you wish to learn all this and be certain

of my genealogy:

[ὄφρ' ἐὺ εἰδῆς / ἡμετέρην γενεήν: literally,

“that you might know well our generation / race / lineage”]

there are plenty of men who know it.

There follow here about fifty lines describing the trials, vicissitudes, and heroic exploits of his various ancestors (Ailos > Sisyphos > Glaukos (I) > Bellerophon > Hippolochos). Glaukos ends his genealogy by speaking of his father:

But Hippolochos begot me, and I claim that he is my father; he sent me to Troy, and urged upon me repeated injunctions, to be always among the bravest, and hold my head above others, not shaming the generation [γένος] of my fathers, who were the greatest men in Ephyre and again in wide Lykia.

Such is my generation and the blood I claim to be born from

[ταύτης τοι γενεῆς τε καὶ αἵματος εὐχομαι εἶναι].

One might think this is just an instance of puerile boasting, which of course it is, and we might therefore put it aside as irrelevant. In this context it is, however, perhaps not as off-topic as it might seem. This is a world in which a few

highly individuated warriors stand out—often literally, it seems, standing in front of a large, anonymous mass of fighters (the λαοί). By reciting his pedigree in such detail, Glaukos is imparting important and relevant information about his background and probable training, and also giving a kind of performance. Perhaps he is trying to raise his own spirits and to intimidate his opponent, signalling that he has no intention of slinking away, but he is also in some sense actually changing the situation. *Having* the pedigree Glaukos has means in this context that one is likely to be a person of a certain sort, interested and skilled in warlike pursuits, and brought up to try, as Glaukos says, “to be always among the bravest”; *announcing* that pedigree in a situation of public confrontation means identifying oneself in a certain way and thereby making it impossible to withdraw anonymously, without loss of face, into the mass of λαοί.⁴

When Diomedes hears Glaukos’ stories about his ancestors, he realizes that his own grandfather and Glaukos’ grandfather were hereditary “guest-friends,” and so the two warriors decide not to fight each other after all, but instead to exchange armor in token of the renewal of this hereditary relation of guest-friendship. Determining *who* they are via their respective genealogies has important normative consequences for how they think it appropriate to treat each other. The question of who one’s opponent is seems in this world a perfectly natural one to ask, and it also seems natural to answer that question, even in the heat of battle, by giving a genealogy and a series of narratives. *Who* I am and what my essential properties are are thought to be connected with my origin, which is given by a genealogy. The genealogical narrative is assumed to disclose something important about my essential powers, obligations, entitlements. What we would call “natural” and what we would call “social” properties are not distinctly separated. Is the question of “origin” really so natural as all that?

Another early and important example of the human concern with origins is Hesiod’s great cosmological poem

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Theogonia, which explains who a large number of gods, goddesses, etc. are by giving their genealogies. Giving the genealogy here is intended to be explanatory; to know who and what a given god is means to be able to locate him in the sequence of divine generations, and this also gives one at least some minimal ability to address him, to know what to expect of him and how to deal with him.

Oddly enough, this genealogical interest in origins does not seem to have developed in the ancient world into an intellectual, hegemonic, formal discipline. Genealogical inquiries do not seem to have been one of the major direct ancestors of anything we moderns would recognize as full-blown "history" (or, for that matter, what the Greeks called "history," namely systematic empirical inquiry of any kind), and history itself seems never in the ancient world to have attained the exalted status it occupied in some parts of Europe in the modern period. Rather, at a relatively early age the genealogical impulse was crushed to death and pulverized between two huge millstones, which to some extent represented theoretical competitors to genealogy. These two competitors were rhetoric and philosophy.⁵

To start with the first of these, rhetorical culture was focused on producing persuasion through the medium of correct, aesthetically attractive, and effective speaking. Rhetorical training, then, meant the study of language in all its aspects, but also the inculcation of certain aesthetic, moral, and political values that were considered part of being a persuasive speaker.⁶ In discussing ancient rhetoric it is important not to lose sight of two important facts. First of all, rhetorical training was in the first instance eminently vocational and practical, not abstractly speculative or merely ornamental. The ancient Greeks sometimes distinguished three types of persons who went to the Olympic Games.⁷ First there were those who went to compete—to run, jump, throw the javelin, race their chariots, or pummel one another into insensibility with their fists. Then there were those who went to sell things; in the era before corporate sponsorships they

were the objects of an entirely appropriate, almost universal contempt. Finally there were those who went to watch. This third group, the spectators, were the archetypal "theorists." Observing, especially observing a highly public competition, can easily come to be associated with commenting on the performance of individual competitors and then with a kind of rudimentary criticism. Ancient rhetoricians were either direct participants in the rough-and-tumble of ancient politics, speaking in public assemblies and trying to get the better of other speakers by defeating their proposals, or competitive performers, and so, in the terms of this comparison, they were more like Olympic athletes than like spectators. Rhetoric as a disciplined skill seems in fact originally to have had a close connection with proto-democratic politics, where such skills would for obvious reasons be particularly valued.

Although the basic structure of the discipline of rhetoric and its teleological orientation were practical and political, this did not exclude the development of some kinds of theoretical analysis and relatively disinterested criticism as a subordinate part of rhetorical culture. Thus, in several early Platonic dialogues, particularly the *Protagoras*, we see Plato making fun of teachers of rhetoric who give way to an obsession with correct linguistic usage, subtle semantic differences, and a kind of morally edifying but, Plato claims, fundamentally insubstantial and unsound literary criticism.

The second important fact is that this rhetorical training was *not*, contrary to the propaganda of Plato, originally just a technique for unscrupulously manipulating people. To put it in somewhat later terminology, the original project of rhetoric was to teach something both inherently valuable *and* instrumentally valuable. It was inherently valuable because it made those who learn and practice it good, beautiful, and self-confident (and these are values in themselves), and it was instrumentally valuable because it was useful in helping one get one's way politically.⁸ It was precisely this orientation toward human improvement, not just effective instrumental manipulation, that made some of the original forms

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of rhetorical training such an easy target for Plato's criticism. Plato was terrified by what he took to be the potentially subversive ("democratic") political possibilities of rhetoric: *anyone* who could pay the fees, *regardless* of their genealogy and family connections, could learn the art of speaking persuasively from professional teachers of rhetoric. Nevertheless, Plato couches his criticism in epistemological terms. If the study of rhetoric really makes people better, he argues, then surely its teachers must be able to explain what the human good is and how the study of rhetoric conduces to helping people attain it.⁹ This is part of Plato's general argument that you cannot be performing an activity well unless you can explain *why* you are doing every component part of it in the way you are, and you can't do that unless you have the correct general theory. Since rhetoricians were basically inculcating skills in practical public speaking, secondarily developing certain ways of interpreting literature,¹⁰ and had some theories about some things (such as the correct order of the parts of a speech) but no general theory of the human good, Plato's conclusion is that they did not really know what they were doing and hence could not be doing it *well*, except, as he condescendingly sometimes adds, by accident (θεία μοίρα, *Ion* 542a).

Seen retrospectively from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, there seems nothing extravagant in the claims of professors of rhetoric that they were making those whom they taught "better people"; after all, they were making them more able to participate effectively in public debate and in the common political life of their respective cities, and that might perfectly well be considered a good. Isn't Plato's Protagoras in some sense right to say that a human capable of taking part in sociable common life is better off than one condemned to a life of solitude, isolation, and silence?¹¹ Similarly, there seems nothing outrageous in claiming that one is benefiting people (and their cities), even though one cannot specify by reference to a general theory in exactly what way that is occurring. Given our complete inability despite over

two thousand years of effort to agree on a theory of “the good” that would have satisfied Plato, it seems highly rash to continue to claim that possession of such a theory is a precondition for any stable form of good practice.

Plato’s criticism does not seem to have had much immediate effect; rhetoric was simply too useful for that. What killed off old-style rhetoric was the gradual but cumulative marginalization in the Roman Empire¹² of the political bodies in which free speech was permitted and could be politically effective: the popular assemblies and then the Roman Senate.

In the context of the study and practice of rhetoric, genealogy, historical inquiry, or the study of origins might have had at best a subordinate place. Individuals like Varro (and the Emperor Claudius) might have had idiosyncratic antiquarian interests, and history of a sort had some standing as a source of *exempla* for virtuous or vicious action, so what one gets is at best something like what one finds in the first few books of Livy, and, apart from whatever concerns one might have about the accuracy of the account, the heavy moralizing quickly gets rather cloying.

That brings me to the second of the two huge millstones that ground away at the interest in origins: philosophy. The standard doxographic account of the origin of philosophy, which goes back at the very least to book 1 of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, runs: First, there were myths and poetic cosmologies, structured as narratives or genealogies, like that of Hesiod; then, at some point Thales of Miletus initiated philosophy precisely by breaking with mythic and genealogical accounts, and by claiming that there is a single ἀρχή for everything in the world: what he calls “water.” Ἀρχή comes from the verb (ἄρχω) which means to make a beginning, initiate, take the lead, and then, by a natural association, control or rule. The dancer who makes the beginning in some sense sets the tempo and determines the nature of the dance. For Homer, he who “made the beginning” of Glaukos is first of all his father, then his paternal lineage; and that is what determines what and who this person is. But with Thales,

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ἀρχή seems to begin to take on the meaning of determining (abstract) principle, while leaving behind the idea that there is an interesting historical sequence that can be traced back to some initiatory moment. I don't know exactly how Thales thought water constituted the nature of the world, and I think it likely that this is not merely a personal failing of mine. Rather, I think "we" don't know—the available information is just not adequate—and it is even conceivable that Thales himself did not know exactly how he meant various of his claims. In a sense, as Hegel recognized, the whole history of philosophy is nothing more than an attempt to get clear about what kind of ἀρχή there can be for the world and in what relation it can stand to the cosmos as a whole and to individual objects and events.

Thales stood at the very beginning of this long historical process of clarification, and didn't perhaps have views articulated as highly as those of later philosophers. The pursuit of clarity is in general a good thing, but the indiscriminate pursuit of clarity is a vice and a serious obstacle to the proper understanding of large parts of human life. This is particularly the case when considering the philosophical past. So the obscurity of Thales' actual theory is not surprising and in fact not so important; whatever specific theory he had, if indeed he had any, did not recommend itself sufficiently to any of those of his successors whose work survives for them to transmit it to us. Nevertheless, later thinkers have found in him a kind of origin for philosophy. Hegel remarks¹³ that when Thales says "All is water," he is neither specifying an origin the way Glaukos is nor making a statement with the same structure, import, or "grammar" as the statement "All the fish in this barrel are cod" when it is made by the holder of a market stall. Also, "water" in this statement does not refer to the colorless liquid one finds filling the Aegean Sea, but to some kind of speculative principle which stands in an unspecified relation to the well-known fluid. "All is water" makes a totalizing claim, the claim that everything in the world can in some way be accounted for by

reference to a single abstract principle. Simply having that thought, even if one was not able to elaborate it any further, was, Hegel claims, enough to initiate what we have come to know as philosophy.

We have encountered two different senses of "origin." First, origin in the sense of historical origination, as in the case of Glaukos, and second, origin in the sense of some explanatory scheme or principle that provides a unitary abstract account or rationale, as in the case of Thales.

In principle one can investigate the "origin" of something in either or both of the two senses. At some point in human prehistory humans put two pieces of wood or stone together in a particular configuration and used them to beat pieces of material into shape. As we would say, they "invented" the hammer. One can, however, tell two slightly different stories about this. First, one can tell the story of origins of the hammer, for instance by visiting the Musée de l'Homme in Paris and looking closely at the exhibited artifacts. One could also—and this would seem to be a second way of proceeding—discuss the "origin" of the hammer by looking at continuing configurations of human desires, goals, needs, and the conditions under which they are or are not attainable or capable of being satisfied—by looking at the problem to which the invention of the hammer was the solution. One might—or might not—think that this second story gives one a better understanding, and in the second account one might think that the *specific* history is not of great interest. Given the problem (and that means given the assumption that human desires and needs are more or less invariant and environmental conditions more or less uniform), with enough ingenuity someone was eventually going to hit on the solution which consisted in inventing something very much like the hammer.¹⁴ The two stories are, however, perfectly compatible. Once the hammer is there, it can, of course, also have other uses from its original one. For instance, certain hammers might be so beautifully made that they become objects of aesthetic contemplation. This new function can in

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some cases survive atrophy of the original need. To be sure, it is not clear to what extent Glaukos would accept that one could equally well tell two distinct stories, parallel to those concerning the hammer, about him. An account of his origins, he would likely think, would have to deal with the specific details of his history. There might be something about being the descendant of *those specific* ancestors that makes him the object of the kind of individualizing interest which finds its appropriate expression in an "idiographic" narrative. He might think it makes a huge difference that his ancestor is Bellerophon, not some other equally heroic figure, if only because Bellerophon was the guest-friend of Diomedes' grandfather, and thus Glaukos and Diomedes should not fight each other. What Glaukos is seems to be comprehensible only relative to his particular history and that of his ancestors.

I have also been discussing "origins" in the context of two different inquiries. First, I have been asking what in fact are the origins of certain human disciplines—from what matrix of human purposes, social pressures, and contingent occurrences they arose; the motivation for asking this question is to get a better understanding of these disciplines. Second, I have been recounting certain traditional views held by the practitioners of one of these disciplines, "philosophy," about what should count as having a satisfactory understanding of any important human phenomenon. The overwhelming traditional view among philosophers is that one only has an adequate understanding of a phenomenon if one has a general theory about or an abstract rationale for it. So if one wants to call a search for the best understanding of something an inquiry into its "origin," the term "origin" has its second, not its first, sense—that is, a good account gives a unitary principle, and certainly not anything that looks like a sequential narrative.

Kant, for me, has always summed up what is most wrong-headed and retrograde in modern philosophy. He follows the philosophical tradition in rejecting any positive role for his-

tory in philosophical reflection.¹⁵ Rather, he construes the task of giving an origin for philosophy as that of providing a unitary abstract rationale for it, and tries to connect that with a set of universal and invariant human interests. These interests require that humans try to attain a unitary view of the world as a whole. Human agents, Kant thought, had to act in the world, and this required them to make a series of assumptions about how their world was constituted.¹⁶ Several nineteenth-century neo-Kantian philosophers developed lines of thought which Kant had marked out into a theory of what came to be called the "metaphysical need," which was the need for a single universal scheme that would make all things make sense.¹⁷ This metaphysical need was generally construed by those who believed it existed as a demand rooted in continuing aspects of human nature for the kind of cognitive and normative orientation that could *only* be given by something like a religious or a systematic "philosophical" worldview.

Kant's most important successor, Hegel, represents a significant break by virtue of his attempt to think about philosophy in a more inherently historical way.¹⁸ In one of his early essays he says that "the need for philosophy" arises not ahistorically for all rational practical agents by virtue of a metaphysical need they have, but under highly specific social circumstances, namely when "life has lost its 'unity.'" ¹⁹ This raises the un-Kantian possibility that fascinated several later philosophers in the Hegelian tradition, among them Marx,²⁰ namely the idea that in a satisfactory society, from which certain kinds of deep-seated conflicts were absent, philosophy (along with religion) would be superfluous and would disappear. Of course, even in such a basically harmonious society there might be a pale successor-discipline to the antique magnificence of "philosophy," which might, for example, take the form of straightforward attempts to get an overview of the state of our knowledge or even suggestions for minor improvements in our social arrangements. One line of criticism of what are sometimes called "positivist" strands in twentieth-century philosophy consists in claiming

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that positivists propound methods of direct observation and theory construction which would in principle be cognitively perfectly appropriate in a fundamentally harmonious society; however, by advocating the exclusive use of such methods in repressive and conflict-ridden societies like ours, they tacitly contribute to diverting attention from fundamental social antagonisms.²¹

However, once a connection is established between certain forms of inquiry or intellectual disciplines, such as philosophy, with interests or needs, the door is open to further subversive thoughts. It might be the case that some particular conceptual or theoretical invention itself creates psychological needs which, once they are in existence, are difficult to get rid of. This is the model that Nietzsche uses for Christianity.²² It develops a complex set of practices and institutions which arise for perfectly understandable, but utterly contingent and perhaps slightly disreputable, reasons, such as human weakness and resentment of that weakness, but which, once they get themselves established, generate from within the new set of human needs of which Christianity is the fulfilment. The salvation which Christianity offers is, arguably, not for everyone but for those who need it. Since salvation means in the first instance salvation from sin, it would seem that the Christian kerugma—the message that sins can be erased and salvation is at hand—would have no purchase on those with no sense of sin. Missionaries have special difficulty with people lacking a sense of sin, so they may need to create one.²³ This is completely different from the case of the hammer, in that even if the hammer eventually acquires new functions, such as serving as an object of aesthetic appreciation, the original problem, that of beating things into a more serviceable shape, can be said to have existed *before* the hammer was invented. On Nietzsche's reading this is not the case with Christianity. Christianity did not in the first instance cure the preexisting problem of sin, but attempted to cure a completely different (and, Nietzsche thinks, virtually incurable) *other* condition, namely a histor-

ically specific, widespread form of human debility. Christianity, as he puts it, "turned sick people into sinners." This means that Christian institutional life can not only inculcate a *belief* that one is a sinner, but can actually produce people whose somatic constitution is correctly described as "sinful." The model here is addiction to drugs. Those who believe or feel themselves to be "sinners" think they need the consolation Christianity provides; those who really have been turned into sinners really do need that consolation, in the way the addict needs the drug. The only difference is that whereas we tend to assume drug addiction is "in principle" reversible (i.e., given sufficient willpower and a facilitating environment), Nietzsche seems to think that for most people the changes introduced by Christianity are effectively irreversible. Still, this is compatible with thinking they are radically contingent.

Unfortunately, this whole Hegelian project of doing philosophy in a historically informed way has recently fallen out of fashion for reasons that are too complex and obscure to be presented uncontroversially in brief compass,²⁴ but a significant part of the reason is likely to be the fear that if one embarks on this path, one will eventually be confronted with the unpalatable alternative of either accepting a highly baroque and counterintuitive metaphysic of the kind Hegel himself advocated, or losing one's bearings in the face of the teeming variety of historical forms of thinking and acting. The second of these two fears is often expressed as anxiety in the face of the threat of "relativism." Loss of the absolute moral certainties given by Christian or Kantian attitudes can clearly give rise to vertigo, but perhaps the appropriate reaction to that is to show that the purported threat of "relativism" is illusory, and to treat the vertigo as mildly pathological.

Above I told the usual story about the origin of philosophy. However, it is notable that Plato²⁵ gives a different story about the origin of philosophy, which does not begin with Thales. (The first extant occurrence of the word φιλοσοφία is in Plato, and it is not out of the question that he in fact

coined the term.)²⁶ This story is repeated in a very prominent place by Cicero.²⁷ Philosophy starts with Socrates, and it actually gets going—has its real origin or ἀρχή—when he turns his back on speculation about the natural world and turns to ethics. In Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates says that when he was young and immature he concerned himself with what the Greeks called φυσιολογία (that is, speculation about nature), but now that he has become an adult he is no longer interested in the structure of the universe, but rather in how things need to be to be “for the best.” As Cicero puts it, Socrates “brings philosophy down to earth” (from inspection of the skies to the ἀγορά). For Plato, this seems to mark a kind of beginning; however, Plato did *not* follow Socrates in his turn away from cosmological speculation, but developed a highly peculiar theory about the cosmological basis of values: his theory of “forms” or “ideas.” This notion of a conjunction between cosmology and ethics developed especially long legs when it was taken over and adapted by Christianity, because Christians construed their god as both creator of the natural world and moral legislator. I simply note that it is highly peculiar that these *two* distinct things—speculation on the nature of the universe on the one hand and moral and political philosophy on the other—get put together as one subject (philosophy).

Once a unity like “philosophy” gets itself established, especially institutionally established, for instance in schools or universities, there is an almost irresistible tendency to *find* or *create* a single unitary genealogy for the enterprise, which means both a unitary history and a unitary, non-contextual goal. There is a compulsion to make up a single rationale and project it back onto people who are then retrospectively declared to be “precursors.”

Nietzsche has a notorious line in criticism of all forms of analysis by reference to purported unique “origins.”²⁸ He is especially scathing about attribution of the origins of continuing institutions to individual heroic founders: philosophy founded by Thales or Socrates, Christianity founded by

Jesus. There was never a single origin for anything with any continuing historical significance. What looks like a unique origin always disperses into a multiplicity. All persisting institutions and practices have unsurveyable multiple sequences of completely contingent ancestors, "contingent" meaning that there was no logical or rational necessity in their conjunction. One can in principle trace these ancestors back indeterminately into the past, and the farther back one goes the more such ancestors there will be. At some point one will not be able to go farther, but that is merely, as it were, an accidental limitation of our cognitive powers or the evidence that happens to be available.²⁹

In fact, then, the account of the "origins" of philosophy I have given above is a gross oversimplification. The history of the "origins" of philosophy is not simply one in which two different kinds of inquiries (physics and ethics) come together. There is at least a third more or less independent element: a concern with forms of argumentation, logical thinking, and the validity of inference.³⁰ Plato, in composing his dialogues, makes great play of this concern with correct inference, a part of his thought that does not seem influenced either by the earlier speculators about nature (such as Thales) or by Socrates' moralizing, but derives from several more obscure sources, including the so-called Eleatic philosophers (Parmenides) and also, to some extent, the sophists. The influence of this tradition on Socrates was profound. Plato, to be sure, is anxious to distance Socrates from the sophists as much as possible, so anything he took over from them has to be rather carefully hidden, or Plato has to explain at great length in what way the Socratic version of the concern for correct speaking is different from that of the sophists.

It would not be surprising if the discipline of "philosophy" depended for its continuing vitality on the tension between these different poles—between interest in the structure of the natural world, interest in forms of argumentation, and interest in "what would be for the best"—so that without this

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tension the practice as we know it could not continue to exist, but would break up into individual parts, each of which would go its own way as a distinct discipline.

There seems, in fact, no reason anymore why those concerned to understand the structure of the natural world should *ex officio* also have a non-trivial interest in which political institutions or which works of art are best or in formal structures of speech and argumentation. "Philosophy" could dissolve itself into physics for the study of nature; linguistics, rhetoric, and mathematics for the study of speech, argumentation, and formal systems; and politics, *belles lettres*, and social psychology for the study of "what would be for the best." I strongly suspect that a radical dissociation of these interests has already occurred, although many people have not noticed it yet, and the discipline of philosophy in its present configuration is held together only by a combination of historical inertia and a sentimentalized attachment to a mostly illusory image of a glorious past. As a purported single subject, philosophy seems unlikely to last. If the various components really have as little to do with each other as they nowadays seem to, this may be no bad thing.

This story is a tempting development of Nietzschean themes about the artificiality of what has its origin in a series of contingent encounters of originally diverse and heterogeneous elements. One should not, of course, conclude from the fact that certain disciplines have a contingent history relevant to understanding their present form that just *any* old available elements could randomly be put together as a "discipline," nor that all conjunctions are equally good. For example, the Roman writer on architecture Vitruvius, when discussing the kind of training a good architect needed to have, states that such a person had to be especially well trained in music.³¹ The reason for this was that an architect was expected also to be a military engineer, and a military engineer would be called on to build and activate catapults, and catapults would shoot straight and thus be effective only if the tension in the ropes providing their motive

power was equal. Ropes, I suspect, were not industrially produced to a high level of uniformity in the ancient world, and so the only way to tell whether the tension in two improvised ropes was equal was to pluck them and see whether they sounded the same note. If they did, the tension was equal; otherwise not. So in an ideal Vitruvian university architectural training would include bridge-building, ballistics, and music as forming a “natural” unit. This unity was “natural” in that the conjunction gave prospective architects very good preparation for tasks with which they would be confronted. One could not, that is, equally well have taught them cooking, ballet, and viticulture. On the other hand, if most warfare in the Roman world had been naval, it might have seemed more obvious to group ballistics and music with navigation and astronomy, not with bridge-building. When gunpowder arrives, music becomes irrelevant and can be expected to drop out of the military curriculum. So there are things that “go together” better than other things, but it is not at all clear that the idea of “going together” makes sense independent of some at least minimal reference to historically specific human projects, valuations, and purposes.

In addition, it is still an open question whether a conjunction which has been given such a synthetic unity—for whatever reasons and in whatever way—can also just as easily split up into its component parts. One might be tempted to argue that since traditional philosophy arose as a purportedly unitary pursuit from a series of accidental conjunctions occurring over a period of two centuries or so (roughly from Thales to Plato), there is no reason why it cannot also come apart again. This cannot be the whole story because of considerations like those mentioned above in discussing the hammer or Christianity—if, like the hammer, philosophy acquired some further functions that could best be discharged by a unitary discipline, or if, like Christianity, it generated from itself needs that only it could satisfy. If there are such hidden, *new* essential functions, what are they?

If this is true about philosophy, it is true in spades for “the humanities.” This term, in the sense in which it is used today in the English-speaking countries, seems not to go back much farther than the middle of the nineteenth century,³² and to say anything substantial about why it came into use and why it seemed plausible to think it had a referent would require more interest in and knowledge of nineteenth-century Britain than I possess. It seems plausible to expect that at least one of the immediate pressures operating here resulted from the demands of education, especially higher education. What seems, however, also rather clear, even to an outsider, is that the idea that there was one discernible, collective thing, “the humanities,” a more or less unitary set of subjects or disciplines that belonged together, required a highly constructive act of conceptualization, putting together various existing, disparate things that had not antecedently been thought to have anything particular to do with each other. The resulting synthesis was composed of various rather debased bits of detritus from the ancient world, with a particularly high concentration of bits of the ancient rhetorical tradition put together with bits of history and philosophy and some parts of the non-verbal arts. Again, from the fact that it was constructed, it does not follow that it was random in the sense that *any* collection of pre-existing skills, forms of knowledge, and practices could *equally well* have been put together; the historical account is in part directed at showing that that is not the case.

In light of the above remarks, the relatively artificial nature of the conjunction called “the humanities” ought no longer to seem surprising. It is in any case no news that all human classificatory schemes are partly structured by wider forms of human valuation and human purposes. One might with good reason think that much of value—many important kinds of knowledge—can relatively easily survive large-scale shifts in our way of classifying and organizing disciplines. To recur to Windelband’s terminology, we will retain our “idiographic” interest in the Peloponnesian War (and in

Thucydides' account of it), and much—though possibly not all—of what we find of the greatest interest will continue to come to representation whether this conjunction of events, actions, and words is treated as part of *Altertumswissenschaft*, of “classics,” or of “history.”

The proliferation and dispersion of new subjects and disciplines, combined with changes in the way we live and in our attitudes and dominant concerns, can be expected to render implausible our accustomed way of organizing academic subjects. There is nothing historically unprecedented about this. Foucault closes his study of what he calls the human sciences, *Les mots et les choses*,³³ by comparing their central organizing conception, “man,” with a face drawn in the sand which is about to be washed away by the incoming tide. The face may be gone, but provided the sand remains, we have no reason for more than transitory twinges of grief, and certainly no reason for deep melancholy.

In conclusion, I suggest that if the general perspective on our historical situation which I have tried to sketch here is correct—if philosophy in fact is on the point of dissolving into a number of different constituents and has long since lost any organic or systematic connection as a discipline with the so-called humanities, and if a similar fragmentation of the humanities themselves is underway—then the whole question of giving some *general* account of the role of philosophy in the humanities doesn't make sense. Neither of the two purported entities has the requisite stability to admit a useful investigation of this question. At the moment, the relation between what is called philosophy and what are called the humanities is a matter of idiosyncratic associations between certain individuals, which are so contingent they border on the whimsical—the odd Professor of Ethics who *also* happens to have read Greats at Oxford rather than PPE, or the don who works professionally on some aspect of the philosophy of language but also happens to be devoted to the ballet. Whether or not this dissociation is a temporary phenomenon, and if it is not, what new

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structures will eventually emerge, are matters of speculation, but since such controlled speculation was once one of the things philosophers used to do, I would suggest that if there is no ecological or economic catastrophe—or something comparable that radically overturns, or even puts an end to, our organized intellectual life—dispersal of the kind I have described is likely to be a continuing feature of our landscape for the foreseeable future.

notes

I am particularly grateful to Richard Raatzsch and to the other members of the Cambridge *Philosophisches Forschungskolloquium* for comments on an early version of this text. A very much abbreviated version was presented at the conference “Changing the Humanities / The Humanities Changing” at the Cambridge Centre for Research in the Arts, Humanities, and Literature in July 2009.

1. Wilhelm Windelband, “Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft,” *Prälu-dien*, vol. 1 (Tübingen 1919), 136–61.

2. Klaus Köhnke, *Entstehung und Aufstieg des Neukantianismus* (Frankfurt am Main 1993).

3. I use the Monro /Allen OCT; translation by R. Lattimore (Chicago 1951), sometimes slightly modified.

4. One of the many fascinating aspects of this passage is that it contains what may be one of the first references to writing in Western literature. One of Glaukos’ ancestors, Bellerophon, is exiled from home and takes refuge with King Proitos. As the consequence of an intrigue, Proitos decides he needs to kill Bellerophon, but he doesn’t dare. We are not explicitly told why he doesn’t dare, but one might surmise it is because in the Homeric world it was considered wrong to kill someone to whom you had once offered refuge. Proitos sends Bellerophon off to a neighboring king, carrying with him a folded tablet on which are inscribed, incised, drawn, or painted (γράφας, 6.169) some signs or marks that will bring him death (σήματα λυγρά . . . θυμοφθόρα πολλά, 6.168–69) when the neighboring king sees them. I have often wondered whether the very unclarity about what is painted or scratched on those tablets might not be part of the point. We don’t know whether they are the words “KILL BEARER IMMEDIATELY” (ΚΤΕΙΝΕΙΘΕΡΟΝΤΑΑΥΘΙ) or rather something more indirect and suggestive, such as pictures of a stick-man with a spear in his back or a skull and crossbones. If this is a case of writing and writing is still a novel, unfamiliar, and slightly puzzling phenomenon, sending someone off with a written warrant for his own death might be a very good way of generating a form of self-deception that would allow one to believe one has distanced oneself from what eventually happens. Not just “I didn’t know the gun was

loaded," but "How was I to know that that tiny tube could *really* kill at a distance?" The written or painted image is a kind of obscure black box: how could I know it would work?

5. See also "Thucydides, Nietzsche, and Williams" in R. Geuss, *Outside Ethics* (Princeton 2005), 219–34.

6. George Kennedy, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric* (Princeton 1994).

7. Diogenes Laertius 8.8.

8. *Protagoras* 318a–b.

9. See Plato's *Gorgias*.

10. *Protagoras* 339–47.

11. *Protagoras* 320–28.

12. See the position attributed to "a philosopher" in Longinus' *De sublimitate*, ch. 44 (OCT, ed. Russell).

13. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie, Werke*, vol. 18, E. Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel, eds. (Frankfurt am Main 1970), 202–9.

14. Arnold Schönberg, *Stil und Gedanke* (Frankfurt am Main 1976), 33–34.

15. *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* A852/B880–A856/B884. The history of reason gets four pages out of 850 or so. See also *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik, "Vorrede."*

16. Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, 50–57; 119–22 (Ak.)

17. Most clearly in Schopenhauer; see his essay "Über die Universitäts-Philosophie," *Parerga et Paralipomena* (in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 4 [Frankfurt am Main 1985], 173–242).

18. This is only one half of the story for Hegel. He also thinks that philosophy is in some sense a form of "absolute" spirit. The relation between philosophy as a historical formation and as a systematic, absolute enterprise is at the heart of his complex views.

19. G. W. F. Hegel, *Differenz des Fichteschen und Schellingschen Systems der Philosophie, Werke*, vol. 2, E. Moldenhauer and K.M. Michel, eds. (Frankfurt am Main 1970), 20–25.

20. Karl Marx, *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie* MEW (Bonn 1978) 1.378–80.

21. See T. W. Adorno et al., eds., *Der Positivismustreit in der deutschen Soziologie* (Neuwied and Berlin 1969).

22. In his *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, in *Nietzsche Werke: Kritische Studien-Ausgabe*, G. Colli and M. Montinari, eds. (Berlin 1967), vol. 5, 245–413; see also "Genealogy as Critique" in *Outside Ethics* (note 5), 153–61.

23. St Paul, after all, in a slightly bizarre passage (*Romans*) seems to claim that the point of the Jewish Law was to increase consciousness of sin, one can hold that Christianity generates the sense of sin to which its mes-

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sage of redemption from sin is purportedly the only adequate response.

24. I mention only one of the presentable philosophical reasons for the demise of this Hegelian tradition. This should not be taken to imply a denial of political, economic, and social causes, which were in fact probably more important.

25. *Phaedo* (OCT) 96a–99d.

26. See W. Burkert, "Platon oder Pythagoras," *Hermes* 88 (1960), 159–77.

27. *Tusculan Disputations* (OCT) 5.4.10–11.

28. See *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (note 22), 245–413; also "Nietzsche and Genealogy" in R. Geuss, *Morality, Culture, and History* (Cambridge 1999), 1–28.

29. *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (note 22), 254.

30. This gives one the ancient triadic division of philosophy into physics, ethics, and dialectics (or logic). See, for instance, Diogenes Laertius 7.39; Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* (OCT) 5.24.68–72.

31. Vitruvius, *De architectura* 1.1.8; 10.12.2.

32. OED gives a first isolated instance in 1702, then a series from the mid-nineteenth century.

33. *Les mots et les choses* (Paris 1966), 398.