What Is Philosophy?

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§ Preface: Note Toward an Art of Ignorance

It is very difficult to say why one becomes attached to a particular problem.
~Gilles Deleuze

Samuel Taylor Coleridge opens Chapter 12 of the *Biographia Literaria* with curious resolve. “In the perusal of philosophical works I have been greatly benefited by a resolve, which, in the antithetic form and with the allowed quaintness of an adage or maxim, I have been accustomed to word thus: ‘until you understand a writer’s ignorance, presume yourself ignorant of his understanding.’” What is the relationship posed here between ignorance and understanding?

In *Memoirs of the Blind*, Jacques Derrida discusses the conditions and status of self-portraiture. According to Derrida, “the status of the self-portrait of the self-portraitist will always retain a hypothetical character.” “Even if one were sure,” for example, “that Fantin-Latour were drawing himself drawing, one would never know, observing the work alone, whether he were showing himself drawing himself or something else—or even himself as something else, as other. And he can always, in
addition, draw this situation: the stealing away of what regards you, of what looks at you, of what fixedly observes you not seeing that with which or with whom you are dealing.” None of that can be known for a very general reason: In the instant pen or pencil makes contact with paper, “the inscription of the inscribable is not seen.” Further,

Whether it be improvised or not, the invention of the *trait* [trait, feature, line, stroke, mark] does not follow, it does not conform to what is presently visible [...]. Even if drawing is, as they say, mimetic, that is, reproductive, figurative, representative, even if the model is presently facing the artist, the *trait* must proceed in the night. It escapes the field of vision. Not only because it *is not yet* visible, but because it does not belong to the realm of the spectacle, of spectacular objectivity—and so that which it makes happen or come [*advenir*] cannot in itself be mimetic. [...] Whether one underscores this with the words of Plato or Merleau-Ponty, the visibility of the visible cannot, by definition, be seen, no more than what Aristotle speaks of as the diaphanousness of light can be. My hypothesis—remember that we are still within the logic of the hypothesis—is that the draftsman always sees himself to be prey
to that which is each time universal and singular and would have to be called the unbeseen, as one speaks of the unbelo

In order to be read—in order to be worth having read—above all one must unknowingly have preserved for another an ignorance to be understood. One can perhaps paraphrase Benjamin here and speak of an historical index proper to ignorance, that it only attains to legibility as such at a particular time, that of its recognizability.

A situation, indeed. To be made to glimpse “what fixedly observes you not seeing that with which or with whom you are dealing”: I draw on the ignorance of others in order to have drawn, with my own ignorance, my own self-portrait.

§ ON ARGUMENT: FRAGMENTS

Alfred North Whitehead: “It is more important that a proposition be interesting than that it be true. The importance of truth,” he goes on to say, “is that it adds to interest.”

In 1735, with the first appearance of the Systema naturae, Linnaeus assigns Homo to the order of the Anthropomorpha. From the tenth edition of 1758 on, that order will be called Primates. “In truth, Linnaeus’ genius consists not so much in the resoluteness with which he
places man among the primates,” Giorgio Agamben has commented,

as in the irony with which he does not record—as he does with the other species—any specific identifying characteristic next to the generic name Homo, only the old philosophical adage: nosce te ipsum [know yourself]. Even in the tenth edition, when the complete denomination becomes Homo sapiens, all evidence suggests that the new epithet does not represent a description, but that it is only a simplification of the adage, which, moreover, maintains its position next to the term Homo. It is worth reflecting on this taxonomic anomaly, which assigns not a given, but rather an imperative as a specific difference.

An analysis of the Introitus that opens the Systema leaves no doubts about the sense Linnaeus attributed to his maxim: man has no specific identity other than the ability to recognize himself. Yet to define the human not through any nota characteristica, but rather through his self-knowledge, means that man is the being which recognizes itself as such, that man is the animal that must recognize itself as human to be human.
Amid the backlash, Agamben continues, “the notes for a reply to another critic, Theodor Klein, show how far Linnaeus was willing to push the irony implicit in the formula *Homo sapiens*. Those who, like Klein, do not recognize themselves in the position that the *Systema* has assigned to man should apply the *nosce te ipsum* to themselves; in not knowing how to recognize themselves as man, they have placed themselves among the apes.”

And yet it is significant that this reply is elaborated only in notes. On his own terms, and in principle, Linnaeus could not make that response. *Homo* is, again in Agamben’s words, “a constitutively ‘anthropomorphous’ animal”: Man only *resembles* man, and in order to recognize himself for what he is, he must recognize himself as merely one among the *Anthropomorpha*. Linnaeus could not make that response to his critics, in other words, because he had staked his humanity on recognizing himself in them—in those, precisely, who are unable to.

Hume only became who he is because he managed to wake one philosopher from his dogmatic slumber. It’s entirely possible he may yet wake more. Should he do so it will be in no small part thanks to the work of Quentin Meillassoux: he has added his voice to Hume’s and revived the latter’s problem in all its radicality. Hume asks how we know the future will resemble the past, that is, that the usual connections observed between successive events are
necessary and, in fact, universal. The short answer? We can’t. Hume’s treatment of the problem presaged its subsequent treatment from his time until today: because we believe in causal necessity on the basis of habit, induction has largely been treated as a practical problem, in other words, and for example, under what conditions and by what means are inductive inferences generally made? In its ontological dimension the problem is taken to be insoluble because where it leads is taken to be absurd. Not so, Meillassoux:

On the contrary, the ontological approach I speak of would consist in affirming that it is possible rationally to envisage that the constants could effectively change for no reason whatsoever, and thus with no necessity whatsoever; which, as I will insist, leads us to envisage a contingency so radical that it would incorporate all conceivable futures of the present laws, including that consisting in the absence of their modification.

Meillassoux continues, “I would affirm that, indeed, there is no reason for phenomenal constants to be constant. I maintain, then, that these laws could change. One thereby circumvents what, in induction, usually gives rise to the problem: the proof, on
the basis of past experience, of the future
constancy of laws. But one encounters
another difficulty, which appears at least
as redoubtable: if laws have no reason to
be constant, *why do they not change at
each and every instant?* If a law is what it
is purely contingently, it could change at
any moment. The persistence of the laws
of the universe seems consequently to
break all laws of probability: for if the
laws are effectively contingent, it seems
that they must frequently manifest such
contingency. If the duration of laws does
not rest upon any necessity, it must be a
function of successive ‘dice rolls’, falling
each time in favour of their continuation
[...]. From this point of view, their
manifest perenniality becomes a prob-
abilistic aberration—and it is precisely
because we never observe such modi-
fications that such a hypothesis has
seemed, to those who tackled the
problem of induction, too absurd to be
seriously envisaged.

If “the persistence of the laws of the universe
seems consequently to break all laws of
probability,” Meillassoux goes on to argue,
that’s because probability doesn’t apply here.
To the objection that the uniformity of nature
would be tantamount to untold dice throws
with the same result, Žižek has pointed out that
that argument “relies on a possible totalization of possibilities/probabilities, with regard to which the uniformity is improbable: if there is no standard, nothing is more improbable than anything else.” And that is very precisely the case here: there can be no standard in principle because the universe, unlike a die or a coin, possesses no denumerable set of possible states, no delimitable set of inherent possibilities. That is to say, the universe is nontotalizable. And it may even be illegitimate for that reason to speak of ‘the universe.’ Umberto Eco has discussed this point near the end of “The Power of Falsehood.” “Does the universe exist? Good question.” If the universe does not exist that’s because the future does.

Argument is by nature a rearguard action. (Nietzsche: “—what have I to do with refutations!—”; “I refute it thus”: and thus Dr. Johnson kicks the stone but misses Berkeley.) The emphasis—the interest—is elsewhere: as Deleuze and Guattari put it, lines of flight are primary. First you flee, and only in flight do you fashion a weapon.

§ Addendum: On Argument

“Philosophy,” Quentin Meillassoux has stated, “is the invention of strange forms of argumentation.” A curious claim, it is at the same time a profound intuition. What’s at stake for philosophy in the changing forms of argumentation
employed in it, and according to what necessity does the recourse to invention impose itself there?

Alexander Nehamas has staged the divided desire that organizes Nietzsche’s work. Nietzsche “wants, on the one hand, to distinguish himself from Socrates and from the philosophical tradition. One way in which he might have achieved this goal would have been to refrain from writing anything that might in any conceivable manner be construed as philosophical—the only certain method of accomplishing this purpose being to refrain from writing altogether. But this is not, and cannot be, Nietzsche’s way. Refraining from writing, assuming that this was something he had any choice about, would not simply have distinguished him from the tradition; it would have prevented him from being related to it in any way. But Nietzsche also wants, on the other hand, to criticize that tradition and to offer views of his own which, in their undogmatic manner, will compete with other views. Yet this procedure always involves the risk of falling back into the philosophical tradition after all. We can think of philosophy as a mirror in which those who belong to it are reflected, while those
who are not reflected are totally irrelevant to it.

Argument, above all, and before any explicit contention, registers the effects of a departure—and that nowhere more so than in its form. Formal invention in argumentation obliquely describes, in philosophy, the limit that joins what is relevant to what is irrelevant to philosophy. Wanting, strangely, it will have broached it in reflection.

§ Untimely Meditations

Without question, philosophy is an activity. One “does” philosophy; one philosophizes. What remains an open question, however, is the character and status of that activity: What is it to philosophize? In other words, what does one do when one does philosophy?

1.

In Chapter XV, “The Value of Philosophy,” the concluding chapter of The Problems of Philosophy, Bertrand Russell observes that, “Philosophy, like all other studies, aims primarily at knowledge.” “But,” he immediately concedes, “it cannot be maintained that philosophy has had any great measure of success in its attempts to provide definite answers to its questions. If you ask a mathematician, a mineralogist, a histor-
ian, or any other man [sic throughout] of learning, what definite body of truths has been ascertained by his science, his answer will last as long as you are willing to listen. But if you put the same question to a philosopher, he will, if he is candid, have to confess that his study has not achieved positive results such as have been achieved by other sciences. It is true that this is partly accounted for by the fact that, as soon as definite knowledge concerning any subject becomes possible, this subject ceases to be called philosophy, and becomes a separate science. The whole study of the heavens, which now belongs to astronomy, was once included in philosophy; Newton’s great work was called ‘the mathematical principles of natural philosophy.’ Similarly, the study of the human mind, which was a part of philosophy, has now been separated from philosophy and has become the science of psychology. Thus, to a great extent, the uncertainty of philosophy is more apparent than real: those questions which are already capable of definite answers are placed in the sciences, while those only to which, at present, no definite answer can be given, remain to form the residue which is called philosophy.
2.

What remains, at present, to form that “residue which is called philosophy”? Perhaps nothing more, nor less, finally, than what philosophy ever had.

Eric Dietrich has claimed that philosophy does not progress, that it “is exactly the same today as it was 3000 years ago; indeed, as it was from the beginning. What it does do,” however, he goes on to contend, “is stay current”:

Imagine that Aristotle, as he’s walking around the Lyceum, encounters a time-warp and pops forward to today, on a well-known campus somewhere in some English-speaking country, with the ability to speak English, dressed in modern garb, and that he doesn’t become deranged as a result of all this. Curious about the state of knowledge, he finds a physics lecture and sits in. What he hears shocks him. A feather and an iron ball fall at the same rate in a vacuum; being heavier doesn’t mean falling faster, something he doesn’t understand. Aristotle along with the rest of the class is shown the experimental verification of this from the moon (from the moon?!?!?) performed by Commander David Scott of Apollo 15. The very same equations (equations?!?!?) that explain why an apple falls to the
ground explain how the moon stays in orbit around Earth and how Earth stays in orbit around the sun (orbits?!?!?). He learns of quantum mechanics’ strangenesses. The more he hears, the more shocked he gets. Finally, he just faints away. He faints away again in cosmology class where he learns, for starters, that comets and meteors, and the Milky Way are not atmospheric phenomena, as he concluded. The Big Bang, relativity, the size of the universe, the number of galaxies, dark matter, and dark energy . . . are all too much for him. In biology class, he learns that a living thing’s potential, its matter, is not at all explanatory, as he thought, but instead learns of genetics and developmental biology. He also learns that his idea of spontaneous generation is just plain wrong—not even close to being correct. He learns of evolution and the discovery that all of life on Earth is related. As the class continues, he again faints dead away.

After he comes to, he soberly concludes that this modern world, this advanced time, has utterly surpassed his knowledge and the knowledge of his time. He feels dwarfed by our epistemic sophistication. Sadly, he trundles off to a philosophy class—a metaphysics class, as it turns out. Here he hears the professor
lecturing about essences, about being qua being, about the most general structures of our thinking about the world. He knows exactly what the professor is talking about. Aristotle raises his hand to discuss some errors the professor seems to have made, and some important distinctions that he has not drawn. As the discussion proceeds, the metaphysics professor is a bit taken aback but also delighted at this (older) student’s acumen and insight. Then Aristotle goes to an ethics class, where he learns of the current importance of what is apparently called “virtue ethics.” He recognizes it immediately, but again, the professor seems to have left out some crucial details and failed to see some deeper aspects of the view. Aristotle raises his hand.

This story of Aristotle’s return to philosophy no doubt is somewhat plausible to the reader (excluding, probably, the time-travel part). Perhaps it is no more than that or just barely that. But this is all I need.

3.

Gilles Deleuze has developed a theory of the event, of what constitutes an event. In contrast to the classical conception according to which being is opposed to becoming as eternity is to
time, Deleuze opposes becoming to history: whereas becoming is classically identified with history, it is their difference, their noncoincidence, that pertains to events. As Deleuze has it, “not exactly something that occurs, but something in that which occurs,” “the part that eludes its own actualization in everything that happens.”

An activity that approximates inactivity, an event that to all appearances approaches a non-occurrence, what one does when one does philosophy is, against history, to become—“that is to say, acting counter to our time and thereby acting on our time and, let us hope, for a time to come.”