NOTES

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

Pg. 1: What is philosophy? Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, What is Philosophy? trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 41: “The nonphilosophical is perhaps closer to the heart of philosophy than philosophy itself, and this means that philosophy cannot be content to be understood only philosophically or conceptually, but is addressed essentially to non-philosophers as well.”


Pg. 2: as one commentator has pointed out Seymour Feldman, Introduction to Baruch Spinoza,

**Pg. 2: What Auden said of poetry**  

**Pg. 2: it makes nothing happen**

**Suspense: Note on Topography**

The refutation of utopia, in politics as in philosophy, has proven no more definitive than has its invocation. That it remains an issue, however, affords a better understanding of it: its mode of persistence gives insight into its nature.

As Giorgio Agamben has recounted, a technical term of the Skeptics’ stakes out a no man’s land between affirmation and negation, acceptance and rejection: *ou mallon*, no more than. It is by way of this phrase that the Skeptics denote—and enact—what Agamben calls “their most characteristic experience,” that of *epochê*, suspension: It is used by them to refute an argument at the same time as the counterargument on offer. “No more than,” records Diogenes Laertius, “is no more than it is
not.” Sextus Empiricus concurs. “Even as the proposition ‘every discourse is false’ says that it too, like all propositions, is false, so the formula ‘no more than’ says that it itself is no more than it is not.”

Utopia exists no more than it does not exist. It has become a commonplace to point out that the word “utopia” originally designated “nowhere.” But it is necessary to add what Gilles Deleuze observes of the title of Samuel Butler’s utopian novel Erewhon: It is “not only a disguised no-where but a rearranged now-here.” The reversibility of no-where and now-here—by way of a single, finally unlocatable space—makes of utopia the most common place. Giorgio Agamben, Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 256; Gilles Deleuze, Difference and Repetition, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 333n7.

**Pg. 2: In its deepest intention, philosophy is** Agamben, Potentialities, 249.

**Pg. 4: the construction of** In a recent interview Quentin Meillassoux has differentiated two senses of the word ‘construction’: “If I employ this word in connection with the work of an architect,

what I mean is that the building thereby
constructed would not have existed without the architect’s plan or the labour of the workers. But let’s suppose that by ‘construction’ I refer instead to the mechanisms by which an archeologist has set up a dig site in order to excavate some ruins without damaging them. In this case the ‘constructions’ (a complex of winches, sounding lines, scaffolding, spades, brushes, etc.) are not destined to produce an object, as in the case of architecture. On the contrary, they are made with a view to not interfering with the object at which they aim: that is to say, excavating the ruins without damaging them.


**Pg. 5: As Giorgio Agamben recounts**

Agamben has recounted Aristotle’s definition of potentiality many times, prominent among them in “On Potentiality,” in *Potentialities*, 177–84, and in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 44–47. “I could state the subject of my work,” Agamben writes near the beginning of the former, “as an attempt to understand the meaning of the verb ‘can’ [potere]. What do I mean when I say: ‘I can, I cannot?’” (“On Potentiality,” 177). In a paren-
theoretical interjection among his opening remarks in *The Neutral*, Roland Barthes proposes an interesting complication of that question when he writes, “(Who can distinguish between inability and the lack of taste?)” Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*, trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 10. Stated positively, how is taste implicated in ability? And what would it say of one’s own ability, not to mention taste, going forward, to attempt to tease them apart?

ON ARGUMENT

**Pg. 7 On Argument**

**APOLOGIA PRO VITA PHILOSOPHICUS, APOLOGIA PRO VITA SUA**

In “Philosophy and Disagreement,” Brian Ribeiro takes as his point of departure the question, “Why,” in philosophy, “is there all this disagreement?”:

Philosophy is not only rife with disagreement; one might even say that philosophy is in the *business* of disagreement. That’s who we are, or what we do, *qua* philosophers: we question, dispute, object, oppose, beg to differ, quibble, and sometimes even cavil. Since this is so, one might expect philosophy would, long ago, have
worked out a fairly sophisticated account of disagreement—of its nature, origin(s), and its implications for the practice of philosophy—but it seems fairly clear to me that this is not so.

I find that very surprising. After all, one of the other things philosophy is in the business of is being a thoroughly and uncompromisingly *self-critical* enterprise, i.e. being an enterprise that not only thinks about its paradigmatic objects of inquiry but also thinks about *itself* and *its relation* to its own inquiries. Thus, one might be surprised to find that philosophy is in the business of doing (at least) two things (viz. disputing and being relentlessly self-critical), but doesn’t appear to be in the business of doing them in conjunction (being relentlessly self-critical about this disputing.)

Ribeiro goes on to claim that this is a “problem.” A curious problem, indeed: What is the relationship between philosophy and disagreement?

Daniel Heller-Roazen has provided an account of what it is, following the Stoic percept, to live according to nature. He notes a distinction that “may seem subtle, but it is, in truth, of prime importance, as the thinkers of Antiquity well knew.” Further,

A text of uncertain authorship contained
in the De anima liber cum mantissa attributed to Alexander of Aphrodisias most clearly illustrates the point. The pertinent passage consists of two sentences, the first of which attributes a doctrine to some Stoics, “but not all of them”: the belief, namely, that “that which the animal senses as the first thing that belongs to prōton oikeion is nothing other than itself.” The second sentence continues: “Others, instead, seeking to give a more elegant and precise definition, say that from the moment of birth we are appropriated to our constitution and to that which preserves it [phasisin pros tēn sustasin kai tērēsin oikeiōsthai euthus genomenous hēmas tēn hēmōn autōn].”

The contrast between the two statements could not be more clear. It sets a formulation of some imprecision against the principle repeatedly espoused by Seneca and the masters of the Stoic school. The ‘more elegant and precise definition’ posits, at the heart of every being, a difference without which it could not come to be itself: the difference between the self and its constitution, that most proper thing to which the animal, in relating itself to the world about it, comes by nature to be appropriated. Not the self but that to which the self perceives itself to be assigned
and to which it must always adapt itself, the ‘constitution’ is that element within the animal with which it never altogether coincides, to which, from birth, it continues to ‘conciliate’ and ‘commend’ itself. It is that for which every living thing, to be and to preserve itself, must ‘care,’ that which each being, rational or not, incessantly senses and never knows.

Disagreement in philosophy follows from ‘the difference,’ in each philosopher, ‘between the self and its constitution’: That ‘to which the self perceives itself to be assigned and to which it must always adapt itself,’ what a philosopher must ‘conciliate’ him- or herself to before all else, and with every word, is the assignation of that self to inquiry. Mutually delivered over one to the other, mutually inexplicable one in terms of the other, everything in philosophy transpires between a self and the rigors of its inquiries. Investigation in its course, a kind of propitiation, is what comes to make one’s inquiries, as it does one’s life, as a philosopher, one’s own. Informing every unaccountable departure, it is also that according to which philosophy lives. Brian Ribeiro, “Philosophy and Disagreement,” Crítica 43 (2011): 3–4; Daniel Heller-Roazen, The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation (Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books, 2007), 114–15.

Pg. 7: **It is very difficult to say** Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, xv. See also, at 162: “Problems are tests and selections.”

Pg. 7: **In the perusal of philosophical works** Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. Nigel Leask (New York: Everyman Paperbacks, 1997), 141.


Pg. 7: **Even if one were sure** Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 65.

Pg. 8: **the inscription of the inscribable** Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 45.

“the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded.”


**Pg. 9: In truth, Linneaus’ genius consists** Agamben, *The Open*, 25.

**Pg. 11: the notes for a reply** Agamben, *The Open*, 26.

**Pg. 11: a constitutively ‘anthropomorphous’ animal** Agamben, *The Open*, 27.

**Pg. 11: Hume only became who he is** Walter Kaufmann, *Hegel: A Reinterpretation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 278: “It would seem that the British discovered Hume’s philosophical significance by way of Kant and Hegel.” And higher up on the same page: “Berkeley and Hume had been prominently mentioned by Kant and could not be ignored. Through Kant they gained a place in the tradition.”

Pg. 12: On the contrary, the ontological approach Meillassoux, “Potentiality and Virtuality,” 226. See also, Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 84: “We all know the old adage according to which there is no absurdity that has not at one time or another been seriously defended by some philosopher. Our objector might acerbically remark that we have just proved this adage false, for there was one absurdity no one had yet proclaimed, and we have just unearthed it.”

Pg. 12: I would affirm that, indeed Meillassoux, “Potentiality and Virtuality,” 227.

Pg. 13: Žižek has pointed out Slavoj Žižek, “Is it Still Possible to be a Hegelian Today?” in *The Speculative Turn*, eds. Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman, 216.

Pg. 14: Umberto Eco has discussed this point Umberto Eco, “The Power of Falsehood,”
in *On Literature*, trans. Martin McLaughlin (New York: Harcourt Brace, 2004), 272–301. See also, 300: “The idea of the universe as the totality of the cosmos is an idea that comes from the most ancient cosmographies, cosmologies, and cosmogonies. But can we possibly describe, as if we could see it from above, something inside which we are contained, of which we form a part, and which we cannot leave? Can we provide a descriptive geometry of the universe when there is no space outside it onto which to project it? Can we speak of the beginning of the universe when a temporal notion like that of a beginning must refer to the parameters of a clock whereas at most the universe is its own clock and cannot be referred to anything that is external to it? Can we say with Eddington that ‘hundreds of thousands of stars make up a galaxy; hundreds of thousands of galaxies make up the universe,’ when, as [Jean-François] Gautier observes [in *L’Univers existe-t-il*?], although a galaxy is an object that can be observed, the universe is not, and therefore one is establishing an unwarranted analogy between two incommensurate entities?”


Pg. 14: First you flee George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1994), 328: “I may run, but all the time that I am, I’ll be looking for a stick!”

Pg. 14: Philosophy is the invention Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 76.

**Pg. 16: Philosophy, like all other studies**  

**Pg. 18: is exactly the same today**  

**Pg. 18: Imagine that Aristotle**  
Dietrich, “There is No Progress in Philosophy,” 334.

**Pg. 21: not exactly something that occurs**  

**Pg. 21: the part that eludes**  
Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 156. 111: “To think is to experiment, but experimentation is always that which is in the process of coming about—the new, remarkable, and interesting that replace the appearance of truth and are more demanding than it is. What is in the process of coming about is no more what ends than what begins. History is not experimentation, it is only the set of almost negative conditions
that make possible the experimentation of something that escapes history. Without history experimentation would remain indeterminate and unconditioned, but experimentation is not historical. It is philosophical.

Pg. 22: that is to say, acting counter Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 60. Alfred North Whitehead, *The Function of Reason* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 80, 76: “The supremacy of fact over thought means that even the utmost flight of speculative thought should have its measure of truth”: “Abstract speculation has been the salvation of the world—speculation which made systems and then transcended them, speculations which ventured to the furthest limit of abstraction. To set limits to speculation is treason to the future.”

ON NOT KNOWING


Pg. 22: If anything is unknowable Stace, *The Philosophy of Hegel*, 47.
Pg. 22: **Total ignorance of a thing**  Stace, *The Philosophy of Hegel*, 47.

Pg. 23: **an obscure passage of the De Anima**  Agamben, “On Potentiality,” 184. Agamben claims of this passage, on the same page, “that it is truly one of the vertices of Aristotle’s thought and that [it] fully authorizes the medieval image of a mystical Aristotle.”


Pg. 24: **Potentiality is actual in perpetually separating from itself**  Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 151–52: “On one side, there is the part of the event which is realized and accomplished; on the other, there is that ‘part of the event which cannot realize its accomplishment.’ There are thus two accomplishments, which are like actualization, and counter-actualization.”


Pg. 25: **Heller-Roazen has provided a beautiful commentary**  Heller-Roazen, *The
Inner Touch, 296.


[T]o say that the reason for examining one’s life is not to misspend it is to miss the more problematic dimension of Socrates’ claim; it is to transform Socrates’ practice into an essentially utilitarian activity, good because of its possible benefits or outcomes. It is to trivialize Socratic philosophy by turning it into a species of self-help. Having reflected and come to better views of what one ought to aim at, it implies, we should set aside reflection and examination, and go on with leading our new, more meaningful lives. So seen, reflection may be a necessary preliminary—especially in corrupt places and times—but it is ultimately only a preparation for life, not life itself.
Socrates’ own words are more challenging, and for two reasons. The first is that thinking things over seems to be, for Socrates, not a means to an end, but an end itself. It is, he says—astonishingly—not the *practice* of virtue that is the greatest good for a human being, but *talking about* virtue in the course of every day. This proposition is only defensible, I suggest, if talking about virtue *is* virtue. Virtue, Socrates seems to be suggesting, is necessarily actively self-reflective, the eye seeing itself seeing. Something about this tends to stick in the craw of students. For not only do many of them not see themselves as especially interested in thinking, but the demands that Socrates seems to place on them—that they suspend concerns for advancement, family, and personal lives while they enter upon a course of questioning that will ultimately prove inconclusive—seem extreme, even perverse. The natural tendency is to dismiss by becoming ‘reasonable,’ temporizing. Sure, some reflection is good; but Socrates takes it too far. ‘Shouldn’t he be supporting his children?’ is a common question.

Reinforcing this objection is a second: if Socrates himself is a model of the kind of examination that he urges on others, his lifetime of inquiry appears remark-
ably unsuccessful. Having constantly engaged in discussions about virtue, he seems by the time of his trial to have learned nothing. All he has achieved, on his own account, is knowledge of his ignorance. The prospect of spending one’s life in unpleasant (as students think) and fruitless inquiry—inquiry which does not even pretend to hold out the possibility of answers—is disheartening. And some, understandably enough, lose interest as soon as it becomes clear that there is no concrete prize or reward at the end. The natural question of the student—‘what am I going to get out of this?’—has no answer that the soul disposed to ask it in the first place is going to recognize as satisfactory; reflection and self-knowledge are not products, but processes, or rather activities. One does not, in thinking about Socratic questions, typically get a final answer; one gets—at best—understanding of possibilities.


**Pg. 30:** Agamben has discussed the manner Agamben, *The Open*, 13–14.
Pg. 32: as what results from the incongruity Agamben, *The Open*, 16.