

*Essay submitted to the University of Kentucky Seventh Annual Prize Essay
Competition in European Philosophy from Kant to the Present on the question:
How is Doing Philosophy Related to Doing the History of Philosophy?*

If I Were to Find a Photograph of Kierkegaard

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A. One of the most common occurrences in life is to find out that others often will not do what we think they should do. Sometimes a great surprise when we are young, we often will fail to expect it even many years later. This bafflement provokes many difficult questions as to how we influence others and how we resist influence, what thoughts have and have not the power to influence others or even ourselves, and which kind of force makes this power actual. Sometimes, one can write *currente calamo*, as fast as the pen goes, like Kierkegaard or Thoreau, who each produced journals of more than seven million words, in addition to books and essays; at those times one sees ideas force the hand into making them a visible thing. This force will be almost as mysterious as moral force, or the force of obligation, whenever the sight of it sets us to wonder about the will behind it, according to which one chooses to write out an explanation or expression of anything. The force of the hand in fabricating an object is wondrous enough, spiritually mysterious yet nevertheless observable; but the force of ideas is altogether another thing, feeble and relentless by turns. We have a lot of ways to

try to make or keep this force strong. Philosophical inquiry is one of them. All of them run up against the question of the nature of the force of ideas. Looking at this part of the issue is one of the special virtues of philosophical inquiry.

Though we often fail to persuade ourselves, much less others, to right, true, or good action, we keep trying. When we write out our thoughts, we are also trying, however waywardly, to find truth and goodness. When we simply think, we are moved or we move ourselves somehow to try to find these things. Whenever we try as hard as we might we are most likely to be more honest seekers. Philosophy is, at least in part, the rigorous pursuit of honesty, for any question rigorously pursued by inquiry into its farthest forms tends to issue in something people generally and broadly call philosophy. There is a less simple way as well in which we may rightly say that philosophy is a most rigorous pursuit of honesty, in that most philosophers think about the confidence that ought or ought not to be attached to statements. This is part of the task of figuring out how to affirm or deny validity. Thus the confidence of persons in the truth of assertions is at issue because the drive to be honest, honesty being profoundly consequential, encourages us to think about what is real and what is not. Persuasion depends upon confidence, confidence depends on honesty, and honesty depends on some conviction of the will, a turn of the heart, that drives us to figure out how to give influential force to truth.

These concepts form an orbit, like a choir dancing around an altar. Although everyone may know this circular motion of thought manifested as energetic concepts, stimulating choice or effective actions, each of us accepts or declines to join at one time or another. Sometimes to be honest seems utterly irresistible, and sometimes it's of no account whatsoever. Sometimes we are bucked up by arguing with others, and sometimes it's just too discouraging. The fact that these processes do not appear to depend upon physical causality is a spring of a great deal of philosophy and of theology as well. Here lie some forms of the basic issues of knowledge, belief, and doubt. They remain exposed to us and we to them, at every point of intellection. The historian Lucien Febvre, in the years in which he was founding *annalisme* as a new kind of historiography, wondered why historians of philosophy talk about "concepts...giving birth to one another within

the imponderable ether of thought”¹ in place of total history, in which geography, language, social forces, and all the other human and natural marvels together efficiently cause changing events, including philosophers’ changes of their own minds. Within the sphere of private reflection, there seems to be such an ether, swirling in the cranial cavity or in our consciousness of identity, even if at other times one feels quite free from any invisible private compulsion to be truthful or righteous. The public ether has a similar capacity for disappearance. We can and do feel the force of what others have thought in confrontation with the logic or validity of our thoughts, or at least as the ancestor that must shape its descendants. But at other times we assert a complete inward unanimity of opinion, or autonomy, by which we do as we will and not a thing other than that. Somehow force and freedom together obtain in the medium by which we connect ourselves to the past. For philosophers, this medium itself is under acute questioning, because if philosophers do anything at all, they must know the necessity of responding to the demand of honesty as rigorously as they can, by using the tools they have long worked to design for this purpose.

B. We have more choice in this matter of the progenitors of our philosophical work than we do of our parents, whose replication is under their control rather than ours. We have as much choice in disposition of this inheritance as we do in any other parts of life, or as little choice if one is determined to look on our decisions in that way rather than in terms of choice. We do not have any choice to have no natal parents, while it seems notionally possible to have the choice of replicating no other thinker at all. Yet a minute’s thought tells us that no person is entirely free of this kind of debt as a matter of anything but the leafless twig of bare possibility. We choose where to accept and where to reject, what to continue and what to silence. These small moments of seeming or real freedom, of remembrance, forgetting, hoping, and quitting mean that whatever the relations of generation, replication, and alteration in which we move to our conclusions, we wonder alone. One may have a large bouncy family and feel quite abandoned at times, just as one’s trade or discipline is sometimes the most helpful support and sometimes competitive or indifferent or cold. All our relations with others must include the possibility of isolation from them since at the moment we are aware of

¹As quoted without source by Peter Burke, ed., in his preface to *A New Kind of History from the Writings of Febvre* (London: Routledge, 1973), pp. xi-xii.

this we feel what it is to be alone. We feel at the same time at which we imagine a feeling, for even as possibilities feelings must be felt, just as thoughts are thought. When we say that we don't feel something emotional, we are saying that this emotion is not inwardly large enough to take into account in the present matter, yet we nonetheless feel it even as we are moving over into thinking about it in place of feeling it. Neither reason or emotion of course is anywhere near pure one of the other. Thinking about an emotion we do not "feel" includes some measure of feeling that emotion, just as thinking about an idea includes in the background some measure of the emotions suggested by ideas and the conflicts to which we respond by reason. As philosophers face other philosophers, they have an implicit and inward experience of the possibility of isolation from the streams and styles of thought recommended to them by the forces of these exogenous inquiries. To call this anything less pointed than solitude or loneliness is to underestimate what we pursue rigorous honesty in great matters to the best of our ability.

Perhaps this seems a heavy reduction of philosophical thinking to emotional feeling, which carries the threat of subverting any universal truth. But it is not yet enough.

First, no matter how free or attached we feel to others in the same inquiry as our own, and no matter whether the character of the others is exemplary in disposing us for or against a position, the question of true or false according to rigorous examination remains independently at issue. The possibility of people we like being consequentially wrong or people we dislike being dreadfully right leads the possibility of our having to isolate ourselves from another person or from a community in this regard. The possibility of autonomy, whether it is on principle or on character, produces that conflict in which we might find ourselves alone. These two aspects of the situation are like a sock turned inside out and then pulled the right way.

This brings us next to recognizing that the formal elements of proof are intended to give us confidence in the procedure. Likewise, they express the confidence of the person offering the proof. The choice of affirmation or dissent by the auditor or reader strands in front of the confidence of the arguer. The interlocutor also stands upon confidence in his capacity for rigorously honest reflection. The formal part of any argument is therefore not the only part, just as in

any other human activity. But in no other activity do we regularly presume our having complete control over the responses of other persons. We have but little control over the natural world in the end. We have it only in the small corners we excavate with great labor over the years. Most of us would consider a conviction as to complete control over the responses of others to be mental illness on the part of the person who holds this belief about his own power, or at the very least that his logic is defective, whenever it occurs—except in the case of logic itself, or rather our exercise of logic. Logic does not give us any power over others, except in a sense and occasion wherein all sides accept the rules and rely on the acceptance of them by others. “Acceptance” refers to a vast field of acts of each and every kind we know to be done by persons—kinds that are inextricable from one another in the end—resulting in a community apart from which progress in knowledge is hardly to be imagined. In this regard, intellectual analysis is an illusion of control.

This then complicates the use of logic. At the same time, it can help us to see things from others’ point of view, just as other kinds of communication do. Logic, like feeling, breaks one’s limits, clearing the mind. In the light of this constitutive element of communication, the most extreme formal rigidity and the sloppiest empathy are roughly equal parts of the same battery of faculties with which we go into the world. The rigor of critical thought sets it apart as specially strong in the rigorous pursuit of honesty, but to achieve its aims it challenges any community of agreement by means of the autonomous energy of the logical arguer. This is cradled in the rest of his or her own personality, and exactly the same must be said of every interlocutor. The inquiry requires tacit commitments. It is not an automatic calculation with a spear-tip of efficient force, and it therefore also challenges the tacit commitments it requires.

The field of objects of philosophical inquiry is almost unimaginably large. It includes “the law by which a brook finds its river, the instinct by which a bird performs its migrations, and the knowledge by which a man steers his ship round the globe,” as Thoreau put it, inserting man into all of nature;² as Leibniz put it, inserting all of nature into man, it includes not only “all the old books which will be unearthed in time” but all languages, “the most ancient monuments of mankind.”³

²H. D. Thoreau, ed. B. Torrey *et al.*, *The Journal* (New York: Dover, 1962) for 17 May 1854 (6.277-8).

³G. W. F. Leibniz, tr. P. Remnant and J. Bennett, *New Essays on Human Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 3.9.336-7.

Each of this infinite number of inquiries connects us to the object of inquiry, but it also raises the possibility of conflict with it. The inquiry is personal. It is fraught just as personhood is fraught. When the object of inquiry, from among all of outward and inward worlds, is philosophy, or inquiry itself, it will twist and turn inside us, if we are to get out of ourselves at all. The question of philosophical inquiry into the thinking of other philosophers has therefore the bi-valve action of the personal: it ties us to the outward and guards us from it, because the depth of the problem of confidence in one's assertions and in the assertions of others leaves us vulnerable to estrangement.

C. Recognition of the arguments of others in the midst of one's own pursuit of rigorously honest inquiry includes both the influence of the others and rejection of their arguments. The action here is inward: with each decision as to the persuasiveness of argument with which one is faced in inquiry, one also stresses the relations of one's intellectual autonomy or moral personhood to that of others who claim a part in this inquiry by virtue of the strength of their arguments along with the ether of trust necessary to communication. When we read good philosophers, we challenge our own grip on things, as to how well we understand and argue, as to serious things in the world, and as to positions about them to which we commit our intellectual autonomy and moral personhood. Though our study is private, we expose ourselves to trouble *via* persuasion, which can creep in on logic, on example, on emotion, on the unconscious, on delusion, and on fearsome truth. This is a situation into which philosophers permanently commit themselves by engaging in public and published inquiry. Kant or Schopenhauer need no longer worry about being corrected or refuted, but while they studied and wrote they fought with deep fears and other feelings about the matters to which philosophical disputes refer. They and the others fought in the most difficult intellectual arenas, in which the application of reason and the demands of conscience can be relentlessly applied. Enough for them, but each of us is infected as well. It is never more clear that we are in exposure than when we study the history of philosophy. Its weight is the measure of the narrow singularity of the spot on which one stands. I use the word loneliness to express the fact that exposure is not only intellectual or only emotional. It is of the full person, which seeks something in which to be confident and which is in demand as a source of affirmation because each person, no matter what, is a moral actor.

Because the job of rigorous honesty is great, the rigor of philosophy cannot occlude the participation of all the moving parts of personality in inquiry. The strength of argument of great philosophers being not solely a formal matter, their influence over centuries is nourished by all the processes by which they sought to generate force of argument. In the engagement of a philosopher with earlier philosophers, he or she is exposed to many species of influence. Not only do we think about the various psychic and social dimensions of the arguments in the books before us, but the encounter itself has measures of the voyeuristic, exhibitionistic, scopophilic, and narcissistic. Of course, the encounter should be philosophy and not melodrama. Its outcome is supposed to depend on logic. Though we know that the matter is more complex than this, nonetheless logic is a rigid outer framework to it all. But it would not be honest to dismiss these softer aspects of the consciousness of inquirers. Although they go far beyond the scope of this essay, let them stand to emphasize the delicacy due from philosophers to their consciences.

Progress is not charity that the smart give to the stupid. When one unfolds his or her inner world in a manner designed to test its congruity with the outward world according to standards that one trusts, courage is needed as well as intelligence. This was the case for those philosophers from other times and places whom we now read as much as it is for us. From the point of view of each philosopher who studies the history of philosophy, in other words, from my point of view, or yours, the exposure is tremendous. Conscience might awake, or social or intellectual estrangement ensue; but even in matters solely concerning my inward understanding of myself, I am obliged to miss nothing and to admit everything if I am not to fool myself. The stronger the philosopher I read, the harder his arguments are and the deeper my confession of respect for him is, and the tougher the encounter with myself. This also is a type of loneliness. It's the gamble we make whenever we shake hands with someone new to us, and a gamble many augment in ways suited to their dispositions with perfect dramaturgy. For some, philosophy raises the stakes to nearly unbearable risk.

Think of logical and critical analysis of ideas as the medium through which a philosopher passes from motive to response and on to the next motive. Like the risk in all human intimacy, each of us chooses issues that are profoundly, even

unconsciously important. As with the rest, we respond to inward conflicts sometimes in ways that worsen them and sometimes in ways that better them. One tests his or her identity when looking into the thoughts of someone who has cogently, lucidly, and logically expressed them. In terms of this risk, looking into or at discursive reasoning includes passive exhibition of one's self, because when a great philosopher launches his series of thoughts it's like being subjected to a cannonade. If you trustingly study the history of philosophy, you are at risk of becoming rubble. There is no hiding, except by not doing it. The instant you unveil, even in silent reading, your inward configuration to critical or logical reflection, you are inside something like an "ether of thought." The history of philosophy is such an ether whenever it is grasped by a person. The productive power of that ether is the force of the motor within the person, capable of being pounded, to the full extent of its fuel, into expressing the introspective proofing power of this nagging, compulsive ignition.

D. I study both philosophy and philosophers. My own experience of philosophical ideas centers on their transmission in history, including the material media of communication. This experience of mine has a group of definite, peculiar, singular features. My study of philosophers has a congruent group of singular and peculiar features. In this essay I can describe little of these courses of study and response, except to lay out a portion of its fundamentals, as I have in the foregoing pages, because it has been a large and long experience that, even had it been shorter, I do not now fully understand. In this case, the best that I can do is to explain some bits of one case in which these two lines of experience lucidly intersect. I say that this situation of grasping at what one does not know by trying to express something encompassing both thoughts and their thinker is the fundamental address that many philosophers do in fact make toward ideas and their history, though it often stands unapparent to writer and reader. I shall try to do this in regard to Søren Kierkegaard. He is the case in which this nexus is, at this moment, most apparent to me.

In order to describe the relation between the reader of philosophy and the author that I have in mind, I'll describe a part of my exposure to Kierkegaard—that is, to put into words some of the matters of my inward world that knowing about Kierkegaard exposes to inquiry. From among these matters I will not list the my

philosophical positions that Kierkegaard's arguments call into question, because to do this would not illustrate those parts of the basic relation between a philosopher and the history of philosophers, a species of the relation of author and reader, that, were they more obvious than they are, might have obviated the need to ask about the relation between the two itself into question. I cannot say whether these aspects of my relation to Kierkegaard came into existence in my mind because of what I know of his ideas or because of what I know of his life, or whether they existed unseen from the first time I read anything of his or required greater study in order to come into existence. I am going to draw your attention to feelings in myself that he touches upon, rather than to philosophical topics.

I do know that some of these feelings now attach themselves to the several extant life drawings of his face and person. Although he looks different in each of these images, in all of them he is delicate, intelligent, vulnerable, and alone. He is elfin but not a naif. He appears aware, receptive, experienced, and he seems lonely. I am erotically attracted to him. The possibility that he might have been quite different from how I think him to have been is par for the course of sexual feeling. I expose myself to my readers on this point, because my reception of his ideas exposes me to the desire to bind myself to the ideas and to him. The most important quality of this combination for the present purpose is the psychic power of cathexis. In attempting to understand his ideas as fully and deeply as I can, I take on a dim and partial reflection of the conflicts he experienced. I, and a great many of us, have undergone similar conflicts and undergone similar emotions in consequence of them. Here again are the motive and consequence of pursuing an inquiry wrapped around the logic of its arguments. The images of his face make the point for me of the feelings, concepts, thoughts, reasons, desires, and beliefs I take on from reading Kierkegaard open-mindedly and with willingness. The result is sometimes pleasant and sometimes unpleasant. Such states attend the course of conviction and doubt through the study by which one develops trust in his or her own ratiocinative judgment. Yet the strength of these images also suggests that the feeling alone does not fulfill the personal understanding one seeks in philosophy, although it is a necessary and inevitable part.

We have four portraits of Kierkegaard from life, all drawings.⁴ Two are

⁴A nice online collection of these and other portraits of Kierkegaard will be found at <http://sorenkierkegaard.org/kierkegaard-gallery.html>. The Kongelige Bibliothek in Copenhagen has a good

idealized, and two are attractive caricatures. Both groups give us something true of Kierkegaard in life, as far as we can guess. Many of his acquaintances said that his visage seemed to change a lot from moment to moment. The two idealized drawings were both made by his cousin Nils Christian Kierkegaard, a half-face in pencil in 1838 and a full face in ink in 1840. These both show an exquisitely tender, sensitive, self-contained, and beautiful young man. Of the other two, one was made in pencil when he was quite young, in the Student Union at the University of Copenhagen, and the other is a color sketch as he appeared on the streets of Copenhagen rather late in his short life. These show someone perhaps harder to understand: determined, observant, sarcastic, tough, and self-possessed.

Kierkegaard left us one ink self-portrait that I am aware of.⁵ In a letter to his fiancé Regine Olsen, he scribbled a little picture of himself on a hilltop peering through an extended telescope, so big that his tiny place in the drawing is scarcely other than to support the instrument. It provides almost no detail of how he might have viewed his face or body other than the magnitude in his self-identity of his observation of others from a distance. His manuscripts provide another sort of portrait in his intense proof-reading, carefully devised ink-strokes for deletions, thorough and foresightful organization of the manuscripts, and other graphic details.

No one ever photographed Kierkegaard. He avoided sitting for his portrait. Photographers had established practices in Copenhagen well within Kierkegaard's lifetime. We have photographs of most of the important people in his life, such as his fiancé Regine, his brother, his closest friend Emile Boesen, his cousin Henriette Lund, his student Hans Brøchner, and people in literary and publishing circles, though they usually were taken a few or more years after Kierkegaard's death. Photographic portraits give us an entry in depth by the viewer into the subject, a steady connection between the subject and the viewer, a strong assertion of identity

discussion of four of the principal images at <http://www2.kb.dk/kultur/expo/sk-mss//engkat4.htm>, with notes on his attitude toward having his portrait done. Rikard Magnussen's *Søren Kierkegaard set udefra* (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1942) is a complete scholarly account of Kierkegaard portraiture, well-illustrated. A good brief account in English is by Bruce Kirmmse in his invaluable *Encounters with Kierkegaard* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 293 n. 15.

⁵Niels Jorgen Cappelorn, Joakin Garff, Johnny Kondrup, trans Bruce Kirmmse. *Written Images. Søren Kierkegaard's Journals, Notebooks, Booklets, Sheets, Scraps, and Slips of Paper*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 41 and fig. 25. Kierkegaard frequently doodled partial portraits of others in his notebooks.

by the subject; furthermore, they assert conflict between the subject of the photograph and the photographer and between the subject and the viewer—a full range of conflict across the barrier of one’s own space and mind, intrusive and possible violent. These are aspects of Roland Barthes’s well-known concept of the *punctum*. We do not have the fixed and intense living presence given by photographic technology for this man who lived an impassioned and full inner life and an impassioned full life on the streets and in the houses of Copenhagen (as well as in the Danish countryside). Conflicts between his ideas and society often led him to break with those closest to him. To his readers he was a tricky dancer, starting from his pseudonymous authorship on the title-page. Kierkegaard is the last great philosopher of whom we have no photographic portrait. Arthur Schopenhauer, who is perhaps the first, found that it brought him attention. A couple of photographs of him taken in his sixties contributed to his celebrity image as the face of an attitude toward life, which he enjoyed by acting it out and living up to it. Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer had both intensely isolated and intensely public sides. When he was not writing his staggering corpus of works, Kierkegaard was often walking about Copenhagen, observing and arguing on the model of Socrates.

It’s unclear whether he had more fame in his life than he truly wished, but it’s certain that his photograph would have been tugged his image into celebrity. More intimacy with the man Kierkegaard might imperil my clarity about his ideas, such as it is. Yet I am sorry not to have a photographic *punctum* added into my image of Søren Kierkegaard. This is in part disappointed desire, which is to be expected of desire if one has his mind in order. But what I miss is something even less ordinary as well. We do not have photographs of most great philosophers from the course of history, but at times each of us may have the desire to understand the thinker’s overall view of the world in extraordinary depth, because of the force of argument and because it acutely agrees, or disagrees, with the world as we know it. My unforced ideas of the world seem as much a conclusion I’d draw if I’d experienced Kierkegaard’s life as they are in the broad line of his developed conclusions about the fundamental issues of philosophy. The desire, partly rooted in the erotic, to look into his eyes is a measure of the length I might go to understand his questions and answers about reality and human life. I discern in myself the need for struggle with another like him, in which to play out my passions in concert with one who unfolded his passion in thought in ways similar

to my own manner of feeling and thinking.

E. Kierkegaard argued that abstract thought, specifically defined, cannot express “the difficulty inherent in existence.”⁶ He maintained however that even the abstract thinker could be “a work of art in his existence,” and that if he did not try to be this he would have “in spite of all pretensions personally existed like a nincompoop.”⁷ Thus he judges thought by life. The degree to which we do this, and just how to do it, is another controversy. Within his own terms, though, Kierkegaard stated that thought used in the actual ethical progress of individual existence, as a concretion, requires looking backwards as something “necessary...(to) the immense detour of dying from immediacy.”⁸ This kind of thinking he set in opposition to totalizing thought, by which Hegel created out of the history of philosophy something we might call an empire, with all the self-destructive fatality of imperial ambition.

By emphasizing the experiential over the discursive in philosophical inquiry we can outline a scheme of three approaches to the history of philosophy . The first approach is to the raw bones of argument. This flays the skin, strips the skin off the bone, by breaking the bone of argument. The second approach is what we generally call historical, based on any number of methods, critical theories, or ideologies. It is genealogical in the broad sense of the word,⁹ in which the thinker brings ideas to life by virtue of their historical source, context, use, and fate. The third approach is study of or reflection on the overall view of a philosopher or of a school of philosophy. By “overall view” I mean something different by degrees from “world view” as it is commonly used. It is like world view in that it is critical analysis that is more sympathetic than imperial. But as an approach to the philosophical study of the history of philosophy it includes, among other features, a certain kind of the strength it gives the inquirer

⁶Søren Kierkegaard, trans. David Swenson and Walter Lowrie, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 270.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 268-269.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 469.

⁹*I.e.*, not in the critical meaning, given it by Foucault, in which it is now used in a large body of contemporary philosophy.

F. Leibniz, in the passage quoted above, expected that every language will be recorded and everything in them compared, until every meaning is recovered and mankind will have reconciled all minutiae. Hegel's idea of absolute truth, the object of Kierkegaard's attack, was fundamentally different from Leibniz's, but both shared the struggle to balance universal validity with the fact of contradiction by seeking to understand the pattern of variation among particulars and even among persons. Both followed logic out to its end, and yet they differed. How to encompass the variation within logic itself? Leibniz at one point said he sought to explain that which "inclines but without necessity." But clearly the difference is not in "logic itself," which, *ex vi hypothesis*, ought to end always at the same spot. In fact we no longer see logic in this monopunctual way, and the beginning of this alteration must be traced to Leibniz and its great growth to Hegel as much as to any others, but this fundamental tension of the one and the many applies to human affairs, such as morality and history, whatever its fate in ontology and metaphysics. Why then is not the raw-bones approach to the work of philosophers better than the overall-view approach? What value does the overall-view have in judgments as to truth? If it has any such value, should it be recommended as a supplementary trier of fact or as deeper and better judgment? Or is it something in between? If our study of the thoughts of others is in the end a matter of psychology, then this study probably would be prejudicial to clear thinking, no matter what we want to believe about the limits of our rational faculty when it faces nature or about the importance of our personalities in this universe.

This would be true if the over all view approach were a matter of swamping judgment in the questions of good and bad personal example. However, since for each and every statement we assess the particular shapes and terms of the speaker's confidence in it, it is necessary to consider the works of philosophers in part as the products of their personalities. It is at least as necessary to do this as to hope for impersonal and final truths from them or from anyone, including empirical inquirers. We all test our control of our thoughts and we test our capacity for control of the external word by means of our thoughts. As our thoughts do little for the world except through the objects of the efforts they guide, the philosophical world of such objects is incomplete without some understanding of the person, which limits and biases thought according to the circumstance of personhood that produces it. These circumstances are, like the thoughts themselves, objects of our attention. Objects belong to us and yet they do not belong to us. Our will fails, as

does our control. Our personalities however are always ours. They contest with the objectivity of objects—the tendency of things to incline or push us and also to go away and leave us. Circumstances that shape character gain and lose influence in life, and we subject great philosophical ideas to our own changing circumstances. Philosophical thought being partially under our critical control, we approach it as our being alone and finite beings in order to help us understand the world. So, since philosophical work is in fact not an objective product, or entirely objective, we face wholly discounting its value if we do not de-objectify our understanding of the history of philosophy. The will supposedly contends with the intellect, but both will and intellect would be just like objects in the outward world if their contention was not held inside of a competent and capable personal force.

We cannot live with the raw-bones approach alone, even if we cannot live quite without it. This is true also of the overall-view approach, so the question of the balance of freedom and necessity is again in view, except that for the moment we might supply personality to the problem as an “ether of thoughts.” This seems as improbable an escape from the oxidative effect of causality as the *intermundia* (or *metakosmia*) in which Epicureans are sometimes said to have thought the incorruptible gods dwelt. But *ataraxia*, the human version of immateriality they recommended, hardly describes the passion and fear that philosophers bring to their task. Though it sounds improbable, personality as the ether of thoughts, through which we think and study as philosophers or in the moral aspect of any and every activity, is about the only sphere capable of defining persuasive communication, unless we turn to divine command or the imperation of some other authority.

Neither the will nor the intellect alone suffice. In fact, they barely survive the middle of the twentieth century as legitimate concepts. The person stands in a relation to them almost like his or her relation to objects. Will and intellect are caught up in objects and bear toward us as persons the same fraught relationship we have with material objects. They require such objects, in order that they might be. Their whole history is combined. Persons, on the other hand, stand in a more conflicted relation with all outwardness including their own extroversion, curiosity, sociability, and intellection. The entire complex history of every known idea, text, document, or fabricated artifact, as well as a great deal (if not all) of the non-human world—who experienced it, when, where, and why, and to what effect—is

constituted solely in personality. If I had a photograph of Kierkegaard, if I were to discover one, although it would be subject to the same ethical situation to which all thought is subject, it would be unique in that the object of attention here is a metonym for incessant subjectivity. I could not look into Kierkegaard's eyes, into the *punctum* of a photographic portrait of him, and forget that he is a subject—that is, a thinking person—since that is what he sets about becoming as a philosopher. In this sense every philosopher gives us a sun-picture of himself, a direct exposure of sensitive matter to the light, fixed by a force of the thinker and by neither magic nor logic. I could want to embrace or attack the man I see in Kierkegaard's photo, but the firm fact of his having been a human person takes entire control of my relation to him. This is true of as any thinker, from Socrates onward, who is strong enough to make it true. They all set in front of us a kind of *punctum*, to which we are vulnerable. Exposure to this is a source of the kind of strength I have referred to, the kind we need to fluff an ether of thoughts into operation.

G. A less doggedly personal approach to philosophy, one less satisfied with etherization, might hold out more hope of finding universal truth. In the schema of approaches I outlined above, the “middle” choice, the broadly historical approach, suggests such possibility in some of its forms. In such forms the historian employs the narrative to explain or prove the truth of a philosophical point of view. In other versions, history gives us consensus, sometimes said to be validated by our intuition. Consensus as a source of truth raises many problems, some of which come from the personalist approach in the present essay. The fact that humans do communicate with some success requires us to acknowledge common ground, but it is far from clear what universal truths must come from it. In other forms of the middle choice the historian denies any grand narrative in favor of the mechanisms by way of which one thing leads to another. And in still another approach to the history of thought, the historian, in this case sometimes called the genealogist of morals, fights against unifying narratives on the grounds that they lead to false consensus and to false assertions of purity or progress, whereas the true story is one of the contest of desires unattributable to self either globally or in particular. This approach denies any ground, by consensus or otherwise, to liberal universalism based on the study of mankind. Whether we seek universal truths in history via a transcendent ontology or via the anthropology of finitude, all forms of the middle approach rely on beliefs that depend in turn on

our conception of inward and outward selfhood. If you dodge one way you run into logic, and if you dodge the other way you run into emotions and the will. One or the other of these will move other people, if it doesn't move you, to change the consensus sooner or later. Both logic and the passions affect the growth of philosophy through innumerable inward and outward circumstances as passing time engulfs any established consensus.

There might in fact be little we can do to find universal or even broad truths in the face of circumstances moved by personality rather than controlled by logic. In the ether of thought, which one might presume to be viscous and retardant, events move too quickly and numerous for us. They come and go much as do mere material things. We sense some kind of meaning in their passages, but most of the time we're poor experts on the lives we lead. We're left with the problems we call our selves, which are as disobedient to the force of our thoughts as are other persons, and living nature, and inorganic lumps. The history of philosophy presents us with the same problem as the lumps: we are exposed to change it might cause in us, being unequal to exogenous forces, and yet we nevertheless feel ourselves to be a force in the events that transpire. But if we are able to reach other philosophers—the great and the good dead ones, whose work is the most revolutionary and disturbing—in the full personhood they attempted to develop by means of philosophy, then we might not be as vulnerable to mistaken logic and unlawful error or to will and chance as we otherwise would. They, as persons who were philosophers, offer us such companionship as that which I seek in a photograph of the living Kierkegaard—some way to be exposed and to respond without being at the loss we are at when similarly placed before nature.

A good actor or actress has a related capability—that of conveying something broad in the expression of something particular. The breadth might stand upon as thin a point as the link between one of us in an audience and that one person on stage or on film. But there are bigger things at both ends of that narrow channel between performer and observer or auditor. From the force of expression, by the whole force of a person's presence on stage or screen, or by voice, the largest consequence may be suggested. Watch video of great acting with the volume turned off, or look at videos made by American Sign Language interpreters. The deaf tend to intensify their facial expressions more than the hearing do, and ASL interpreters must do the same thing. They are mimes. A

person sitting for his or her photograph is a mime too, for an instant, by representing himself or herself. That is a distinct act of original subjective existence

We might view philosophers as performers, trying to give real presence to something universal through their own presence with us in an enveloping ether. They mime reality by the performance of logic. We might put objects upon a podium, and be moved by contemplating them until they are taken away, and still be moved by our memory of them, even though the podium itself has become less meaningful, or meaningless, or sad, by its emptiness. But just as ideas are more lasting than things, and stronger than they are, in this and other ways, we are exposed to the persons who argue for them, just as they were exposed, though they themselves are now but shades. The greater their philosophical work, the more dramatic our vulnerability to it, the more it offers us as persons some chance to be less severely the victims of fate.

A performer, in turn, is a guide who won't let the moral force of the matter at hand escape our attention. The Desert Fathers feared lines of thought so powerful that they threatened to cause the loss of reason, of true understanding, or of moral life. They found that to defend their humanity they should develop, in concert with elders who had passed such barriers, a species of understanding that enabled them to know when it became urgent to depend upon others. Others gave this help in the form of gentle touch or wise words.¹⁰ They sought help because they had the wisdom to know that they needed it. This gave them a better chance of being equal in strength to the trying questions their spiritual journey threw at them. Something like this taken from the long-time discourse of philosophy, in part logic, in part history, and in part their sensibility about what the world is, all made as by a photographic flash into a dream of communion, leaves us on a stronger footing against the infinitely powerful and complex reality we seek to understand.

¹⁰Brown, Peter. *The Body and Society. Men, women and sexual renunciation in early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 228-229.