Knowledge, Wisdom, and the Philosopher

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The word 'philosophos', in Greek, means 'lover of wisdom', and the association of philosophy and wisdom is one of long and distinguished standing in the history of the West. It is my view, however, that this relationship is overstated; that while *some* philosophers, undoubtedly, have been concerned with the cultivation of wisdom, they are in the minority. For the most part, if we are speaking of the dominant or 'mainline' tradition in philosophy, the primary preoccupation of philosophers has been with *knowledge*, and not only are wisdom and knowledge not the same, but they are, in many ways, opposites.[1]

This essay is devoted to identifying the distinctive characteristics of wisdom and knowledge, with an eye towards distinguishing the mainline philosophical tradition from two philosophical 'countercultures', the first of which is essentially conservative in temperament, the second whose spirit is thoroughly radical. Aside from the fact that I think it is important to look at the history of ideas through alternative lenses, so that we may avoid excessively conventional, textbookish interpretations of the past—interpretations which prevent us from taking advantage of the full breadth and depth of our predecessors' insight and understanding—I also think it is imperative that we have a clear understanding of what *kind* of endeavour mainline philosophy is, so that we may be in a position to examine it critically. I will not actually engage in a critical examination of mainline philosophy in the present essay—my aim is to provide the *backdrop*, against which such a critique can take place—but my feelings on the subject likely will be obvious, even to the

[1] The distinction I will make here is somewhat similar to that which Nicholas Maxwell makes between 'knowledge inquiry' and 'wisdom inquiry' (see his 'Science, Knowledge, Wisdom, and the Public Good', in *Scientists for Global Responsibility Newsletter*, No. 26 (February 2003), pp. 7-9), although our respective conceptions of what wisdom consists of differ substantially and our inquiries into the subject stem from what are substantially different political orientations (though it appears to me that we are motivated by essentially similar social and political concerns).

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most casual of readers.[2]

§2

The term 'wisdom' suggests a synthesis of intelligence and sound judgment. The wise person is one whose intelligence is prudentially applied to life, in *all* of its many, varying dimensions. 'Prudence', which means 'good sense', in addition to sound judgment, implies good *habits*, the development of which requires extensive, varied experience, and because wisdom is so intimately connected with experience, it cannot be understood in isolation from the common beliefs and practices, which constitute the *framework* within which one's experience is interpreted. The wise person is *not* one who has adopted the 'view from nowhere'—to employ an expression which aptly describes mainline philosophy's preferred stance[3]—for he cannot separate the questions 'Is it true?' 'Is it good?' and 'Is it right?' from the questions 'What will be its impact on real people and real life?' and 'What will be its effect on that which is already in place?' which require us to pay attention not only to current opinions and practices but to the opinions and practices of our predecessors.

In contrast with being intelligent or knowledgeable, for which one can imagine entirely general, abstract definitions, in terms of IQ or the number of justified, true beliefs one holds in a particular subject, what it is to be wise is much more ineffable, something that can be fully comprehended only in its particular instances; that is, in the context of a specific cultural and social framework. To be knowledgeable in physics or biology means the same thing, whether one is in New York or Bombay, but wisdom in such things as raising children, conducting business, or governing a state will mean entirely *different* things, depending upon the time, place, and people one is talking about.

It is in this essential relationship to common experience and common sense that wisdom's inherent conservatism is most apparent. I refer to wisdom as *conservative* and not intransigent or reactionary, because the traditions of behavior and thought upon which

[2] Like Maxwell—and as indicated above—my inquiries are ultimately motivated by social and political concerns, but I prefer to reserve discussion of them for another time and place.

[3] This is the title of Thomas Nagel's important—and revealing—book, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

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it is based *do* progress, but in an evolutionary, organic manner; in a way that is responsive to lived experience and which honours precedent, but does not blindly follow it. As Michael Oakeshott has explained, changelessness is *not* a conservative attribute: 'No traditional way of behaviour, no traditional skill, ever remains fixed; its history is one of continuous change', he says. 'The appearance of changelessness…is an illusion which springs from the erroneous belief that the only significant change is that which is…induced by self-conscious activity'.[4] What counts as wisdom changes, but always slowly and deliberately, like a great ship turning in the sea. There are no quick turns, no sudden revolutions in wisdom.

In meditating upon these attributes of wisdom, it would appear that the mainline tradition in philosophy has had little interest in it. Prudence has not been afforded a high place on its agenda. Mainline philosophy's primary preoccupation has been with what is *true*—and within the context of what is true, what is *good* and what is *right*, abstractly conceived—and with this concern foremost in mind, philosophers have been prepared to jettison common beliefs and practices and the history and traditions that underlie them, on the epochal equivalent of a moment's notice. For mainline philosophy, 'What will be its impact on real people and real life?' and 'What will be its effect on that which is already in place?' have been, at best, irrelevant questions and at worst, obstacles to what it has believed to be intellectual, moral, social, and civic progress.

This philosophical temper began in the classical past, with Plato, who identified truth with the ideal rather than the actual and who consequently believed that the quest for knowledge, which he thought supreme amongst human aims, must take us *away* from the world of ordinary experience and common sense and towards the purely intellectual realm of the Forms. It was Plato who in the *Republic* conceived a politics based entirely in abstract reasoning, rather than experience; who opined that society should be ruled by intellectuals, because of the knowledge that they possess;[5] and who lamented that but for the common folk, who do not understand what the 'true' political leader does, this dream might be at least *partly* realized ('partly', because no Form can be fully realized in the actual world), a point brought to life in his Parable of the Ship.[6]

[4] Michael Oakeshott, 'The Tower of Babel', in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1962), p. 64.

[5] Plato, *Republic*, tr. Paul Shorey, in Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *Plato: The Collected Dialogues* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) (473d-e).

[6] Ibid., 488a-489e.

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This lack of understanding on the part of the common folk, not to mention their alleged 'avarice' and 'greed', is one reason why Plato despised democracy, with its 'assigning…of equality to equals and unequals alike', which he believed renders it both 'anarchic and motley'.[7]

In the modern era, it was René Descartes who most effectively gave voice to this essentially rationalistic view that reason alone should govern what we believe and do and consequently that our common sense and inherited customs and practices are worthless.[8] In the *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations on First Philosophy*, he argued that every inquiry, if it is to discover the truth (and he gives no indication that he thinks inquiry has any other aim) must cast aside precedent and start anew with self-evident first principles, raw perceptual intuitions, and deductive and inductive inferences, all coordinated by way of a quasi-mathematical/scientific methodology: 'I could not do better than to try once and for all to get all the beliefs I had accepted from birth out of my mind', Descartes announced in the *Discourse on Method*, 'so that once I have reconciled them with reason I might again set up either other, better ones or even the same ones'.[9] 'Those long chains of reasoning…that geometricians commonly use to attain their most difficult demonstrations, have given me an occasion for imagining that all the things that can fall within human knowledge follow one another in the same way…'[10] Francis Bacon had thought much the same (though he rejected the deductivism that would become a hallmark of at least the popularized forms of Cartesianism) and devoted much of his *New Organon* to the fight against 'received doctrines'[11] and the 'idols' that he believed hamper human intellectual progress, most significantly, common language and ordinary speech, which Bacon labeled the 'idols of the market place', and established belief systems, which he called the

[7] Ibid., 558c-d.

[8] By 'rationalism' I mean the view that every human belief and practice must have a rational justification, as a basic condition of adequacy. Clearly, on this reading of the word, both empiricism and rationalism, as traditionally defined, may count as rationalistic philosophies.

[9] René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method for Rightly Conducting One's Reason and for Seeking the Truth in the Sciences*, 3rd Edition, tr. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1993), p. 8.

[10] Ibid., p. 11.

[11] Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, in *The New Organon and Related Writings*, ed. Fulton H. Anderson (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1960), p. 43 (Aphorism xxi).

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'idols of the theatre'.[12] (In his *New Atlantis*, Bacon pined for a society run by scientists, a vision lampooned with great effectiveness by Jonathan Swift, in the short 'Voyage to Laputa', from *Gulliver's Travels*). Later, Immanuel Kant,[13] in the process of defining 'enlightenment', would describe it as '...man's release from his self-incurred tutelage', by which he meant the freeing of the individual from the beliefs of others—and particularly the beliefs of one's predecessors—and from the traditions established on the basis of them:

> Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapere aude! 'Have courage to use your own reason!'—that is the motto of enlightenment.[14]

While those like Bacon, Descartes, and Kant were advocating rationalism in a general way, across the disciplines, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and the other purveyors of social-contractarianism, the modern mainline tradition's official political philosophy, were busying themselves with its more specific application to social, political, and even ethical subjects, arguing that rather than looking to the opinions and practices of our predecessors for guidance in how we ought to live, we should instead determine our social, and political forms of life—even our morals—on the basis of esoteric thought-experiments; we should 'start from the original foundations', as Descartes had put it, in speaking of knowledge more generally in the *Meditations*. Indeed, Hobbes argued in his *Leviathan* that prudence should have no role to play in philosophy whatsoever; that reason alone should govern all of our deliberations. '[W]e are not to account as any part thereof that original knowledge called experience, in which consisteth prudence', he wrote, 'because it is not attained by reasoning..., and is

[12] Ibid., pp. 47-66 (Aphorisms xxxviii-lxviii).

[13] Of course, inasmuch as he devoted much of his work to delineating the *limits* of reason and to rejecting speculative metaphysics, Kant opposed the kind of rationalism found in Descartes. But in the broader sense that we have been discussing—particularly, in the sense of rejecting any authority but that of reason and sensory intuition—Kant is most certainly a rationalist.

[14] Immanuel Kant, 'What is Enlightenment'? in *Foundations for the Metaphysics of Morals and What is Enlightenment*, tr. Lewis White Beck (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1959), p. 85.

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but a memory of successions of events in times past'.[15] Hobbes then went on to dismiss classical and medieval thought with the sweeping judgment that 'there is nothing so absurd that the old philosophers…have not some of them maintained'.[16]

The announced method of the original social-contract theorists was to derive ethical, social, and political positions entirely on the basis of an assessment of the 'natural condition' of mankind and from speculation as to what such a natural man, if rational, would choose. Of course, this allegedly 'natural' condition of mankind was simply the reductive picture of human nature recommended by the then-new mechanical sciences, while 'rational' meant nothing more than the sort of instrumental rationality that one finds in modern economics and increasingly in political science, which treats the hedonic calculus as the sole ground on which human decision is based. As for determining what such a man 'would choose', as is commonly the case when philosophers invoke counterfactuals, woolly thinking abounded (a counterfactual, after all, is a state of affairs for which there can be no evidence). But adoption of these new paradigms was essential to the social-contract theorists' larger project of removing moral and political questions from the jurisdiction of religion and philosophy and placing them within the purview of the sciences, in the hope of creating a comprehensive 'science of man', so with the exception of the philosophers belonging to the conservative counterculture—Burke, most prominently—and a handful of reactionaries, such as Joseph de Maistre, social contractarianism went largely unopposed, despite its questionable assumptions about human nature and its dubious logic.

The thought behind the science of man was that one should be able to explain and predict human behavior in much the same way that one explains and predicts the motions of physical bodies, an idea that prepared the ground for psychology and the other social sciences and remains their governing assumption to this day. Politics, on this view, is essentially social engineering, and the chief political virtues, as Alasdair MacIntyre has pointed out, are not those excellences of character that have been identified with the classical statesman, but rather the narrower, amoral, and apolitical virtues of the managerial classes; that narrow cluster of excellences that comprise what we commonly call 'efficiency'.[17] In the

[15] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Edwin Curley, ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1994), p. 454 (Part IV, Ch. XLVI, §2).

[16] Ibid., p. 457 (Part IV, Ch. XLVI, §11).

[17] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd Edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), esp. Ch. 3, 6, & 8.

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Introduction to *Leviathan*, Hobbes anticipates this conception of politics-as-engineering, when he compares man to a machine and a polity to an artificial man,[18] and in his 'map' of the sciences, he suggests that politics is a branch of natural science and that ethics is a branch of *physics*, the main concern of which is with the causal relations that govern human sentiments or, as Hobbes put it, 'consequences from the passions of men'.[19] Despite criticisms from communitarians, Christian humanists, conservatives, and others, this conception of politics remains the dominant paradigm in philosophy today, as evinced by the fact that John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, a contemporary exercise in rationalistic social-contractarianism (one that recommends a rigorous program of social engineering, affected primarily through the compulsory redistribution of private property), is widely thought to be the most important work of political philosophy written in the last century.[20]

As for contemporary mainline philosophy, considered more generally, still felt today is the powerful presence of Logical Positivism, with its ambitions to 'correct' or otherwise systematize ordinary language, and omnipresent is the philosophy of Willard van Orman Quine, according to whom natural science is First Philosophy and in whose thought intentionality and all of the distinctively human complexities, ambiguities, and contradictions that come with it are eliminated in favor of a logically pure extensionalism in language and a rigorous behaviorism in psychology, the main advertisement for which would appear to be its evidential transparency and experimental efficiency.

It has been in its penetrating, sometimes tart response to mainline philosophy's rationalism and consequent imprudence that the philosophically conservative counterculture of which I have spoken has both defined and distinguished itself. At the head of this counterculture is Aristotle who, in a handful of sentences in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, punctured the entire inflated balloon of Platonic perfectionism in ethics and politics, when he observed that 'it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class

[18] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, pp. 3-4 (Introduction).

[19] Ibid., p. 48 (Part I, Ch. IX, §3).

[20] In a survey of philosophers in the United States and Canada, conducted by *The Philosophical Forum*, of the 25 most important philosophical books of the twentieth century, *A Theory of Justice* was ranked third, after Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and Heidegger's *Being and Time*. See 'What are the Modern Classics? The Baruch Poll of Twentieth-Century Philosophy', *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (1999), pp. 329-346.

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of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits'[21] and that 'matters concerned with conduct and questions of what is good for us have no fixity…'[22] (Winston Churchill, in responding to the perfectionist argument against democracy, famously remarked that democracy is the worst form of government…except for all the others.) Aristotle also believed that the development of sound ethical and political positions requires not only that historical and contemporary common views *not* be ignored, but that they must be taken into consideration in *every instance*: '[W]e must consider happiness in the light not only of our conclusion and our premises, but also of what is commonly said about it; for with a true view *all* the data harmonize...'[23]

In the modern era, the conservative counterculture's banner was first raised by David Hume, who criticized mainline philosophy for its immoderate approach to inquiry—its relentless, single-minded pursuit of the truth—which he correctly surmised can only lead to radical skepticism or, as Hume referred to it, *Pyrrhonism*. Pyrrhonism, of course, is a quintessentially imprudent philosophy, for it cannot be lived or even, for that matter, *honestly believed*, a point made not only by Hume, but by his contemporary Thomas Reid and later, in the twentieth century, by G.E. Moore. 'The great subverter of *Pyrrhonism* or the excessive principles of skepticism is action, and employment, and the occupations of common life', Hume wrote in the first *Enquiry*. 'These principles may flourish and triumph in the schools… But as soon as they leave the shade..., and are put in opposition to the more powerful principles of our nature, they vanish like smoke, and leave the…sceptic in the same condition as other mortals.'[24] '[W]hat do I gain [by skepticism]…?' Reid asked. 'I resolve not to believe my senses. I break my nose against a post that comes my way; I step into a dirty kennel; and, after twenty such…rational actions, I am taken up and clapt into a

[21] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. Sir David Ross (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 3.

[22] Ibid., p. 30.

[23] Ibid., p. 15. [Emphasis added] I should mention that my own interpretation of Aristotle on this subject has evolved. In earlier, more Platonic days, I was inclined to view Aristotle's philosophy systematically; his positions on the various "special sciences" as applications of his metaphysical views.

[24] David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and the Principles of Morals*, L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 158-9 (Sec. XII, Part II, §126-127). [Emphasis in the original]

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madhouse.'[25] 'It is, of course, the case that all philosophers who have held such [skeptical] views have repeatedly…expressed other views inconsistent with them…', Moore observed dryly. 'One way in which they have betrayed their inconsistency, is by alluding to the existence of other philosophers'.[26] Moore's efforts to counter Pyrrhonism, by corralling philosophical investigation within the confines of ordinary language and common sense, bore fruit in the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein—and especially the Wittgenstein of *On Certainty*—and in the 'ordinary language' philosophy that flourished at Oxford in the middle of the last century and which represented a revival of Humean and Reidian ways of thinking, cast in the linguistic idiom characteristic of twentieth-century thought.

But, it is with respect to questions of ethics, politics, and values, more generally, that mainline philosophy's imprudence stands out most glaringly, and it was on these fronts that Edmund Burke, the conservative counterculture's greatest political spokesman, pressed his own brand of anti-rationalism:

> I cannot stand forward and give praise or blame to anything which relates to human actions and human concerns on a simple view of the object, as it stands stripped of every relation, in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction…Circumstances…give in reality to every political principle its distinguishing color and discriminating effect. The circumstances are what render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind.[27]

Indeed, it was precisely in the difference between prudent social evolution and its imprudent, revolutionary counterpart, that Burke saw the crucial distinction between England's bloodless revolution of 1688 and the anything-but-bloodless French revolution a century later. The English revolution affected changes from *within* the boundaries of England's existing institutions, which the agents of the revolution respected. 'It is true, that, aided with the powers derived from force and opportunity, the nation was at that time, in

[25] Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Derek Brookes, ed. (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2000), p. 169-170 (Ch. 6, Sec. 20). [My brackets]

[26] G.E. Moore, 'A Defence of Common Sense', in *Philosophical Papers* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1959), pp. 40-41. [My brackets]

[27] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution* in *France,* in *Edmund Burke: Selected Writings and Speeches*, Peter J. Stanlis, ed. (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1963), p. 514.

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some sense, free to take what course it pleased for filling the throne', Burke wrote, 'but only free to do so upon the same grounds on which they might have wholly abolished…every other part of their Constitution. [T]hey did not think such bold changes within their commission.'[28] In contrast, the French revolution was grounded in an abstract conception of Right—in a *philosophy*—and thus came entirely from *outside* the historical and political framework of France. Its temper, consequently, was not one of moderate change but instead, had all the feverish intensity (and devastating results) of a coup.

Burke believed that *how* we understand political change—as a form of evolution that involves continuity with the past or as a revolution that is the result of embracing an abstract philosophy—plays a large part in determining how that political change manifests itself, and in fact, this was precisely what determined how the very different revolutions of 1688 and 1789 turned out: progressively in the case of the English, regressively in the case of the French (where an old-style medieval monarch was replaced by an even older, classical-style Emperor). It is because Burke saw clearly the relationship between looking to tradition for guidance and moderation on the one hand and absolute obedience to reason and radicalism on the other, that he feared that mainline philosophy must *always* run the risk of sliding into radicalism. For this reason, Burke, over the course of his career, chose to root political principles in history rather than in philosophical theories:

> You will observe that from Magna Carta to the Declaration of Right, it has been the uniform policy of our Constitution to claim and assert our liberties as an entailed inheritance derived to us from our forebearers…, without any reference whatever to other more general or prior right…We have an inheritable crown, an inheritable peerage, and a House of Commons and a people inheriting privileges, franchises, and liberties from a long line of ancestors…[T]he people of England well know that the idea of inheritance furnishes a sure principle of conservation, and a sure principle of transmission, without at all excluding a principle of improvement. It leaves acquisition free; but it secures what it acquires.[29]

[28] Ibid., p. 521.

[29] Ibid., p. 528. Along these lines, Russell Kirk wrote the following about Burke:

> He…defended the liberties of Englishman against their king, and the

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Of course, Burke's worries were well founded: a second, philosophically radical counterculture *did* arise in the Enlightenment, on the grounds that mainline philosophy, far from being too imprudent, was, in fact, not imprudent enough. At its head was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose commitment to abstract principles and antipathy for common practices and beliefs—and particularly, for common *mores*[30]—have no counterparts in the history of philosophy prior to him, with the exception of Plato, and Rousseau's work throbs with an emotional intensity that is entirely absent from the Platonic dialogues (Burke referred to Rousseau as 'the insane Socrates'). Beyond fueling the French revolution, Rousseau's philosophy would supply many of the philosophical ideas, not to mention the temper, for the totalitarian philosophies of Marx and Lenin and of their heirs in the Frankfurt School and today's New Left.[31]

That Rousseau's political philosophy, even more than the philosophies of Hobbes and Locke, begins from an unreal picture of human nature is no better illustrated than by the opening paragraphs of his *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Amongst Men*, in which Rousseau forthrightly says: 'Let us begin…by setting all the facts aside, for they have no bearing on the

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liberties of Americans against king and parliament, and the liberties of Hindus against Europeans…, not because they were innovations, discovered in the Age of Reason, but because they were ancient prerogatives, guaranteed by immemorial usage. Burke was liberal because he was conservative.

Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind from Burke to Eliot*, Seventh Revised Edition (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc. 1985), p. 21.

[30] [A] vile and deceitful uniformity reigns in our mores, and all minds seem to have been cast in the same mold. Without ceasing, politeness makes demands, propriety gives orders; without ceasing, common customs are followed, never one's own lights. One no longer dares to seem what one really is…., and in this perpetual constraint, the men who make up this herd we call society will…do all the same things unless stronger motives deter them.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Basic Political Writings*, tr. Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1987), p. 4 (Part one, ¶7).

[31] There is an ongoing debate as to whether Rousseau's philosophy is itself totalitarian. That it has been one of the primary intellectual *sources* of totalitarianism, however, is largely undisputed.

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question'.[32] That Rousseau's attention is utopian rather than practical, is demonstrated by the concern with *perfect* equality, *perfect* freedom, and *perfect* individuality that pervades all of his political writings. That politically, Rousseau means to go far beyond Plato is evident in the fact that he thinks that these abstractions should be *imposed on people*; that although nature may make human beings unequal, and social dependency may further this inequality and rob us of some of our individuality, making us less free than we would otherwise have been, it is up to the State to correct this; to *make* us equal, where we are unequal, and to *remake* our freedom, where we have lost it—'[A]lthough [men] may be unequal in strength or in genius', Rousseau wrote in *On Social Contract or Principles of Political Right*, 'they all become equal through agreements and law',[33] after which he says:

> Anyone who dares to undertake the founding of a people should feel himself capable of changing human nature…, of transforming each individual, who by himself is a perfect and solitary whole, into part of a greater whole from which this individual receives…his life and his being…; and of substituting a partial and artificial existence for the physical and independent existence we have all received from nature….The more impotent these natural forces are, and the greater and more enduring the acquired ones are, the more solid and perfect the institution…, so that if each citizen is nothing and can do nothing except through all the others…, it can be said that legislation has reached the highest level of perfection it can attain.[34]

Finally, that Rousseau believes that substantial coercion by the State will be necessary in this 'remaking' of human equality and liberty—including State intrusion into private and non-governmental social relationships and especially those that comprise what Robert Nisbet has called the 'intermediate institutions' that lie between the individual and the State, such as the family, the church, the voluntary civic association, and the private business[35]—is indicated by,

[32] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Amongst Men*, tr. Julia Conaway Bondanella, in Alan Ritter and Julia Conaway Bondanella, eds., *Rousseau's Political Writings* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988), p. 9.

[33] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On Social Contract or Principles of Political Right,* in *Rousseau's Political Writings,* p. 98 (Bk. I, ch. 9, ¶8).

[34] Ibid., p. 108 (Bk II, ch. 7, ¶3).

[35] Robert Nisbet, 'Rousseau and Equality', in *Rousseau's Political Writings,* p. 244.

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among other things: (1) his endorsement of far-reaching State censorship of writing and speech;[36] (2) his belief in mandatory and exclusively State-run education;[37] (3) his argument for the elimination of organized, institutional religion, centered around God, and its replacement by 'Civil Religion', in which obedience is solely to the State;[38] and (4) his advocating the State's intrusion into the very *consciousness* of the individual, in order to insure loyalty to the principles of perfect equality and liberty :

> [I]t is no small matter that the state is tranquil and the law respected, but if one does nothing more, there will be more appearance than reality in all this, and the government will have difficulty making itself obeyed… If it is good to know how to make use of men as they are, it is better still to make them into what one needs them to be; the most absolute authority is that which penetrates a man's inner being and is exerted no less on his will than on his actions. Certainly, people are, in the long run, what the government makes of them…Form men, therefore, if you want to command men…[39]

§3

I have maintained that the mainline tradition in philosophy has held knowledge as its highest aim and has shown little interest in wisdom. I have described two philosophical countercultures, one conservative, one radical, which have emerged in opposition to the mainline tradition, and I have suggested that radicalism is the natural outcome of taking the inclinations and ideas of mainline philosophy to their logical conclusions. My task now is to explain, in a deeper way, the relationship between the unadulterated quest for the truth and radicalism on the one hand and between the cultivation of wisdom and moderation on the other. My method will be one of *personification*: I intend to uncover the contrastingly radical and moderate natures of knowledge and wisdom, by painting what

[36] Rousseau, *On Social Contract*, p. 165 (Bk. III, ch. 7, ¶6).

[37] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Political Economy*, in *Rousseau's Political Writings*, p. 73.

[38] Rousseau, *On Social Contract*, pp. 166-173 (Bk III, Ch. 8). This idea of civil religion seems a particularly French predilection. One finds an even more grandiose, bizarre version of it in the late writings of Auguste Comte.

[39] Rousseau, *Discourse on Political Economy*, pp. 66-7.

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are, in effect, psychological portraits of the knowledgeable and the wise person, with an eye to identifying the relevant differences in their respective characters.

These difference were addressed with great perceptiveness by Aristotle, whose account rests essentially upon differences in both the *objects* and the *modes* of philosophic (by which he meant *metaphysical*), scientific, and practical reasoning. When one is involved in philosophic or scientific enquiry, one's intellect is turned in the direction of the truth. When one is engaged in practical reasoning, it is directed towards the conduct of life.[40] Excellence in each is described by Aristotle as 'wisdom'—practical and philosophic or scientific, respectively—but only excellence in the second is 'wisdom', in the sense that we have been talking about, while excellence in the first is what we ordinarily would call 'knowledge' or 'erudition'. The person who possess practical wisdom is the one with whom we identify sound judgment and behavior, while the person who possesses what Aristotle calls philosophic or scientific wisdom would be most aptly described today as 'intellectual' or 'learned'. Notice, in this regard, that it would be quite odd to say of someone, *solely* on the basis of the fact that he was knowledgeable in a number of subjects, say mathematics, physics, and chemistry, that he was wise, for wisdom is predicated on one's having benefited from substantial experience, while being knowledgeable speaks only to the possession of information in a subject-area, which commonly takes a good amount of time to accumulate, but which—in the case of a genius, for example—may not. It is for this reason that wisdom is never present in children, though knowledge, as in the case of child prodigies, may well be.

Aristotle's description of the difference between the practical and the scientific or philosophic forms of life adds both color and depth to this distinction that we have been making between wisdom and knowledge; between the fruit born of practical wisdom and that stemming from pure intellection. For Aristotle, the life governed by practical wisdom is one of moral, social, and civic virtue, while the life over which philosophic reason rules is an amoral, contemplative existence. In part, this is merely a question of semantics: moral, social, and civic virtue involve goodness in one's social behavior, so to the extent that the life spent pursuing knowledge is secluded and inactive, it *literally* cannot be a life of moral, social, or civic virtue. But beyond the issue of definition, there is a more interesting sense in which Aristotle believes that the process of searching for truth is at odds with the development of moral, social, and civic virtue. The

[40] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* pp. 137-158.

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life that the truth-seeker chooses is asocial—and consequently amoral—in a way that goes *beyond* its mere lack of activity.

Jonathan Lear, in a discerning commentary on Aristotle's conception of the contemplative life, has said that 'the contemplative life is *by its nature* unethical',[41] and no one who has had experience with theoretical scientists and other research scholars, who are consumed by their inquiries—the most obvious contemporary counterparts to Aristotle's contemplators—can deny that we often suffer from a distinctive lack of good sense—of sound behavior and sound judgment—in conducting the non-intellectual, ordinary parts of our lives; a quality that the expression 'absent-minded professor' only begins to capture. Singular devotion to a specific task and especially one that involves highly theoretical questions in science, abstract ideas in philosophy, mathematics, and logic, or perfectionist notions of goodness and beauty, can easily have the effect of *erasing* the world and the people in it. The scientist and the mainline philosopher, both of whom I will speak of as 'contemplators', in the Aristotelian sense of the term, fall into a kind of tunnel-vision, as a result of their utter absorption with the respective objects of their efforts. Without putting too hard an edge on it and intending the comparison in a purely descriptive sense, there can be an element of *sociopathy* to this form of life. Ordinary people and common life can be irritating, even hateful in their untidiness, their irregularity, and their imperfection, so the scientist or philosopher may be inclined to 'correct' them; to *make them fit* the particular image of perfection that he has formed in his mind.

In any form of life, where one's attention is fixed upon a perfect object, when conflicts arise, one's inclination is either to change the offending thing or to reject it. In the clash between the universal, consistent, perfect world of the contemplator and the particular, inconsistent, imperfect world of the common run of humanity, the latter must either be corrected or rejected, because its particularity, inconsistency, and imperfection render it unsuitable to reason's methods and distasteful to the contemplator's palate. Similarly, when we consider those clashes that occur within the universe of pure intellection—that is, *between* rival philosophical or scientific schemes—the stark, binary quality of the contemplator's world, of the true and the false, the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, requires that the false, the bad, and the ugly must also be transformed or discarded.

[41] Jonathan Lear, *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 315. [Emphasis added]

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If perfect truth, goodness, and beauty are the ends of pure intellection, then *consistency* is the primary virtue for the contemplator, because everything must fit together in order to be perfectly true, beautiful, or good. Anything that does *not* fit must be eliminated, and since truth, beauty, and other forms of perfection are the contemplator's *sole* ends, there is no reason that the eliminating should not be done decisively and at once. '[H]is disposition makes both destruction and creation easier for him to engage in, than acceptance or reform', Oakeshott says. 'To patch up, to repair he regards as a waste of time…'[42]

If consistency is the primary virtue of the contemplator, a certain *lack* of consistency is the chief virtue of the wise person. More precisely, the wise person must have the capacity for *appropriate, responsive improvisation*. He must recognize and more importantly, *accept* that real life and real people are characterized by particularity, heterogeneity, and irrationality—that is, by *im*perfection—and he must be capable of responding appropriately to the ever-shifting, fluctuating currents of human life that result. Whatever pure intellection may reveal to be true, good, or beautiful, the wise person will suspend judgment as to whether it is *desirable*, until he has seen how it plays out in real life, amongst real people.

This is most apparent in ethics and politics, where the contemplator's demand for consistency and universalizability entails moral and political positions which often are at odds with what common sense would identify as decent and humane. This is certainly true of Kant's moral philosophy, which insists that if an action is morally right in one circumstance, it must be morally right in all circumstances, since the moral significance of an action lies in the universalizability of its maxim. It is not a coincidence that Kant arrives at this view, after meditating upon ethical concepts like 'right', 'good', 'duty', and 'ought', taken entirely in the abstract and not as they are actually used in ordinary language and common practice. The wise person, of course, must view this sort of ethics as unacceptable from the start, because its commitment to absolute consistency and universality and resulting distance from real life entails a rigid ethical outlook, which inevitably runs roughshod over human beings. To him, Kant's so-called morality of rational persons looks much more like the triumph of principles over people. A similar rigidity plagues Utilitarianism, with its exclusive concern for maximizing utility, though the inhumanity that can result is of a different vari-

[42] Oakeshott, 'Rationalism in Politics', in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, p. 4.

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ety from that engendered by Kantianism. Under Kantianism, people are sacrificed to moral abstractions, but with Utilitarianism, some people's happiness is sacrificed for the sake of the happiness of others, who either are more numerous or whose happiness is deemed greater, by some other measure.

This essential difference between the morals of the contemplator and that of the wise person is well-illustrated in Kant's 'On a Supposed Right to Lie for Philanthropic Concerns', which addresses the ethics of truth-telling and lies. A critic has argued that Kant cannot possibly be correct on this subject, because in *real* life, there will be some occasions in which the right thing to do is tell the truth and some occasions in which the right thing to do is lie. (I am obliged to lie, for example, if the person I am talking to is a murderer, inquiring into the whereabouts of his next victim, which are known to me.) This criticism well illustrates the sense in which for the wise person, morality always must be *inconsistent* and *particular*, rather than consistent and universal, if its application to real human beings, in real circumstances, is to be decent and humane. But Kant, in responding to his critic, insists on universality and consistency at all costs, and argues that one must always tell the truth, no matter what, a position for which he offers nothing more than the uncompelling, though characteristically abstract rationale that to permit even one lie 'does harm to humanity in general, inasmuch as it vitiates the very source of right'.[43]

To take another example, this one political, freedom, taken abstractly abstract, is a good, and for the contemplator, this is reason enough to think it desirable and to recommend the overthrowing of any social or political system that does not maximize it. But the wise person will reserve judgment about the desirability of freedom, until he sees how it is exercised by specific people in specific times and places. He will ask, as Burke does, whether because 'liberty in the abstract may be classed amongst the blessings of mankind', we should therefore 'felicitate a madman who has escaped from the protecting restraint and wholesome darkness of his cell?' and he will agree with Burke that because 'the effect of liberty to individuals is that they may do what they please: we ought see what it will please them to do, before we risk congratulations'.[44]

This struggle between the contemplator and the wise person is also played out in the most unlikely of areas, namely in metaphysics

[43] Immanuel Kant, 'On a Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns', in *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, tr. James Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 1993), pp. 64-5.

[44] Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, p. 515.

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and epistemology, where one would think that the perspective of pure intellection is overwhelmingly favored. Take, for example, the belief that the external world exists. For the contemplator, the question is solely one of truth and justification, with consistency once again playing the role of the essential regulating principle, and consequently his thinking goes something like this: (1) The sole determinant as to whether or not we should believe something is whether or not the belief is true; (2) The strength of our justification for a belief is the sole indicator as to its truth; (3) Therefore, beliefs for which we have no justification should be jettisoned (this is the reason, for example, why we no longer believe in witches); (4) The belief that there is an external world is one for which there is no justification (see the various skeptical arguments); (5) Therefore, we should not believe that there is an external world.

The wise person will find this line of thought objectionable, not because he denies that in addressing the question of which beliefs we should hold, truth and justification are of great importance, but because he rejects the notion that they are of *exclusive* importance. He will insist that we must also attend to the *usefulness* of the belief in question, in all its varying dimensions, its *role* with respect to other beliefs that people hold, the *price* to be paid if it is abandoned, and a host of other practical considerations. In short, prudence will compel him to consider elements relevant to human belief *other* than truth and falsity, and consequently, he will reject the contemplator's robotic application of the principle of consistency to our beliefs. Particularly in the case of fundamental metaphysical and existential beliefs, like the belief in the external world or in the existence of other minds, the wise person—who thinks that as is the case with ethical obligation, the epistemological 'ought' implies 'can'—will want to consider whether it is even *possible* to forgo such beliefs. He will observe that as a matter of fact, people *do not* treat their beliefs in a consistent fashion; that we may be ready to rid ourselves of *some* beliefs for lack of justification, while at the same time insisting on keeping others, though they be equally lacking in justification.

The fact of human inconsistency is important to the wise person and will not only determine how far he is willing to pursue what may turn out to be a matter of purely academic interest, but will also operate as a constraint on the judgments that he applies both to and within the world of human belief. He will not so quickly throw around accusations of irrationality, simply because a belief is shown to lack warrant, nor will he so readily suggest that a belief be jettisoned, solely because it lacks a certain kind of epistemological pedi-

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gree. The wise among us, as Hume put it, '[w]hen we see, that we have arrived at the utmost extent of human reason…', will '…sit down contented; tho' we be perfectly satisfied in the main of our ignorance, and perceive that we can give no reason for our most general and most refined principles, beside our experience of their reality'.[45]

The contemplator, in contrast, will produce argument after argument, in order to prove to the world that the world does not exist, a venture which beyond being weird (prove *to the world* that the world does not exist?), is entirely *futile*, for while proofs demonstrating that the belief in the existence of the external world is unwarranted are easy to come by, it is impossible to get anyone to actually *believe* any of them. Or like Kant, he may think it 'a scandal to philosophy' that no proof of the external world exists and find himself compelled to write treatises like the *Critique of Pure Reason* to prove that it does, which, in addition to being futile—Hume demonstrated, quite convincingly, that there can be *no* proof for the existence of the external world—is also *needless*, inasmuch as it is attempting to prove something that everyone already believes.

§4

Further illumination as to these contrasting pairs of relationships—between pure intellection and the revolutionary spirit on the one hand and between wisdom and moderateness on the other—and with respect to the character of mainline philosophy can be found if we consider some of the core differences between the sciences and the liberal and fine arts. These differences stem, at bottom, from divergences in the respective *missions* of these distinctive forms of activity.

The understanding that science pursues is *pure*. Science is not a practical but rather, an intellectual endeavor, entirely concerned with the accumulation of knowledge. I do not mean to imply that the *fruits* of scientific knowledge are not routinely employed in practice, but only that the sole *value* pursued by science is truth. The significance of the various *applications* of the truths discovered by science to human life is a matter of moral, social, and political values, not scientific ones. Whether or not current theories in nuclear physics are true or false is a matter of scientific values, but

[45] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. xviii.

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whether or not those theories should be used to manufacture hydrogen bombs is a question of moral, social, and political ones.

The scientist, by virtue of the very nature and values of his trade, *must* be a revolutionary. I am not suggesting that he must be *politically* radical, but rather, that he must be a radical partisan of the *truth*; he must be ready to abandon any hypothesis or theory on a moment's notice, if reason and evidence require it. The fact that a theory has been long held, is much loved, or occupies a central place in a civilization has no bearing whatsoever on whether it is true or false and thus, is irrelevant to the scientist's decision to retain or scrap it. After all, each and every one of these things was true of Aristotelian physics and cosmology—they had prevailed for nearly two thousand years and enjoyed a central place in Christian doctrine and in the common folk-wisdom of the people of the West—but this did not prevent, nor *should* it have prevented, those like Copernicus, Galileo, Descartes, and Newton from abandoning them in what was, historically speaking, a blink of the eye.

In contrast with the purity of understanding sought by science, what the liberal and fine arts seek is *impure*, meaning that they are concerned as much with practice as with the accumulating of information. Their mission is the *cultivation* of the aesthetic, moral, and political dimensions of human life. 'Cultivation' suggests *betterment*, and the betterment sought by the humanities and liberal arts includes among many things, the nurturing of good taste, the development of humane sentiments, and the cultivation of moral, social, and civic virtue, all for the greater purpose of rendering human life more civilized. Our production and consumption of literature, music, theater, and all other manner of liberal and fine arts, then, are more a matter of our *being better people* and *living better lives* than they are about becoming more intelligent or adding to the stock of our knowledge.

Aristotle's recommendation of tragic drama for its psychologically curative effects—his theory of catharsis[46]—is duly famous, because inspired, but in fact, he believed that every one of the literary art forms benefits the human character in its own distinctive way, a view that I want to extend to the liberal and fine arts more generally. This is one of the key ways in which Aristotle's views on the subject of art differ sharply from those of Plato, who thought that the arts were intellectually and morally corrupting and should be abolished. But if we believe that morality is practical and not

[46] Aristotle, *The Poetics*, tr. James Hutton (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1982), p. 50.

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theoretical—that moral virtue is a matter of wisdom and not of intellection—we must see that the liberal and fine arts are directly implicated in its development, for wisdom and good habits are cultivated primarily in experience and only secondarily through teaching (and by 'teaching' Aristotle means a kind of apprenticeship, rather than explicit instruction), and the liberal and fine arts play a central role both in our experience and in our interpretation of it.

I have spoken at some length about the wise person's capacity for 'appropriate, responsive improvisation', in the face of the particularity, heterogeneity, and imperfection that define human life. These characteristics are what make impossible formulae or rules of human behavior and thought, which is why wisdom rather than knowledge is the most important attribute for those whose primary task is to deal with human beings and their lives. The unavailability of formulae or rules is also what prevents wisdom from being taught in the manner that one teaches subjects like atomic physics or organic chemistry, whose content consists entirely of information. 'Practical knowledge can neither be taught nor learned, but only imparted and acquired', Oakeshott explains, 'It exists only in practice, and the only way to acquire it is by apprenticeship to a master—not because the master can teach it (he cannot), but because it can be acquired only by continuous contact with one who is perpetually practising it'.[47]

It is through the guidance of a master craftsman that an apprentice experiences all of the particularities and heterogeneities—the messy realities—of the craft in which he is seeking to gain expertise, and it is only through repeated experience under the master's guidance that he will develop the good judgment, dispositions, and habits required to make him a master of that craft in his own right. What is true in the case of crafts is also true with respect to human life, which is why Aristotle compares the development of moral virtue to the acquisition of virtues of craft,[48] but in life our masters include our mothers and fathers, older siblings, school teachers, religious and other community leaders—indeed, *all* of the wise adults that help to usher us through the process of maturation. I would argue that our life-masters *also* include those great writers of literature and other artists, who are capable of creating worlds that so resonate with real life that they provide *another set of experiences* through which we can cultivate moral, social, and civic virtue, as well as manners, taste, and all of the other forms of excellence that belong to the practical rather than the intellectual side of human

[47] Oakeshott, 'Rationalism in Politics', p. 11.
[48] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, pp. 28-29.

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nature. Alice Crary, in a recent essay that is particularly *apropos* to our present subject, says that the finest novels…

> …may draw us into more intimate relations with some characters than others, give us discordant accounts of a specific situation through the eyes of different characters and leave us with ambiguous accounts of central events in the lives of some characters. And, in doing these things [it] may elicit a variety of emotional responses. It may lead us to empathize with and love some characters and despise or pity others, to find certain aspects of a state of affairs funny and others boring, to find some features of a mode of life important and others unimportant, and so on.[49]

Gilbert Ryle recognized many of the works of Jane Austen as having this quality—in his famous essay on Austen, he said that Austen is 'a moralist' though not a 'moraliser'[50]—and Crary, much of whose essay is on Ryle-on-Austin, observes that 'Ryle attempts to show that Jane Austen's conception of human understanding, like his own, leaves room for the possibility of forms of instruction which persuade us in that they engage our feelings'.[51] This 'wine-tasting method', as Ryle calls it, is simply what we have been describing as learning from experience rather than from instruction; as developing a set of dispositions and habits rather than acquiring a stock of justified, true beliefs. Indeed, the worlds created by the novelist, playwright, and painter may provide this learning in a manner that is even *more* effective than actual experience, for if the artist is really good at what he does, he will offer us all the particularities, inconsistencies, fluctuations, and imperfections of real life, but in circumstances that are contrived to showcase those aspects of character, thought, and action that are relevant to the specific moral, social, political, or other human virtues and vices on exhibition. 'Jane Austen's people are, nearly always, alive all over, all through and all round', Ryle says, 'displaying admirably or amusingly or deplorably proportioned mixtures of all the colours that there are, save pure White and pure Black'.[52]

[49] Alice Crary, 'Does the Study of Literature Belong Within Moral Philosophy? Reflections in Light of Ryle's Thought', *Philosophical Investigations*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (October 2000), pp. 324-5.

[50] Gilbert Ryle, 'Jane Austen and the Moralists', in *Collected Papers*, Vol. I (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1971), p. 276.

[51] Crary, 'Does the Study of Literature Belong Within Moral Philosophy'? p. 326.

[52] Ryle, 'Jane Austen and the Moralists', p. 285.

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Because they are prime examples of the cultivated human soul and key players in the process of human cultivation, our greatest writers and fine artists always have had a connection to their predecessors, which our scientists have not had and *should not* have. As strange as it may sound, the artist is fundamentally less radical, the nature of his work fundamentally less revolutionary, than the scientist and his theories, for running through every artistic movement are striations of orthodoxy. Indeed, art history itself is the story of one continuous process of organic change, rather than one of successive revolutions. In painting, for instance, one can identify a single conceptual arc that begins in the Renaissance and terminates at the end of the modern era, one which provides continuity between modern art movements and their predecessors, despite the superficial appearance of unconnectedness. Modernism may have *seemed* radical at the moment of its inception, but once even a little time had passed, it quickly became clear that it was really conservative, in our sense of representing organic change, rather than revolution. In stark contrast stands the history of science, where there are no comparable connections between Newtonian mechanics and its Aristotelian predecessor or between Relativity and Quantum Mechanics and Newtonian physics to those that we find in painting, between the Mannerist and the Renaissance, the Baroque and the Mannerist, the Romantic and the Baroque, and the Modern and the Romantic. The breaks between paradigms in science constitute revolutions that are abrupt and total, while in the liberal and fine arts, such 'paradigm shifts' are gradual and partial.

Pulling together all that I have said, over the course of this essay, and in closing, it would appear that mainline philosophy is more appropriately classified with the natural and social sciences than with the humanities or liberal arts, because its fundamental interest has been in knowledge rather than wisdom, and its fundamental inclination has been to oppose established beliefs and practices and not only the beliefs and practices of the common, 'vulgar' folk, but those of its own predecessors. Mainline philosophy, like science, has been an overwhelmingly present- and forward-looking enterprise; ready to drop the prevailing assumptions and dispositions of the age, at a moment's notice.[53]

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