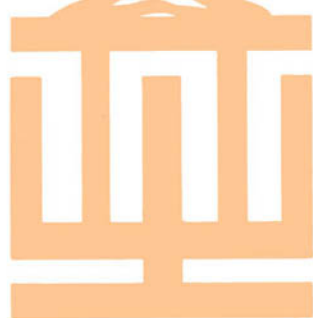


Tradition AND Modernity

PHILOSOPHICAL
REFLECTIONS
ON THE
AFRICAN
EXPERIENCE



Kwame Gyekye

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and MODERNITY

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*Philosophical
Reflections
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KWAME GYEKYE

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*For Maame,
Asantewa,
and Abena*

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Preface

The study undertaken in this book is a philosophical interpretation and critical analysis of the African cultural experience in modern times, an experience that is clearly many-sided, having resulted not only from encounters with what one might regard as alien cultures and religions but also from problems internal to the practice of the indigenous cultural values, beliefs, and institutions themselves in the setting of the modern world. Thus, the study is, in part, a critical evaluation of values and practices of traditional culture. It stresses the normative grounds of criticism, with a view to exploring the relevance or irrelevance of those indigenous and “alien” values and ideas to modern life. Its significance lies in its illumination of the dilemmas confronting the African people as they attempt to enter or create modernity in their own ways and evolve forms of life symphonic with the ethos of our contemporary world, while suggesting alternative ways of thought and action.

The problems confronting the African people and their societies in the modern world are legion. To the extent that some of the problems are cultural—in the sense that they are causally related to cherished practices, habits, attitudes, and outlooks that derive from the inherited indigenous cultures—it can be said that such problems predate, and can hardly be said to have resulted from, the imposition of European colonial rule with its concomitant introduction of European cultural values and institutions. But it can also be said that some of the problems derive from attempts to grapple with, and adjust to, the aftermath of colonial rule and its institutions. Perhaps it is the complex sources of the problems that have made them more intricate, daunting, and resilient.

Among the problems on which philosophical attention could be brought to bear are the following:

- problems of reappraising inherited cultural traditions to help come to terms with the cultural realities of the times and, thus, to hammer out a new modernity on the anvil of the African people's experience of the past and vision of the future;
- problems of nation-building—of integrating and welding together several ethnic (or, as I prefer to say, *communocultural*) groups into a large cohesive political community called “nation-state” (or, more appropriately, *multinational state*) to help eliminate *communocultural* conflicts and transfer ethnic or local loyalties to the new central government;
- problems of evolving viable and appropriate democratic political institutions that will be impervious to sudden and violent disruptions by the military or the imperious will of a corrupt and tyrannical ruler and will, in consequence, inaugurate an era of political stability and certainty;
- problems of evolving appropriate, credible, and viable ideologies for contemporary African nations;
- problems of inculcating political morality and, thus, to deal a death blow to rampant political corruption;
- problems of dealing with traditional moral standards that seem to be crumbling in the wake of rapid social change.

The resiliency of these and other problems of postcolonial Africa has brought confusion to African life and left many to wonder why. In such times of wonder, confusion, frustration, and anomie, fundamental questions and inquiries need to be pursued, responses to which are likely to clarify situations and present suggestions for new or alternative modes of thought and action. The pursuit of fundamental questions constitutes the stock-in-trade of philosophy. By clarifying issues and, thus, helping to understand them more fully, and through well-considered suggestions and recommendations, philosophical activity can help resolve issues.

Philosophy—that intellectual enterprise concerned with raising fundamental questions about the human experience—is indeed widely believed to be essentially a cultural phenomenon. The reason is that human experience is most directly felt within some specific social or cultural context; also, philosophical thought is never worked out within a cultural or historical vacuum. Thus it is that philosophers grapple at the conceptual level with the problems and issues of their times, providing conceptual and critical responses to and interpretations of the experiences of those times: this fact immediately embeds philosophy in human affairs. These convictions of the place of philosophy in grappling with human affairs have led me to undertake this study.

I devote chapter 1 to a discussion of the role of philosophy in human affairs, dwelling at great length on the career of the philosophical enterprise in the experiences of Western societies and cultures where the conceptual responses

to concrete historical experiences are most amply manifested. The interaction between the philosophical activity and human affairs in the development of Western societies can, thus, be regarded as a paradigm case of the role philosophy can play in human affairs in Africa and elsewhere. I argue that the fact that philosophy takes off from experiences that may be said to be specific to cultures or historical situations does not necessarily detract from the universality of (some) philosophical ideas, arguments, proposals, or conclusions. In this connection, however, I make a distinction between what I call “essential universalism” and “contingent universalism.” Essential universalism refers to fundamental values or characteristics of human nature that are intrinsic to human functioning and fulfillment. Philosophical inquiries into such fundamental human values should be of interest to all. Contingent universalism refers to a cultural value or practice created in, or by, a specific culture that, by reason of its quality or power of conviction or historic significance, is embraced by the rest of the peoples and cultures of the world and so attains the status of universality.

In chapter 2, “Person and Community: In Defense of Moderate Communitarianism,” I take up the intractable problem of the most appropriate type of relation that should exist between the individual and society. I discuss the notion of personhood from the normative perspective, highlighting a moral conception of personhood, and distinguish person from individual, regarding the latter as socially detached and the former as embedded in, but only partially constituted by, the community. I argue that communitarian thought should have equal concern for individual rights and social responsibilities. I conclude that a moral and political theory that combines the appreciation and pursuit of individual rights with commitments and responsibilities to the community and its members will be a most plausible theory to defend.

I discuss matters relating to ethnicity, nation-building, and the emergence of national culture and identity in the context of a modern multinational state constituted by a plethora of communocultural groups in chapter 3, “Ethnicity, Identity, and Nationhood.” Initially I distinguish two senses of the concept of nation—as ethnocultural community and multinational (multicultural) state. I deploy arguments to demonstrate that the common descent or kinship basis on which the notion of ethnicity has been erected is genealogically, if not straightforwardly, false in view of the complex genealogies of the individuals composing a particular cultural community and, therefore, that ethnicity is an invention. Thus, it will be more appropriate to speak in terms of communocultural, rather than ethnic, group. The suspicions or skepticisms about the simplicity of the genealogical background of individual members of a so-called ethnic group, however, should facilitate the move toward nation-building. Among the arguments I advance in pursuit of multicultural nationhood is a theory about the character of the modern nation-state in Africa and elsewhere. This theory I call “metanationality”: it states that the multinational state is constituted primarily by individual human beings (who happen to share certain cultural and histori-

cal experiences) rather than by “ethnic” groups. The metanational state is another, a third, sense of nation.

In chapter 4, “Traditional Political Ideas, Values, and Practices: Their Status in the Modern Setting,” I examine claims about the democratic features of the traditional African political practice by delineating the contours of political thought and practice of the Akan society of Ghana, adding references to the political practices and values of some other African societies. I try to delineate what may be regarded as the democratic features of the traditional political thought and practice, stressing the need to adapt what has been inherited from the colonial and traditional practices to suit political life in a large, complex, heterogeneous, modern political community. I advocate a comprehensive conception of democracy that will be strongly committed to both political and economic rights of citizens to make the notion of political (or social) equality a reality. But the main thrust of the chapter is to suggest a thorough and critical examination of the traditional ideas and values of politics and to give a modern translation to those that can be considered worthwhile in pursuit of the democratic political practice in the modern setting.

In chapter 5, “The Socialist Interlude,” I demonstrate that the traditional African communal idea or practice that the apostles of the ideology of “African socialism” such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, and Léopold Senghor identified with modern socialism (Marxism) and from which they derived and justified their choice of the socialist ideology was tendentiously misinterpreted (for that idea was essentially a socioethical idea, not particularly economic); that the traditional idea of economic management bears both individualist and communitarian features; that there are acquisitive and capitalist elements in the African character that seem to have been ignored by the advocates of African socialism; and that what was meant by “socialism” was humanism, a doctrine concerned crucially with human well-being, which is espoused in African moral thought but does not seem necessarily to mandate a socialist economic order. I also present a brief analysis of the concept of ideology and its relation to philosophy.

The problem of justifying the exercise of political power by the military following a series of coups d'état in African nations of the postcolonial era constitutes the background of the discussions of chapter 6, “Quandaries in the Legitimation of Political Power.” Political legitimacy, I point out, is a complex issue, its complexity stemming from several factors, including the circumstances in which individuals or groups have come to assume political power, the nature of the adequate expression or translation of popular consent, the whole question about what constitutes majority vote or decision, the relation (if any) between legitimacy and economic performance or effectiveness of a government. This complexity generates quandaries in the consideration of whether a political power is legitimate. In this chapter I distinguish between formal and informal legitimacy, and between legitimacy of power and justification of power. I argue against effectiveness as a criterion of legitimacy. I argue also that, even though military overthrow of a repres-

sive, authoritarian regime is justifiable on moral grounds, military rule as such will not be legitimate.

I take up the problem of political corruption, rampant in the politics of postcolonial African states and destructive of efforts to develop their societies, in chapter 7, "Political Corruption: A Moral Pollution." I try to clarify the notion of political corruption, and I examine the manifestations of political corruption in the traditional setting as well as the effects of traditional African cultural practices on contemporary political behavior. In contrast to the causal explanations of social scientists that highlight the political, economic, and legal circumstances of political corruption and generally ignore, or regard as peripheral, the moral circumstances, I argue that political corruption is fundamentally a *moral* problem; hence the subtitle "A Moral Pollution." Therefore I stress the need for what I call "commitmental moral revolution"—for fundamental (radical) changes in the attitudes and responses of the individual members of society to the moral values, principles, and ideals cherished by the society. In my view the moral is the ultimate, and therefore we must pay serious attention to matters of personal integrity and character.

In the longest chapter of the book, chapter 8, "Tradition and Modernity," I deal with a complex of issues. I open with an analytical discussion of the notion of tradition: what is tradition? I cast serious doubt on the widely accepted view of tradition as any cultural practice or value that has been "handed down" or "transmitted" from the past to a present, and I attempt to provide a new definition. I point out that the dichotomy between tradition and modernity cannot be well founded because there are many traditional elements inherited, cherished, and maintained by modernity. I also reject the view that tradition has an inherent authority, just as I reject the view of an invented tradition. In a discussion of different attitudes toward a cultural past, I argue against both the wholesale, uncritical, nostalgic acceptance of the past—of tradition—and the wholesale, offhanded rejection of it on the grounds that a cultural tradition, however "primitive," would have positive as well as negative features. The grounds of rejection or acceptance will have to be normative or practical. In a discussion of the relevance or irrelevance of the values, practices, and institutions spawned by the traditional African cultures to the modern situation, I point up, using the Akan experience as a paradigm, some of what I consider to be negative features of our African cultures: these include the traditional attitude toward science and technology and some aspects of the traditional social and moral practice, such as the inheritance system. The humanistic ethic—the ethic of concern for the welfare and needs of others—is among the features of the cultures I consider positive. In a discussion of the notion of modernity as held in Western societies that created it, I point out that some features of Western modernity may not be appropriate for African and perhaps other nonwestern societies and cultures. I emphasize the urgent need to pursue a critical reinterpretation and reevaluation of inherited cultural traditions.

In the concluding chapter, "Which Modernity? Whose Tradition?" I deal

with the creation of modernity in Africa. I set out from the need to understand the whole process of “modernization” and argue that it would be wrong to equate modernization with Westernization, because modern or developed nonwestern cultures may not be enamored of all features of Western modernity. Thus, a monolithic conception of modernity is highly contestable. I suggest not only that it should be possible but also that it would be desirable to create a modernity appropriate to particular cultural traditions. From this standpoint, I suggest further that African modernity must creatively draw on Africa’s complex cultural experience. I highlight the need to cultivate science and technology, including upgrading traditional technologies through the development of indigenous technological capacities, as a significant aspect in creating modernity in Africa. In this connection, I argue that the notion of the “transfer” or “transplant” of technology must be replaced by the notion of the “appropriation” of technology. The creation of modernity in Africa will also require radical changes in some of the old “things,” if not their abandonment, as well as the maintenance and pursuit of those features of traditional culture—a number of them discussed here (and thus deferred from the previous chapter)—that may be regarded as positive and harmonious with the ethos of the contemporary culture. If African modernity is to endure and really to mean something to its practitioners, I conclude, it must be a *self-created* modernity—forged and refined in the furnace of conversations between African intellectual creativity and Africa’s complex cultural heritage.

One final note: Because I consider the postcolonial experiences of the African people—experiences in dealing with problems attendant to transition to a new era or phase of development—to be largely common, I have made the whole of the sub-Saharan Africa (rather than a specific nation or region of it) the focus of my attention in this book. When it comes to practices of traditional African societies, however, I draw most of my examples from the traditional Akan society of Ghana. In the light of the multiplicity of African cultures and the diversities among them, one need not generalize the details and nuances of an idea or practice worked out within one cultural context for other cultures. Yet what may be true is that in many instances the different cultural forms or practices can be said to be essentially variations on the same theme. There is no denying that contiguous cultures do influence one another; and the cultures of dominant groups have influenced those of smaller groups. This is the reason why a number of scholars recognize the existence of common features or commonalities among the cultures of Africa. On the controversy over the use of the term “African,” see my *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), pp. xxiii–xxxii and 189–212. There is no denying the fact that the postcolonial experiences of the African people are largely common.

Acknowledgments

Even though I wrote drafts of some of the chapters of this book before I went to the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, D.C., in September 1993, I can say, nevertheless, that I wrote this book during the next twelve months when I held a fellowship at the center. Not only did I write the remaining chapters there, but I reworked the previously written drafts of some of the chapters there as well, in one of the most congenial and hospitable centers for academic work in the world. The coterie of world-renowned men and women of outstanding erudition that gathers there is indeed itself a great source of inspiration for a research scholar.

It is with the greatest pleasure, therefore, that I express my profound gratitude and appreciation to the Board of Trustees of the Woodrow Wilson Center for offering me a fellowship from September 1993 to August 1994 that enabled me to embark on the research for the publication of this book. Among the staff of the center who made my stay there most enjoyable and memorable, I wish to mention Charles Blitzer, the Director; Ann Sheffield, Director of Fellowships; James M. Morris, Director of the Division of Historical, Cultural, and Literary Studies (the division to which I belonged), and his assistant, Susan Nugent; Richard Cranston, the computer specialist of the center; Lindsay Collins, the receptionist; and Benjamin Arah (then a Lecturer in Philosophy at Howard University), who was my research assistant. I deeply appreciate the assistance of various kinds I received from them.

In bringing this book to its present form, I have benefited a great deal from the critical and penetrating comments and suggestions of a few people who were generous enough to find time to read and offer me their views on various chapters of the book in draft. At the Woodrow Wilson Center, Philip Selznick, a Co-Fellow and an Emeritus Professor of Sociology and Law at

the University of California at Berkeley, discussed his written comments on chapter 2 with me, and so did Seymour M. Lipset, Senior Scholar at the center, with chapter 6. On chapter 2, I received detailed comments also from Eliot Deutsch (University of Hawaii), Will Kymlicka (University of Ottawa), Alasdair MacIntyre (University of Notre Dame), Stephen Mulhall (University of Essex, England), and Amitai Etzioni (George Washington University). The late Sir Ernest Gellner (Cambridge University and the Center for the Study of Nationalism, Central European University in Prague) sent me comments on chapter 3. Lawrence E. Cahoone (Boston University) offered comments on chapters 8 and 9. Following a public lecture at the University of Kansas based on chapter 3, I received written comments from Ann E. Cudd. I must also thank the two anonymous readers selected by Oxford University Press for their comments, queries, and suggestions.

Needless to say, I found these comments and suggestions extremely helpful: they not only compelled me to clarify and amplify my own position and hone some of my arguments but also directed my attention to other aspects of the subjects I was dealing with which I had either neglected or not given enough treatment to. I am deeply indebted to these distinguished scholars and philosophers.

I benefited tremendously from philosophical conversations I had regularly over a two-year period with Anita Allen, Professor of Law and Philosophy at Georgetown University Law Center, on some of the subjects discussed in this book.

I must also express my appreciation to my student Matthew McAdam, then an undergraduate senior at the University of Pennsylvania, who took my seminar "Ethnicity, Identity, and Nationhood" and also had an independent study with me on related subject matters and whose intelligent questions and insightful remarks at private tutorial sessions helped me to clarify portions of chapter 3.

Parts of chapters of the book were presented in public lectures: parts of chapter 3 were given in public lectures in several places, including the Institute of Philosophy and Public Policy, University of Maryland at College Park, Brown University, Haverford College, and the University of Kansas. Parts of chapter 2 were presented in a philosophy colloquium at the University of Pennsylvania. Parts of chapter 8 constituted the subject of the first Annual Humanities Lecture delivered to the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences in May 1993 under the title "Philosophical Inquiries into the Presence of the Past in the Present." The section on the notion of tradition was presented in public lectures at Temple and LaSalle Universities and at the University of Pennsylvania. I found the discussions that followed my presentations helpful, and I would like to record my gratitude to the various audiences.

But since this is *my* work, I alone am responsible for its shortcomings and defects, which merely reflect my own limitations.

I made the final revision of the manuscript when I was a Visiting Professor of Philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania during the 1995–96 academic year. I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation to Gary

Hatfield, Philosophy Department Chairman, who made the offer of appointment to me, and Sandra Barnes, Professor of Anthropology and Director of the African Studies Center at the university. They helped to make my stay at the University of Pennsylvania most worthwhile in terms of both teaching and research.

Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to Deborah A. Stuart, whose meticulous and competent copyediting of the final manuscript resulted in many stylistic improvements. At Oxford University Press, Cynthia A. Read, Executive Editor, and Robert Milks, Production Editor for this book, placed at my disposal their advice and rich experience in book production. I am most grateful to them both.

University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa.

Kwame Gyekye, FGA

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TRADITION
and MODERNITY

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Philosophy and Human Affairs

The nature, purpose, methods, and relevance of philosophy are widely misunderstood. In consequence, philosophy has come to be burlesqued and travestied by most people outside this intellectual discipline. The misunderstanding or misconception has in some people matured into prejudice and resilient skepticism about the relevance of philosophy to public affairs in particular and human purposes in general. Philosophers have been charged with a preoccupation with abstract theoretical concerns, with elitism, apriorism, and uninvolvedness in the practical affairs of life: philosophy has in fact been regarded by most nonphilosophers as the quintessence of ivory towerism and irrelevance. Thus, almost invariably, philosophy is the first discipline to be stretched on the Procrustean bed when budget directors consider cutting or withdrawing grants or subventions to university departments:¹ in many universities, particularly in Third World countries, philosophy as an academic discipline exists only marginally, if at all.

The primary cause of the misconception is widespread ignorance about the nature of philosophy and the past achievements that philosophy and philosophers through the influence of their work can be said to have made. While most people are aware of, and can identify, the subject matters of such generally distinct and fairly well defined social science disciplines as sociology, economics, and psychology and may even have some idea of what these disciplines have achieved and what they are capable of achieving, they are almost totally ignorant of the subject matter—whatever it is—of philosophy, of how, that is, this discipline is pursued or tackled, and what philosophy is ever capable of achieving, if anything. Hence the unrelenting cynicism or skepticism about the relevance of philosophy to the affairs and problems of human society. The skeptics are not, to be sure, unaware of the critical and analytical powers that the pursuit of the philosophical enterprise can

develop in the individual who undertakes it. But to them these analytical powers are misapplied because they are not directed at grappling with the concrete and existential problems of human society. And so the skeptics repeatedly ask, what is the relevance of such intellectual powers and endowments to the needs and problems of humankind? Yet, even though the skeptics may disdain philosophical activity for being irrelevant, they are not necessarily scornful of philosophers as such; they tend in fact to respect the intellects of philosophers—to see philosophers as individual sages or wise persons. It may indeed be said that in all cultures, and throughout history, thinkers are given due respect and admiration; it is only that their intellectual pursuits are often supposed not to be germane to the negotiation of the practical problems of life.

The misconception of the relevance of philosophy to the problems of human life results also from the impression most philosophically untutored people have that the ideas and arguments of philosophy are incomprehensible. The seemingly technical, or perhaps esoteric, language in which the ideas and arguments of philosophers are generally expressed makes philosophy intellectually inaccessible to most people. In consequence, philosophy has come to be regarded by its critics as a cloistered intellectual enterprise that merely arouses the intellectual interest of its practitioners, who themselves are unable or find it difficult to climb over their intellectually cloistering walls and venture out into the extramural world of real life, where they might communicate their ideas and arguments to ordinary people. Those who are skeptical about the relevance of the philosophical enterprise are aware of the highly technical, professional, and esoteric language of science and economics, for instance; but they would quickly point out that, despite their recondite languages, these intellectual disciplines, unlike philosophy, have achieved practical results in the past and continue to do so in the present and thus have amply demonstrated their capabilities to achieve more in the future.

Some philosophers in the past were preoccupied with the vexing conundrums of language as an end in itself, narrowly interpreting or translating conceptual analysis—an outstanding feature of the philosophical enterprise—as no more than linguistic analysis. This is most probably what led A. R. Lacy, for instance, to make the following inaccurate assertion: “In particular, philosophy avoids using the senses and relies on reflection. It is an *a priori* study.”² It is not true that philosophy entirely avoids the senses. If philosophy were a wholly *a priori* intellectual activity, then it would hardly bear any relation to human experience or the practical problems of human life. This conception of philosophy tends to impress it with marks of aridity and jejuneness and thus to confirm the charges that it is irrelevant.

In the foregoing, I have attempted, if briefly, to understand the nature and grounds of the criticisms and cynical attitudes taken by nonphilosophers regarding the relevance of the philosophical enterprise. But this is not intended to imply by any means that the criticisms and skepticisms are well grounded and sustainable. I have noted the ignorance of most nonphiloso-

phers as a cause of the misconception of the purpose and relevance of this intellectual enterprise. I have noted also that some of the ways the enterprise has been conceived and executed in the past by several of its practitioners seem to have removed it from the theater of human affairs and practical concerns, making it an esoteric and cloistered enterprise with some arcane aims, doctrines, and methods accessible only to the initiate. My intention here, however, is to argue the *relevance* of the philosophical enterprise to human affairs and to the development of human culture with a brief clarification of the nature, purpose, and methods of philosophy and by indicating, with a historical overview, what this intellectual enterprise is capable of achieving. I hope to dispel the misconceptions that have befogged the relevance of the philosophical enterprise. I shall end with some thoughts on how philosophy can be considered relevant to an understanding and interpretation of the postcolonial world of Africa and how philosophy could be harnessed to help deal with its problems.

1. The Nature and Purpose of Philosophy

Even though philosophers, whether from the same culture or from different cultures, are not in complete agreement on the definition and methods of their discipline, a close examination of the nature and purpose of the intellectual activities of thinkers from various cultures and societies of the world reveals nevertheless that philosophy is essentially a critical and systematic inquiry into the fundamental ideas or principles underlying human thought, conduct, and experience. Ideas, which include the beliefs and presuppositions that we hold and cherish, relate to the various aspects of human experience: to the origins of the world, the existence of God, the nature of the good society, the basis of political authority, and so on. With regard to the human society, for instance, we would be right in saying that every human society consists of some arrangements and institutions—social, political, legal, and so on—established to meet the various needs of the society. These arrangements clearly are based on ideas, for we know they were not thoughtlessly established, nor did they occur randomly. The institution of punishment, for instance, is based on the assumption that human beings are free agents and are, therefore, free to choose their actions, and hence that they are morally responsible for those actions. The assumption of human free will upon which the ascription of both moral and legal responsibility is based is thus a fundamental assumption that can critically be—and in fact is—examined by philosophy. Thus, philosophy is essentially concerned with the critical inquiry into the most basic of our ideas, beliefs, and assumptions.

These ideas often appear in the form of issues and problems. That is to say, an idea may result from, or be wrapped up in, a problem; thus, problems generate philosophical speculation. Philosophical problems about political obligation might arise because some citizens raised questions about the

conditions under which they should obey their government that could not be satisfactorily answered; problems about knowledge, human free will, moral conflicts, and death and immortality might arise because someone raised questions that could not be adequately answered. Philosophy grapples with problems such as these, problems that cannot be solved by empirical methods, even though they have their origin in human experience. I am certain that no rational being could quarrel with philosophy's concern with clarifying and critically appraising our fundamental ideas or rationally disentangling basic human problems; for such an enterprise, if successful, could form the basis of a satisfactory way of life. For instance, the knowledge that our actions are free or not free is relevant to the question of the justifiability or unjustifiability of the ascription of responsibility. Philosophy thus invites us to be self-critical and to know what things are most worthwhile. If the skeptics and critics seriously considered these purposes of philosophy, perhaps they would not subject it to so much questioning.

Although these same skeptics and critics may consider it appropriate and useful to seriously examine the fundamental ideas that shape and influence our lives and to rationally unravel basic human problems, philosophy, to them, deals with abstract matters, and so philosophical activity, they erroneously infer, is unrelated to the practical concerns of humankind, concerns that are concrete and specific. It is, indeed, part of the method of philosophy to operate at an abstract level, but the conclusion that has been drawn from this by nonphilosophers is misguided. The abstract level at which the philosopher operates is perhaps unavoidable inasmuch as philosophical questions are very often general. Whenever two people—they may not even be trained philosophers as such—are disputing about whether or not a particular action of their government was just or democratic, and one of them, perhaps wanting to be clearer about the concepts involved in the dispute, asks: "what is justice?" (or "what is it to be just?") or "what is democracy?" (or "what is it to be democratic?"), he would be raising a philosophical question. And, if both of them attempted to answer the question in a sustained manner, they would immediately and necessarily involve themselves in abstract thinking, aimed at clarifying some concepts, an activity that might well prove helpful to the resolution of the dispute. And so it is that the abstract level at which the philosopher operates is intended to offer her a vantage point from which to beam her analytical searchlight on the inarticulate and woolly beliefs and thoughts of people. So that the abstract reflections of the philosopher need not—should not—detract from the relevance and value of the philosophical enterprise in the search for answers to at least some of the problems of human society.

Perhaps the most outstanding method of philosophy is reflection. But we must try to understand what the reflective process is or involves. What does the philosopher reflect on, pure concepts or general human experience? And how does reflection proceed? I think that the point of departure of philosophical reflection is the whole gamut of human experience: fears, desires, beliefs, conduct, thoughts, observations, institutions, hopes and aspirations,

failures and successes, problems and enigmas of life, and so on. On this showing, the reflective analysis—and hence the philosophical enterprise—cannot dispense with experience. This is not to say, however, that philosophical problems and issues can be solved by empirical methods, for no amount of observation can determine whether or not the universe has a purpose and whether, and in what sense, human beings have free will; it is not to say either that philosophy directly derives its conclusions from experience or observation. What it means, rather, is that philosophy raises fundamental and profound questions *about* experience in order to explore its meaning and construct from it a synthetic and coherent picture of ultimate reality. The position taken here is at variance with a widely held view that philosophy is a wholly a priori intellectual activity—as suggested, for instance, in the quotation from Lacy, an activity that can be pursued prior to, and hence can dispense with, experience. Here I make a distinction between a philosophical concept, such as justice or free will, and a logical concept, such as validity or consistency: it is the logical concept that may in some sense be said to be a priori, based purely on the activity of the mind, despite the fact that it derives from certain features of language—and language is a social fact.

The critical and systematic examination of the fundamental ideas underlying human experience, involving the clarification of those ideas, is usually referred to as conceptual analysis. Many twentieth-century philosophers in the West regard conceptual analysis as the main task of philosophy. It is undoubtedly the most important and fundamental aspect of the philosophical enterprise inasmuch as the other important approach to philosophy, the speculative or substantive (normative), depends on it, as the elements of the latter approach would need to have been given prior clarification. Thus, the quality of the speculative approach presupposes considerable attention to the analytic. For this reason, speculative philosophers necessarily give adequate attention to conceptual analysis.

Conceptual analysis, as such, cannot be undertaken entirely in isolation from some social or cultural or political or intellectual context. It can most satisfactorily be pursued within some sociocultural context and with reference to that context; it is in fact inspired by that context. One cannot analyze the concept of justice or liberty, for instance, without taking into consideration a whole range of human experience—experience that has allowed us to observe what constitutes human nature, what political systems are or ought to be, and what suffering or inhuman treatment governments or public officials have caused or meted out to individuals or groups; experience that has allowed us to gain empirical knowledge of societal problems; and experience that has filled us with yearnings to see put in place the necessary social arrangements that would allow everyone to fully realize his or her potential as a human being—all this and more comes into play in the analysis of such a concept as justice. Thus, philosophical or conceptual analysis cannot be undertaken in a social or cultural or historical vacuum; it has an experiential background and connections. This is not to imply by any means

that philosophical analysis is an empirical inquiry; analysis includes a rigorous form of reasoning, which is an *a priori* activity. What all this means, then, is that there is a dynamic practical relationship between the *a priori* and the empirical, within the framework of the enterprise of conceptual analysis; one is indispensable to the other.

This is the reason I find a great virtue in W. V. O. Quine's rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction.³ This rejection is also a rejection of the distinction between the conceptual and the factual (empirical) and results in the subversion of the conception of philosophy as a purely second-order, *a priori* intellectual activity. Quine's thesis can be exploited to support my conception of conceptual analysis, and of the nature of philosophy itself. It is a conception that makes the philosophical enterprise relevant to the concerns and problems of humankind. But, remember, it is a conception of philosophy that has been held and practiced by most philosophers of the Western tradition from Socrates on: the essential task of philosophy is to speculate critically about human experience with its many-sidedness, including the experience we have in using language. Thus, for me—and judging from the content of their works, for many others—it would be an oversimplification to consider philosophy or philosophical analysis a purely and wholly *a priori* intellectual activity.

It is true that a great number of the philosophical problems that have exercised the minds of thinkers with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds arise from human experiences, a great part of which may be said to be common to humankind, while some others arise from the fact that human beings live in communities and share desires, aspirations, lifestyles, and life projects. In dealing with such problems—anchored as they really are in human experience—attention will necessarily have to be paid to experience, if the conclusions of conceptual or philosophical pursuits are to be relevant to the resolution of some of the issues and problems facing human society.

2. Philosophy: Not a System of Beliefs?

Wittgenstein claims that “philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity.”⁴ Brenda Almond claims that philosophy is “not a system of beliefs,” and that it must be regarded “as a method rather than as a system of beliefs.”⁵ And Gilbert Ryle observes that “philosophy is not adherence to a tenet or membership of a church or party. It is exploration. Only a *Terra Incognita* is interesting.”⁶ The view that philosophy is not a system of beliefs is another widely held view of the nature of the discipline. It is this view that I would like to examine in this section. The key phrases in the statements quoted above are “a body of doctrine,” “a system of beliefs,” and “adherence to a tenet.” I take it that they all mean the same thing roughly, and that their authors, along with many others, share a common view of

the nature or mission of the philosophical enterprise. But what is really meant by saying that philosophy is not a system of beliefs?

Ryle's reference to "membership of a church or party" provides a clue to understanding the meaning of his statement. In religion there is a well-organized or established corpus of doctrines or beliefs that, once enunciated, not only attain the status of orthodoxy, but also, in the wake of that reason, ossify into a monolithic doctrinal unity, exercising a powerful influence on the life and thought of the religion's adherents or devotees and holding them captive perhaps for life. Politics or ideology may induce similar attitudes in the members of a political party, attitudes that may result in a serious and perhaps lifelong commitment to specific political or ideological beliefs, a commitment that may in turn cause each party member to defend those beliefs tooth and nail, to resist any seemingly far-reaching changes in them, and perhaps to fight and die in their cause. Ryle sees religion and political ideology as exhibiting similar characteristics, evoking similar attitudes in their adherents. Ryle's main intention is of course to point out that there is a strong contrast between religion and political ideology on one hand and philosophy on the other hand. The contrast is that while religion and political ideology may hold the individual devotee or adherent in thrall—and perhaps for life—philosophy does not do so for its practitioners. And while there is a substantial element of tenacity and dogmatism in religious and political (or ideological) commitments, there is none, or very little of that, in philosophical pursuits.

Let me say, parenthetically, however, that it seems to me that there is an element of exaggeration in the claim about the unrelenting or lifelong commitment to religious beliefs. For there are cases of some members of a church or religious faith abjuring their original faith and taking up new ones altogether: cases of Christians converting to Islam or Hinduism or Buddhism; Muslims converting to Christianity or Buddhism; adherents of these religions abandoning their faith altogether and becoming atheists or agnostics. New religious sects, with different doctrines, which proliferate in most societies of the world, draw their membership mostly from already existing religions. So that, even within the territory of religious people, that is, some individuals, do "travel" (to use Ryle's word): commitment in this territory is not as unrelenting as it might be supposed. Similar features may be seen of political or ideological beliefs: the fate that has befallen Marxism or Communism in the last few years, and the well-known phenomenon of individuals moving from one political party to another in democratic political communities—these are clear cases that involve ideological "travels." But, having said all this, I think one has to grant that the contrast Ryle intends to establish between philosophy and religion and political ideology is real to a very large extent. I think that the inebriation often induced by religious faith in its adherents, the petrified commitment often demonstrated by people in regard to religious beliefs, and the emotional and even bellicose responses generated by serious challenges to those beliefs have no parallels in philoso-

phy. In the latter intellectual enterprise, the immediate awareness of the need for rational response introduces intellectual sobriety rather than physical or emotional belligerency.

To grant the appropriateness of the contrast between religious and philosophical beliefs is not, however, to deny by any means, as others are wont to do, that philosophers do demonstrate commitment to their ideas, beliefs, and arguments. Ryle, for instance, thinks that “we have to renounce the supposition that Plato was the lifelong warder or prisoner of a tenet. Plato travelled.”⁷ Elsewhere he says that “we have to recognize that Plato’s thought moved.”⁸ The implications of Ryle’s assertion that Plato traveled—intellectually, of course—and that his thought moved are that Plato was not intellectually sclerotic, that he made progress in his philosophical travels (hence Ryle’s title, *Plato’s Progress*), and that he never thought of establishing a philosophy that was to be a system of beliefs to be cordoned off and warded against the logic and persuasiveness of new or future intellectual discoveries or superior arguments either of his own or of other thinkers. Yet it may be true that one can intellectually travel a long distance without necessarily jettisoning the ideas or beliefs seriously held in the early days of one’s philosophical journey. It all depends, of course, on how persuasive or compelling one’s earlier intellectual or philosophical positions were, how seamless the previous arguments. Progress is not necessarily achieved by a total abandonment of previous intellectual positions; it could be achieved, rather, by building on previous positions, or refining them. And when Ryle says that philosophy is an “exploration,” it must be noted that the explorer hopes to achieve something substantial: to explore a problem is not merely to clarify or analyze it but, more important, to search for a solution to it; to explore a territory is to try to discover something—something substantial.

It would be instructive to know what individual philosophers say late in their philosophical careers about their attitudes toward doctrines they had held earlier. Quine, in his autobiography written well toward the end of his very active philosophical career, makes frequent references to “my philosophy.”⁹ He says that at some public lectures held in Oxford on mind and language, he observed that other speakers were dwelling so much on his work that he thought, “I might do better to present a more central statement of *my* philosophical position.”¹⁰ And, as if to affirm a celebrated doctrine of his, propounded thirty-five years earlier, he states: “My challenge of the boundary between analytic and synthetic statements is notorious, and I have been *at pains* to blur the boundaries between natural science, mathematics, and philosophy.”¹¹ In the autobiography the eminent American philosopher admits giving lectures on the same themes; he presumably presented the same ideas. This fact can be taken to imply that Quine was, to use Ryle’s expression, a “warder” of his doctrines. Surely any philosopher who constantly talks of “*my* philosophy” must mean to imply a commitment to the ideas and doctrines of his philosophy.

All philosophers in their philosophical exertions aim at dealing with an issue or a problem or set of issues or problems. They think and hope that

they have, or can spawn, ideas and can advance arguments that will clarify the issues and so help in their resolution. In all this, the ultimate aim is to search for truths about the issues involved. They deploy arguments and evidences of various kinds in search of the truth as they see it. In response to fresh ideas and arguments derived either from their own further reflections or from examining those of others, they may refine and prune in the course of their philosophical sojourns: all this in pursuit of the truth. We would be right in saying, however, that there are cases of total rejection of previous philosophical ideas or arguments by their authors; but there are also cases of refinement and improvement on previous ideas or positions. All philosophers have unflagging commitments to truth about the specific issues of their philosophical concerns. If this were not so, what would be the point of the elaborate and complicated arguments philosophers incessantly put forward? Sooner or later, philosophers become convinced of the correctness of their ideas and the validity of their arguments, and, a fortiori, of the truths embodied in those arguments. At this point, then, it may be said that their reflective exertions have resulted in a body of assertible truths. Others may become convinced of those truths. It is these truths or convictions that in due course distill into 'isms': thus, Platonism, Aristotelianism, Kantianism, Marxism, and so on, these 'isms' referring specifically to the philosophical doctrines of celebrated individual philosophers. Thus, if someone calls himself a Platonist or Kantian, what he means, surely, is that he is convinced of the truths he sees in Plato's or Kant's philosophy, that he has come under the spell of that philosophy and has, consequently, become its adherent or disciple, even though he may not necessarily be taken in by all aspects of Platonism or Kantianism. In the light of the existence of philosophical adherents to an accepted body of truths that may be said to be embodied in the philosophies of some individual thinkers, it would not be wrong to claim that philosophy is in some sense a *system of belief*, even though the nature of belief here will not be the same as that of a belief in a religious or ideological system.

Moreover, the history of philosophy acquaints us with such phenomena as neo-Platonism, neo-Aristotelianism, neo-Thomism, neo-Kantianism, and neo-Hegelianism. Now, what are these neo-isms? And what is the relevance of the existence of such phenomena to the pursuers of the philosophical enterprise? It would be correct, I think, to say that the neo-isms are new forms of the old 'isms', that their starting points are the old 'isms', that they are (therefore) based on them, and that, consequently, they are greatly influenced or inspired by the old isms. Neo-isms may, therefore, be said to be interpretations and developments on the erstwhile philosophical 'isms' of individual philosophers: to invert the old biblical expression, neo-isms can be said to be essentially the old wine in new wine bottles. It would not be wrong, then, to claim that there is a basic intellectual or doctrinal affiliation between a neo-ism and an old 'ism'.

In Antony Flew's view: "the passages in *The Republic* about the Forms of the Good have had a remarkable influence. It was from them that Plotinus

in the 200's of our era derived the central notion of the philosophy which was later to become known as Neo-Platonism, and the ideas of Plotinus for centuries played a part in shaping the intellectual traditions first of Christianity and then of Islam."¹² And a foremost scholar of ancient philosophical tradition says of neo-Platonism, "The movement itself was regarded by its exponents as the direct continuation of Platonic thought. To themselves and to their contemporaries these men appeared simply as Platonists."¹³ And, according to A. H. Armstrong, "Platonism in the second and early third centuries A.D. was very much alive, and by no means merely stereo-typed and superficial: and the thought of Plotinus in many ways continued along lines laid down by his predecessors."¹⁴ Now, to be so influenced or inspired by the ideas and arguments set out in a philosophical system as to embark on interpretations of them—interpretations that generally turn out to be positive, favorable, and supportive and are thus intended to extend, amplify, or deepen the understanding of that system—is to accept or believe quite firmly in those philosophical ideas (for a radical rejection of Platonism, for instance, will surely not result in neo-Platonism). Whether the acceptance or belief is going to be lifelong or not depends on both the profundity and the logical force of those ideas and arguments and on the intellectual outlook of the individual philosopher or group of philosophers concerned. It is perhaps undeniable that there have been some Marxists or neo-Marxists whose beliefs in the doctrines of Karl Marx were lifelong. It is, also, possible for some philosophers who are tremendously enamored of the ideas of the Absolute One, of the Divine, of the immortal soul, of the mysteries of the postmundane world, and of conceptions of life uncluttered by the impurities of the sensible or sensual world to entertain a lifelong belief in the philosophy of Plato and of neo-Platonism, or some important aspects of them. In all this, the inclinations, orientations, intuitions, outlooks, and, if you like, natures of the individual philosopher are very relevant. It would, therefore, be an oversimplification to assert with confidence that philosophy is not at all a system of belief.

Related to neo-isms in philosophy are other phenomena with which the literature is replete; these are known or referred to as philosophical traditions. We read or know of the liberal tradition, the analytic tradition, the empiricist tradition, the pragmatist tradition of American philosophy, and so on. What are these traditions, and what do they add to the idea of philosophy as a system of beliefs? It can be said at once that, as traditions, they must have been not only bequeathed by previous generations of philosophers but also accepted, maintained, and cherished by subsequent generations of philosophers (see chapter 8). A generation receives a corpus of philosophical doctrines from a previous one, derives from it what it considers worthwhile, maintains and refines it, and then hands it on to the next generation. The corpus of philosophical doctrines thus received influences, or is allowed to influence, the intellectual and other aspects of the lives of the members of the receiving generation. The corpus of the doctrines received—that is, those philosophical traditions—would have long been abandoned if

they had not been accepted by successive generations as a body of doctrine that they consider worthwhile adhering to. It would thus be correct to consider some philosophical doctrines that in the course of time constitute themselves into a philosophical tradition as constitutive of a system of belief as well. Human beings do believe in traditions when they have convinced themselves of the worth of those traditions, cherish them, and allow them to influence their lives. On this showing, believing in a philosophical tradition may be equivalent to taking that tradition as a system of belief.

I think there is yet another way of characterizing the notion that philosophy is not a system of belief. A system of belief, like a system of religious belief, is such as would influence and guide individuals or groups of individuals or generations of people in their lives. Can philosophy provide *such* a system of belief? One celebrated view of philosophy held by philosophers and hallowed and elevated to the status of a testament is the view that philosophy is an activity, a pursuit, as it is asserted in an already quoted statement of Wittgenstein's. The view that philosophy is an (intellectual) activity goes back in the Western tradition to Socrates. The activity is the activity of rational examination and analysis of human thought and action with a view clearly to understanding them or coming to have self-knowledge of them; it is an activity of search and of raising questions, challenging assumptions and beliefs hitherto held as true or taken for granted. The position of some twentieth-century philosophers in the West has been that clarity of thought is all that is required of philosophy. It is not the business of philosophy to establish a system of well-laundered and definite doctrines to guide people in their lives; nor is it its business to prescribe ways of life: it is only to point up alternative courses of action for choice by the individual. Many philosophers, however, including the ancient Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, have held, or at least implied, that clarity or elucidation cannot—must not—constitute the terminus, the cul-de-sac of the philosophical activity, and that philosophy can offer more for the life of the individual and for human society and its affairs.

Socrates tenaciously maintained that "the unexamined life is not worth living."¹⁵ In the thought of Socrates, the only life that is worthwhile for human beings or human society is the life whose basis and goals have been thoroughly and critically examined, searched out. It is therefore the task of philosophy to subject our lives—our ideas, beliefs, actions, values, and goals—to serious critical examination if we should be what we want to be and know what things are most worthwhile for our lives. In proclaiming that philosophers should be kings, Plato was alluding to the application of theoretical wisdom to practical human affairs. And Aristotle described as the aim of his investigations into moral phenomena a similar application: "we are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is (that is not just to understand the meaning of virtue), but in order to *become good*, since *otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use*."¹⁶

A number of contemporary moral philosophers, however, insist that they should confine their activity to metaethics, that is, to the analysis of the

language of morals, the elucidation of moral terms and the logical structure of moral reasoning and moral judgment, maintaining that it is not their business to suggest how people ought to live their lives. But by refusing to pursue the practical implications of their ethical inquiries, metaethicists—but not normative moral philosophers—merely scotch the snake, and, thus, perform an incomplete act. The analysis of moral concepts is an important pursuit, to be sure; but to shy away from making prescriptions or normative suggestions to guide people in their lives is to hide our philosophical lights under a bushel. After all, a good number of the questions philosophers raise involve substantive issues of human experience. If theologians, sociologists, psychologists, social workers, and others feel they have the warrant to offer moral recommendations or advice to guide people in their lives, then philosophers, professionally given to making profound and critical examination into various aspects of human nature and the basic principles of human action, could make the claim of having insight into morals sufficient to provide them with some justifiable basis for offering moral prescriptions, and for passing moral judgments on human conduct. Similarly, even though philosophers operate within cultural frameworks and their thoughts may be said to be influenced by their cultures, they can, and often do, make criticisms of those frameworks on normative and other grounds.

Humanism, a philosophy to which human interests and purposes are central, is certainly a system of beliefs tenaciously adhered to by those who see it as offering a guide to the lives of individual human beings. According to one of the outstanding exponents of the humanist philosophy, Corliss Lamont, there are “ten central propositions in the Humanist philosophy.” He goes on to describe the doctrines in which humanism *believes*, using the phrases “believes in” and “Humanism believes that.”¹⁷ It is a philosophical system put forward, argued, and defended by philosophers of different intellectual outlooks and persuasions. Only a truncated or impoverished conception of philosophy would deny that humanism *is* a philosophical system.

Before I conclude this section of the chapter, I would like to make some observations on Wittgenstein’s characteristically aphoristic statement, “The philosopher is not a citizen of any community of ideas. That is what makes him into a philosopher.”¹⁸ This statement might turn out to be at variance with the views I have expressed in the immediately preceding paragraphs. But we must first determine the meaning of the first part of the statement, which is not very obvious. It may mean that the philosopher must be radically detached from the ideas, beliefs, or presuppositions of his society if he is to pursue his intellectual activities effectively. If this is what the statement means, then it can be supported, for if insight and objective truth are to be achieved by philosophical analysis, the philosopher must be detached, even though he operates within a cultural setting. But if this is indeed the correct interpretation of the statement, as Michael Walzer in fact thinks,¹⁹ then the statement is innocuous and would, in fact, be on all fours with the accepted methodological approaches of the philosopher.

I think Wittgenstein means something more radical than this interpreta-

tion suggests. The notion of "citizen" in the statement is quite suggestive of Wittgenstein's intentions. If we take it that a citizen is someone who generally accepts the values, beliefs, practices, and institutions of his community, one who is involved in, and committed to, the pursuit and promotion of those values and practices and shares many things (values, beliefs, etc.) with other members of his community, we would have some insight into what Wittgenstein might mean by his statement. By saying that the philosopher is *not* a citizen of any community of ideas, he probably means: (1) that the philosopher is not committed to any body of ideas, (2) that he does not (have to) share any ideas with others, and (3) that, in consequence, he is so radically detached from his cultural or intellectual milieu that his ideas are unique and idiosyncratic to him, bearing no relation whatever to those of his community of thinkers, past and present. If this last interpretation of Wittgenstein's statement is correct, then, the statement is, in my view, in the extreme, and would not, perhaps for that reason, be entirely true. For even though it can be conceded that a philosopher can break new ground, spawn new ideas, and critically reevaluate received ideas, this fact, nevertheless, does not detract from the idea of a philosophical tradition or philosophical discipleship, or the idea of neo-isms in philosophy that we noted as clear phenomena in the history of philosophy. The idea of philosophical traditions would not make sense if a philosopher's ideas and arguments were not shared, followed up, maintained *mutatis mutandis* by a new generation of philosophers and then handed on to another generation; if, that is to say, there were no philosophers who were *fellow citizens of a community of ideas*.

To conclude this section, then: the view that philosophy is not a system of beliefs must be explored (1) from the perspective of the individual philosopher's commitment, or lack of it, to her philosophical ideas or doctrines; and (2) from the perspective of the extensive and enduring currency and influence gained by the ideas or doctrines of an individual philosopher that may eventually result in a philosophical tradition (e.g., Kantian or Platonic tradition) influencing the thoughts and perhaps the actions of those under the spell of that tradition. Even though an individual philosopher may not be totally immersed in the ideas or doctrines that may issue from her philosophical reflections, as adherents to religion usually are with religious doctrines, nevertheless, she does frequently demonstrate some enduring commitment to at least some of those ideas and arguments that she may, with compelling reasons, see as embodying some truths, truths that she is almost always prepared intellectually to defend. And to the extent that those truths may form the basis of a moral, social, political, and intellectual life, they may be regarded as constituting a system of beliefs. And so it can be maintained that philosophy provides people with a fundamental system of beliefs to live by.

It may be the self-effacing diffidence or a sense of modesty or an oversimplification of the mission of that enterprise that makes many philosophers shy away from making explicit conclusions implicit in their philosophical