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Philosophical Wandering as a Mode of Philosophy in Cultural Life:¹ From Diogenes of Sinope to Cornel West

Abstract:

In this essay, I defend philosophical wandering not only as an approach to doing philosophy, but also as an important force to incite critical reflection in cultural life. I argue that philosophical wanderers have an embodied, errant praxis, supporting wisdom whenever they engage with others. For these philosophers reflection is not given in a series of systematic assertions, nor through phenomenological description, nor analytic dissection. Rather, reflective life is the force that enhances the performative element of philosophy as an exercise in being obnoxious (as a Socratic gadfly) to bring people within a culture to particular kinds of critical awareness and action. I conclude by suggesting that this mode of philosophy has a correlate mode of truth, “incited reflectivism,” different from coherentism, foundationalism, warranted assertibility, and other theories that have been previously defended as the standard for “truth.”²

1) This essay is part of a larger project, a three-volume work entitled “The Modes of Philosophy.” This project explores the different meta-orientations that are presupposed in philosophical praxis. The method in this project is radically empirical philosophy of culture, which transitions Cassirerian cultural phenomenology out of critical idealism and into a kind of Jamesian and Whiteheadian inquiry into the higher thresholds of experience (human culture). In the first volume, the neglected communal mode of philosophy (philosophical community) is explored through meta-ethical principles that articulate what makes it robust, successful, and valuable. Instead of a purely academic organization, designed for theoretical claims about the history of philosophy, the constellation of principles is designed to incite and enrich reflective engagement from the reader so they in turn might further build robust philosophical communities. The second volume will trace the thread between the assorted aphorisms of philosophical wanderers. The third volume will meditate on and with philosophical speculators, as those who create and maintain dynamic cosmic images for reconstructive contemplation. Together, these three modes of philosophy can be thought of as the “three tripod legs” that support (ground) robust philosophical life within, and effective for, a culture.

2) I would like to thank anonymous reviewers for *Eidos* for helping me clarify the continuity of some topoi in the philosophical wandering mode of philosophy, across the globe and the ages.

Keywords:

philosophy as a way of life, metaphilosophy, Diogenes of Sinope, Cornel West, Pierre Hadot, cynicism, pragmatism

Introduction

It is no overstatement to say that philosophers have been labelled obnoxious, impious, and even dangerous by a great many people. They have been a continued political problem in cultural life. On first glance, this may seem like an unfair stereotype of the history of philosophy. Philosophers today largely look to their own private academic affairs. When we review the history of philosophy, however, we find a remarkably different story. Socrates was not the only philosopher charged with impiety: Anaxagoras, Aristotle, and Theophrastus were so charged. Further, with the ever present anti-Macedonian sentiment in Athens, the Lyceum was also seen as a potentially dangerous entity. In 306 BCE, Sophocles of Sounion passed and tried to maintain a law (that failed), which was aimed at the Lyceum. The law required that no philosopher be allowed to run a school without state approval. There was also Emperor Justinian's infamous closure of the Neoplatonic Academy of Athens in 529 AD, as part of his decree banning as heretical pagan philosophy and religion across the Roman World. The closure of the Neoplatonic Academy is often given as the historical marker of the end of classical antiquity.

Since then, charges of heresy and sedition have continued to follow philosophers wherever they go. Giordano Bruno died at the hands of the inquisition for his philosophical views on the cosmos and his arguments about the nature of the trinity. Takuan Sōhō was banished to North Japan by the shogunate of Tokugawa Hidetada for his views on the oversight of monastic, philosophical communities.³ Descartes was condemned by the University of Utrecht. Spinoza was exiled from the Jewish community in Amsterdam. Rousseau was on the run from 1754 onwards. Locke was obliged to leave England, returning only when William of Orange invaded from Holland. Kant was silenced on matters of religion by the Prussian government, by no less than the Keiser Friedrich Wilhelm II himself. Fichte was fired for the eighteenth century equivalent of "impiety." It goes without saying that Marx was regarded as dangerous, and in fact he was. Nietzsche was self-exiled (renounced his citizenship) and reviled from nearly every corner of Europe. Gandhi and Martin Luther King were assassinated. John McCumber has documented in *Time in the Ditch: Philosophy During the McCarthy Era* that, relative to their numbers, American philosophy professors were fired, dismissed, non-renewed, and denied tenure for political activities at a rate higher than any other academic discipline.⁴ In 1968, philosophy faculty and students at the Institute of Philosophy of the University of Warsaw lead anti-communist protests. As punishment, the Institute of Philosophy was housed under the (communist) UW Institute of Political Science. In what became infamously known as the "Bernstein Affair," Richard Bernstein was denied tenure review, due to his political affiliations. There were campus wide protests. These protests helped catalyze the sixties counter-culture movement. In short, philosophers of all sorts have been charged as unlikable, impious, dangerous, seditious, treasonous, and heretical, in varying degrees of severity, across a variety of political, religious, and social contexts.

3) Ignoring etymological quibbles, there is a long and well-established tradition of scholarship defending East and South Asian wisdom traditions, Brahmanical, Jainist, Buddhist, Confucian, Mohist, Daoist, Legalist, or otherwise, as philosophy proper. For more on this approach to intercultural philosophy, see: Hajime Nakamura, "The Meaning of the Terms 'Philosophy' and 'Religion' in Various Traditions," in *Interpreting Across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy*, ed. Gerald James Larson and Elliot Deutsch (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

4) John McCumber, *Time in the Ditch: American Philosophy and the McCarthy Era* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001).

In most situations, philosophers get themselves into trouble because of their criticisms of conventional cultural practice. Whether it is publishing on a new view of the nature of the cosmos, presenting a policy statement on the limits of religion in governance, being an adherent of a heterodox community, or simply asking critical questions in public, philosophers tend to aggravate the beast of culture by awakening it from its dogmatic slumbers. In this long tradition of aggravating philosophers, there is one mode of philosophy that has been particularly acerbic in its caustic attacks on culture, and for that reason has been especially hated. In fact, even other philosophers have had their doubts about it. Plato considered this kind of philosophy narcissistic, deceptive, and untrustworthy.⁵ He was supposed to have said of its leading herald, Diogenes of Sinope, that “this man is *Socrates* mad.”⁶ This mode of philosophy is that of the philosophical wanderer. It has been a mode of philosophy since the dawn of antiquity:

Itinerant philosophers existed already in antiquity. During the Roman empire, many sages wandered all over the Mediterranean world. They went about for the sake of intellectual and spiritual enrichment, but essentially to spread their teaching and to intervene in local quarrels as religious consultants. Wandering connoted their ambiguous status in society – both in and out – and thereby enhanced their charisma and endowed them with an aura of superior power.⁷

Philosophical itinerancy was also found in ancient China. Such “wandering theorists” (游說之) were considered by the Legalist Han Feizi, as one “the five vermin” plaguing good society.⁸ They have been troubling humankind throughout history and across the globe. From these early adventuring scholars, a whole mode of doing philosophy was born. Beyond adventuring as a scholar to other parts of the globe, philosophical wandering became a way of being in the world. It became a kind of lived cosmopolitanism that could be enacted in one’s daily life with others.

From Diogenes of Sinope, to Cornel West today, these philosophical wanderers have been not only considered dangerous, but obnoxious, anti-rational, egotistical, and self-interested showmen. Their status as “serious academics and philosophers,” never mind their basic integrity as persons, has been questioned. Do they have consistent systematic reflections or only sophistic catch phrases and alluring performance art? In short, are they the enemies of “real” philosophy? Further, are they enemies of the true, the beautiful, and the good?

In this essay, I would like to defend this mode of philosophy as not only as one approach to doing philosophy, but also as an important force to incite critical reflection in cultural life. I argue that philosophical wanderers have an embodied, errant praxis, supporting wisdom whenever they engage with others. For these philosophers, reflection is not given in a series of systematic assertions, nor through phenomenological description, or analytic dissection. Rather, reflective life is the force that enhances the performative element of philosophy as an exercise in being obnoxious (as a Socratic gadfly) to bring people within a culture to particular kinds of critical reflective awareness and action. In other words, philosophical wanderers maintain the kind of critical reflection that incites reflection in others. I suggest that this mode of philosophy has a correlate mode

5) For more, see: Silvia Montiglio, “Wandering Philosophers in Classical Greece,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 120 (2000): 93–98, doi:10.2307/632482.

6) Claudius Aelianus, *Various History*, trans. Thomas Stanley (London: Printed for Thomas Basset, at the George, in Fleet-street, near Cliffords- Inne., 1670), Book XIV, *Penelope*, <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/>.

7) Montiglio, “Wandering Philosophers in Classical Greece,” 86.

8) For more, see: Han Feizi, *Han Feizi: Basic Writings*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 114. Han Feizi probably has in mind Confucians and Mohists that might plague a nation should rulers not properly administer justice.

of truth, “incited reflectivism,” different from coherentism, foundationalism, warranted assertibility, and other theories that have been previously defended as the standard for “truth.”

In the first section, I elucidate philosophical wandering as a mode of philosophy. Next, I provide a brief sketch of two connected routes within the philosophical wandering tradition, that of Diogenes of Sinope and of Cornel West. I conclude by showing how these philosophers have their own *mode* of truth, and by exploring the value and pathology of this mode of philosophy.

Modes of Philosophy⁹

Philosophers often ignore just what sort of mode is presupposed in their philosophical praxis. Like Cassirer’s symbolic forms, the modes in which philosophy is enacted have a propensity to become hegemonic:

...in the course of its development every basic cultural form tends to represent itself not as a part but as the whole, laying claim to an absolute and not merely relative validity, not contenting itself with its special sphere, but seeking to imprint its own characteristic stamp on the whole realm of being and the whole life of the spirit. From this striving toward the absolute inherent in each special sphere arise the conflicts of culture and the antinomies within the concept of culture.¹⁰

Unlike a symbolic form which wants to claim all of reality (as a cultural force) unto itself, the hegemony of a mode of philosophy remains within the field of what counts as “real” philosophy, and how such “real philosophy” can articulate and engage with the world. The dominance of certain modes of philosophy leads to what Arthur Schopenhauer called derisively “philosophy *ad normam conventionis*” (philosophy in its [current] conventional form).¹¹ The “conventional form” of philosophy is whatever mode of philosophy is hegemonic in a particular era and culture. Today, we might consider technical philosophy as the dominate global mode.¹²

The modes of philosophy make up the presuppositions of what we think philosophy can be and do, not only in terms of the conceptual framing of problems and solutions, but in terms of what it *means* to be doing philosophy in the first place. Do you presuppose, as the Cynics did, that one should be a gadfly in the *agora* performing philosophy and shaking people loose from their conceptions, or do you see your praxis as highly individualized and separate from others, meditating on the nature of reality?

Today, we often presuppose that a philosopher, except on rare occasions, writes by themselves, mostly for rarified (but sometimes public) audiences, and teaches students as a practical source of income (often a distraction from “written research”). These philosophers find their work mostly anemic in effecting broader culture and they resign themselves to their fates as isolated scholars. They hope that their research at least hones their own thinking, secures a stable position, and advances scholarship in their respective fields. They may find consolation in teaching, an aspect of their vocation dismissed as secondary by their own professionalization

9) For a less technical, and more approachable, complimentary account to what I call “modes of philosophy,” see: Justin E.H. Smith, *The Philosopher: A History in Six Types* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

10) Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms Volume One: Language*, trans. Ralph Manheim, (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1955), 91.

11) Arthur Schopenhauer, “On Philosophy at the Universities,” in *Parerga and Paralipomena*, trans. E.F.J. Payne, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 149.

12) For a complimentary and critical account of this current, dominate mode of philosophy, see: Robert Frodeman and Adam Briggie, *Socrates Tenured: The Institutions of Twenty-first-century Philosophy*, Collective Studies in Knowledge and Society (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2016), 29–46.

standards. They often *teach* philosophy as a set of problems to be solved, or as a detailed intellectual history of an individual or epoch, highlighting historical nuances or connections previously missed. In either case, these philosophers find the majority of their students lackluster, and in need of far more basic reflective training than should be necessary at the college and university level.¹³ While these philosophers certainly can attempt to do philosophy in different ways, the limited skills they acquired in their own vocational training, and the pressure they feel to meet often unreasonable professionalization standards, significantly curtails their ability to enact robust alternative modes of philosophy.

Despite a variety of philosophical methodologies in current philosophy, most professional philosophers adhere to the aforementioned technical mode of philosophy. Discussing different kinds of philosophical methods, and their coded language, is not enough to account for the different modes in which philosophy is enacted. Being a “Neo-Kantian” does not (by itself) tell us whether your philosophical praxis is writing and defending new metaphysics or living the categorical imperative as a shared spiritual exercise in community. Similarly, pragmatism’s tenets for orthopraxis and method do not adequately account for a mode of philosophy. As William James, drawing on Giovanni Papini, articulated it, pragmatism:

...has no dogmas, and no doctrines save its method. As the young Italian pragmatist Papini has well said, it lies in the midst of our theories, like a corridor in a hotel. Innumerable chambers open out of it. In one you may find a man writing an atheistic volume; in the next someone on his knees praying for faith and strength; in a third a chemist investigating a body’s properties. In a fourth a system of idealistic metaphysics is being excogitated; in a fifth the impossibility of metaphysics is being shown. But they all own the corridor, and all must pass through it if they want a practicable way of getting into or out of their respective rooms.¹⁴

As with philosophical theory, many philosophers have walked through that hallway in a variety of philosophical modes, especially those modes of community, wandering, and speculation, that support (ground) robust philosophical life within, and effective for, a culture.¹⁵ In the lobby at the end of the hallway we might find Sartwellian anarchists¹⁶, squatting, and forcing the hotel staff to call the police; on the other end of the hallway, outside the window on the fire escape, we may find someone meditating on, and reconstructing, Dewey’s generic traits of existence; and in a large conference room adjacent to the first escape, adherents of a new Hull House center are preparing to present on their way of life at an academic conference, in order to incite others to join their community.

A mode articulates a dominate orientation on “how” one is supposed to carry out philosophy as a cultural activity, and “what role” philosophy is supposed to serve in cultural life. Pragmatism offers a pan-modal method for responsibly doing both. For example, West, as we shall see, is a pragmatist philosophical wanderer. A mode of philosophy then is not a method, nor a universe of discourse, nor even a guidebook for philosophical praxis, but the metaphilosophical, normative orientation of philosophy as a cultural activity.

13) See previous footnote.

14) William James, *Pragmatism: a New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (2002 [1907]), Lecture II, *Project Gutenberg*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5116/5116-h/5116-h.htm>.

15) I point, I hope, to further flesh out in the three-volume series I am working on. For more, see footnote 1.

16) Crispin Sartwell is an American philosopher and anarchist political thinker. For more on his now popular pragmatist influenced approach to anarchism, see: Crispin Sartwell, *Against the State: An Introduction to Anarchist Political Theory* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008).

For example, Charles Sanders Peirce was far more interested in and capable of reconstructing a dynamic image of ultimacy than was Diogenes as he performed philosophy in the *agora*. Peirce's philosophical mode was as a creative speculator attempting to radically shift our way of relating to the cosmos. Philosophical speculators are not terribly interested in making institutions or serving as gadflies in the *agora*. These are the "creative types" of the philosophical world.¹⁷ This kind of reflection on the nature of reality is what we are all too familiar with when we think of philosophical praxis.

In contrast, the philosophical wandering mode of philosophy does not use reflection as a means to systematically organize reality as we experience it into a dynamic image for contemplation. In philosophical wandering, critical, performative reflection is so embodied that it is nearly imperceptible from action. It is a mode of critical performativity, but does not systematize for a rigorous, informative, and productive, cultural account of the cosmos (though it might include such a dynamic image for its own purposes). Rather, philosophical wandering critically pokes and prods persons to critically assess, re-evaluate, and reconstruct their embodied cultural habits (*nomos*) in light of a broader cosmos (*phusis*). Keeping in mind then that there are other modes of philosophy, we can now turn to the philosophical wanderers in order to investigate their peculiar praxis.¹⁸

Diogenes of Sinope as Cosmopolitan Herald

Since the first explorations of our forbearers *Homo erectus* and later *Homo sapiens* out of Africa, we seem to have had a deep desire to wander. Sometimes this primal activity of humanity has settled, and places have become narrow and tribal.¹⁹ In Homeric Greece, especially Athens, through war, trade, commerce, and empire,²⁰ wandering was revitalized as a valuable cultural praxis, as opposed to the previous primarily negative conception of wandering as a tragedy of fortune, or the activity of unscrupulous characters. During this period, some Greeks also began again to wander as an educative enterprise.²¹ Interestingly, the conception of wandering that began to develop at this time in Ancient Greece is semantically and conceptually quite close to our own conception of wandering today.²² To give an example, for the ancient Greeks:

Since Homer, the wanderer was perceived as an uncanny figure, whose identity it was difficult to "locate". Wanderers are unknowable, unclassifiable. They could be anything because they appear to be from everywhere and nowhere. A wanderer may look like a beggar, but he could be a god. In

17) There are a few philosophers to bridge these modes, albeit with a great deal of tension and often with a dominant modality taking precedent in their life and work. For example, Josiah Royce was a philosophical speculator with a predilection for discursive and physical wandering. For more, see: Douglas R. Anderson, "Royce, Philosophy, and Wandering: A Job Description," in *Philosophy Americana: Making Philosophy at Home in American Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 33–49.

18) For complimentary accounts of philosophical wandering, see: Douglas R. Anderson, "Philosophy as Culture: Getting Rid of the Professional 'of' in Philosophy as a Way of Life," interview by Eli Kramer, *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* no.5 (2018 – the current issue); Smith, "Chapter 3 – Inside and Outside: Featuring the Gadfly," in *The Philosopher*, 120–158.

19) For more on the early wandering migrations of humanity, see: Jared M. Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 33–52.

20) For more on the influence of war, commerce, trade, and empire on Ancient Greek society, see: Thomas Davidson, *Aristotle and Ancient Educational Ideals* (New York: C. Scribner, 1892), 15–25.

21) For more on the conception of wandering in Ancient Greece before Diogenes of Sinope, see: Montiglio, "Wandering Philosophers in Classical Greece," 86–98.

22) For more, see: *Ibid.*, 86. For a more general survey of Ancient Greek conceptions of wandering, see: Silvia Montiglio, *Wandering in Ancient Greek Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

the *Odyssey*, one of the “proud youth” makes precisely this point in rebuking Antinous, who has abused the “wandering beggar” Odysseus... (Od. 17.48-7).²³

Given its status as one of the central myths of near-eastern antiquity, it should come as no surprise that Homer’s *Odyssey* became a collection of tropes by means of which the Greek world could interpret the meaning and purpose of wandering. The *Odyssey*, in fact, still serves this function today. In Homeric and Hellenistic Greece, the *Odyssey* became a dynamic image of Athenian cosmopolitan imperialism, connecting isolated communities by wandering across the Greek Archipelago – even connecting some communities that had become almost unrecognizable to their Athenian counterparts. As Epictetus noted later in the Roman Imperial Period, there were possibilities latent within the mythic figure of Odysseus, in the very spectacle of an adventurer, that revitalized the trope of wandering as a positive virtue in Greek life: “[we need to wander] ...at times because of some necessity, at times for the sake of the spectacle itself. And it is something of this kind that happened to Odysseus: ‘he saw the cities and learned the minds of many men.’”²⁴

As can be seen in the Presocratic philosophers, this new positive conception of wandering was initially of an educative activity.²⁵ Like today, the conception was that by wandering to new places and meeting new people one would become more educated about the diversity and universality of living. In its turn, this vision of wandering would be reconstructed by one of the founding schools of philosophical wandering, Cynicism.

The Cynic philosophers, from Diogenes of Sinope onward, reconstructed the Greek conception of wandering education into a mode of being in the world. It was from now on the Cynic way of life:

They attach to themselves the label of the outcast wanderer as a permanent condition. Being a homeless wanderer is not a curse, for privation means freedom and self-reliance. The wandering Cynic detaches himself from any political, social and material bond that he rejects by the very act of wandering. But, for all that, he does not resort to wandering in order to withdraw into his thoughts. By presenting himself as an outcast wanderer, the Cynic advertises his contempt for social conventions and his practice of hardship. Cynic wandering, no matter how solitary, has an audience. It is not by chance that it fell to the Cynics, the least intellectual and the most exhibitionist philosophers, to make wandering a part of their programme. For no Greek philosopher in the classical period is reported as wandering while he is seeking mental concentration and withdrawal. The withdrawn thinker stands, like Socrates in the *Symposium*; sits, like Heracles in Prodicus’ allegory; or walks in order, up and down, like Plato as caricatured by the comic poet Alexis. He does not wander. In the background of such widespread resistance to associating the behavior of the concentrated philosopher with that of the solitary wanderer is the tendency, equally widespread in Greek thought, to perceive the wanderer as a deceiver or a mad person.²⁶

Thus, during the time of the Cynics there remained older negative associations about wandering. These negative associations were also embedded in wandering as the Cynic way of life. The most important negative association tied to philosophical wandering was a legacy from the mythos of Odysseus:

23) Montiglio, “Wandering Philosophers in Classical Greece,” 86.

24) As quoted in: *Ibid.*, 101.

25) For more, see: *Ibid.*, 91–92.

26) *Ibid.*, 103–104.

...Odysseus is the prototype of the wanderer because he is the prototype of the deceiver. His tales seem truthful where they lie and they lie where they seem truthful. Odysseus' truth, which accommodates lying, also accommodates wandering. His "wandering tales" can be both true and false at the same time, just as the wanderer who tells them is and is not what he appears to be. Thus, wandering spells out Odysseus' deviousness and elusive identity.²⁷

The question remained, as it still does for us today, as to whether the wanderer should be trusted; are all their tales "tall," and can the wanderer even distinguish the truth from their own mad fabrications? As no one has travelled to all the places they claimed to have visited, who would even know the truth?²⁸ Originating from this trope, the veracity of Cynic philosophical wanderers was questioned. Does the Cynic know the difference between truth and their self-styled exhibitionist posturing? Can the audience of "Cynic performances" separate their reaction to caustic attacks, from the merit of the attack itself? We will return to these questions later in the essay.

Trustworthy or not, this new Cynic mode of philosophical wandering was not framed around travel to new geographic locations, but as an uprooting from the narrow habits of civilized, cultural life. Philosophical wandering was supposed to rekindle in humanity an ethical, reflective intuition of the greater cosmos they participated in. Living as a "citizen of the cosmos" (cosmopolitanism) was a *therapeia* to escape the narrow limits of one's particular culture, place, and embodied movement in the world. This mode of philosophy was a call to wandering as an ethical praxis: "Cynic wandering is an exercise in estrangement and dispossession, a way out: the wanderer gets out of his material and social constraints, he strips them from his body and mind. By doing so, he becomes as invulnerable as the Scythian nomads."²⁹ For the Cynics, their ideal sage/god was Heracles: "As a non-Athenian, whose temple stood next to the gymnasium for non-citizens on the Cynosarges, Heracles lent himself to being cast as a homeless, cosmopolitan wanderer... Heracles is like a god who wanders to judge the deeds of men without attaching himself to anything or anyone."³⁰ The idealized image of Heracles served the Cynics as a reminder to, with embodied, invulnerable strength, enact cosmopolitanism as an ethical activity of wandering beyond the horizons of meaning of the particular place and habits of their culture.

We can now turn to the classic archetype of this mode of philosophy. Diogenes of Sinope (412 BC – 323 BC) is a character of mythic proportion. He is rumored to have lived in a large barrel. He was the vagabond of the ancient Athenian *agora* and the other public spaces of the main ancient Greek cities. He masturbated in public, ate like a dog from the ground, and then dared to mock famous leaders whom he met.³¹ He took every chance he could to criticize his society and reveal that what was disgusting was not his simplistic and natural bodily way of life, but the cruel and barbaric ways the supposedly civilized Greeks lived. These citizens lied, manipulated, and treated other human beings with contempt in their everyday actions. Their tribe (*polis*) was too narrow, and it manifested in their embodied experiences.

In the Western tradition of philosophy, he is the founder of *robust* philosophical wandering as a mode of philosophy: "It is not by chance that this innovation belongs to Diogenes, the declared enemy of all social

27) Ibid., 87.

28) Umberto Eco has explored this thematic of the lying/truthful wanderer in his work *Baudolino*. For more, see: Umberto Eco, *Baudolino*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Mariner Books, 2003).

29) Montiglio, "Wandering Philosophers in Classical Greece," 102–103.

30) Ibid., 101.

31) For the classic account of these anecdotes see: Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, trans. Pamela Mensch, ed. James Miller (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 269–297 [Book 6: 20–81].

conventions.”³² As already mentioned, for Diogenes and later philosophical wanderers, wandering is a way of living in the world beyond narrow social conventions: “. . . Diogenes the Cynic is not well known for his extensive travels. When he claims to be a wanderer and a cosmopolitan, he does not appeal to the image of the inquirer who has widened his horizons through contacts with different peoples and places. He does not mean to present himself as a world-explorer but to show himself unattached to any place.”³³ Thanks to him (under the influence of his mentor Antisthenes) philosophical wandering as a mode of philosophy became understood as the defining characteristic of the Cynic way of life: “In the *Cynicus* attributed to Lucian (but probably spurious), wandering defines Cynic as Cynic. The opening of this dialogue, a discussion between a Cynic and a non-Cynic about the qualities of the simple life, puts wandering in the foreground of Cynic practice. . .”³⁴

For the Cynics, one must train one’s very embodiment out of narrow habits of civilized culture. For example, Diogenes,

...used to maintain that training [*askesis*] was twofold, encompassing both mind and body; that in the case of physical training, ideals are engendered that foster the suppleness needed to perform virtuous deeds; and that neither facet was complete without the other, since health and strength are equally essential for training both the mind and the body. He would offer proofs that exertions in the gymnasium readily give rise to virtue, and declared that one could see in the mechanical and other arts that their practitioners acquire extraordinary dexterity from practice, citing the degree to which flute players and athletes acquire surpassing skill through constant application, and asserting that if these men had shifted their attention to the training of the mind, their efforts would not have been useless and incomplete.³⁵

The great task for the Cynics was to build up the health, strength, resilience, and dexterity, needed for embodied (body and mind) self-mastery (*enkrateia*). Such self-mastery freed one from the immoral and unhappy rooted tribalism of decadent, “civilized life.” One sought a state of uprooted wandering, free to roam the broader paths of existence. Diogenes thought that civilized Athenians had a sophistic gait in the world, their very movement was narrow, restrictive, untrained, and was destroying their “becoming.”³⁶ Diogenes, through embodied training transformed his gait so that he could march to the anthem of the cosmos (hence his coining the term “cosmopolitan,” i.e., citizen of the cosmos).

He performed his philosophy in how he errantly lived in the world. As one moves toward engaging with the public in ways that can shake them out of their limited habits, philosophical reflection is more and more embodied. The time needed for contemplation pushes one away from the daily life of most of human culture. For Diogenes, wandering was a way of embodied performance that lived alongside the duration of the general culture, just so it could disrupt it. Reflection through axioms, witticism, clever performance, sharp critique, *habitus*, and other activities, was used as a force to broaden the public’s movement in and with the world. It opened them to new routes.

32) Montiglio, “Wandering Philosophers in Classical Greece,” 99.

33) Ibid.

34) Ibid., 103.

35) Laertius, *The Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, 291 [Book 6: 70].

36) For more on Diogenes’ philosophy as a cosmopolitan “walking gait,” see: David T. Hansen, “Walking with Diogenes: Cosmopolitan Accents in Philosophy and Education,” in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2009* (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2009), 1–13.

What makes this praxis distinctly philosophical is that it is using critical reflection to irritate other people's critical reflection, such that they adjust their movement in, and relation to, reality. To illustrate this point about his approach to philosophy, Diogenes "...used to say he was imitating the chorus trainers; for they would set their pitch a little sharp so that everyone else would hit the right note."³⁷ In order to help his culture find the "right note," Diogenes saw it as his task to be a "little sharp," or overstate and unfairly antagonize, so his culture could find the right reflective harmony. Diogenes saw that sharp contrasts provide us with clear pictures of the world.

In philosophical wandering, like other modes of philosophy, reflection and action work together symbiotically. In this case, reflection is not made into a synchronic coordinate whole, but is channeled as a diachronic force for shifting people's action on the immediate plane of the present. As Pierre Hadot put it:

There are many typically Cynic philosophical concepts, but they are not used in logical argumentation. Instead, they serve to designate concrete attitudes which correspond to the choice of life: *askesis*, *ataraxia* (lack of worry), *autarkeia* (independence), effort, adaptation to circumstances, impassiveness, simplicity or the absence of vanity (*atuphia*), lack of modesty. The Cynic chose his way of life because he believed that the state of nature (*phusis*), as seen in the behavior of animals or children, was superior to the conventions (*nomos*) of civilization. Diogenes threw away his bowl and his cup when he saw children do without such utensils, and he drew comfort regarding his way of life when he saw a mouse eat a few crumbs in the dark.³⁸

These Cynic "attitudes" were almost always performed in public places to disrupt the unreflective activity of their culture. They were meant to illuminate for their culture the broader paths available in the cosmic becoming, or nature as *phusis*. Culture's arbitrariness all too easily slides into an unhealthy kind of dogmatism. Diogenes always "holds up his lamp" to other routes.

In contrast to the philosophical communities founded at the Academy and Lyceum, the Cynic philosophical wanderers continued what they understood to be the tradition of Socrates. They rejected a *eutopian*³⁹ politics in favor of wandering within cities, performing philosophy as way of life (as public gadflies) in the *agora*:⁴⁰

In a sense, Socrates was the precursor of the Cynics. The comic poets also mocked Socrates' external appearance – his bare feet and old cloak. If, as we have seen, the figure of Socrates is conflated in the Symposium with that of Eros the beggar, wasn't Diogenes, that homeless wanderer with his poor traveling bag, a second Socrates, heroic figure of the unclassifiable philosopher and a stranger to the

37) Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, 276 [Book 6: 35].

38) Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 110.

39) *Eutopias* "...are actualized and forward-looking institutions for the advancement of human dignity and culture. Eutopian politics aims at refining human political life through enacting the "good life" in a smaller place, a kind of microcosm." Further, "...Sir Thomas More's coinage of the word 'utopia' has a double meaning; utopia's Greek root is both *ou-topos* (no-place/nowhere) and *eu-topos* (good-place). Although these are idealized dreams of the "good" as manifested in community life, they can be actualized, albeit under tremendous strain, and on a very limited scale. Given such Greek roots, and to differentiate these kinds of communities, I have used the *eu-* prefix, and thus *utopias* (which have "no place"), are replaced by *eutopias* (which are 'good places')." Eli Kramer, "Utopia as the Gift of Ethical Genius: Ernst's Cassirer's Theory of Utopia," *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture*, no. 3 (April 2018): 106 [and footnote 36], doi: 10.26319/3910.

40) For more, see: Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 91–145; John Patrick Lynch, *Aristotle's School: A Study of a Greek Educational Institution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 44.

world? Like Socrates, Diogenes thought he had been entrusted with the mission of making people reflect, and of denouncing their vices and errors with his caustic attacks and his way of life.⁴¹

The philosophical wanderers as strangers are thus not utopians (or *eutopians*) but iconoclasts; they are the breakers of the iconography of their communities in order to illuminate broader vistas of possibilities. They seem atopic and strange because they always seek a broader home than what is currently available in their respective human communities.

This philosophical work is so individualized it has proven hard to sustain. The philosophical wandering mode of philosophy has rarely been sustainable across generations, in fact their leaders and pivotal figures despised aiming for such longevity. With a quip for the ages, “Diogenes used to call ‘Eukleides’ School (*Scholēn*) ‘bile’ (*Cholēn*) and Plato’s instruction (*diatribēn*) ‘a waste of time’ (*katatribēn*).”⁴² For Diogenes, these schools had failed to truly take up the call of Socrates to enact philosophy as political performance where it mattered, in the *agora*. The retreat of Academicians, Peripatetics, and later, the Epicureans, to schools mostly at the edge of Athens, or in separate houses, was a retreat into self-satisfying reflection and stability, not critical performance for those who need to be prodded into seeing life afresh.

A sister school to the Cynics were the Sceptics. Although Scepticism has sometimes deeply affected cultural life, for example in the work of David Hume and Michel de Montaigne, it does not aim to do so, and such an affect is merely a byproduct:

In the case of the Cynics, they tended to live on the margins of society and scandalize the bourgeois (one thinks of Diogenes living in his barrel, or of Hipparchia and Crates, who lived on the streets and liked to copulate in public). In contrast, the Sceptics, although they led a philosophical life, did their best to follow the external rules of the society to which they belonged. Pyrrho of Elis (ca. 360–270 BCE), the founder of Scepticism, had accompanied Alexander the Great to India in his youth, but was said to have lived quietly with his sister for the rest of long life (he died at age 90), doing housework, selling pigs in the market place, and occasionally bathing piglets. Like Socrates, whom he admired, Pyrrho wrote nothing, but was still considered a philosopher because of his way of life.⁴³

This sentiment of cultural and personal quietism is echoed in Montaigne, who makes clear his *Essays* was written as a personal exercise:

...in contriving [the *Essais*], I have proposed to myself no other than a domestic and private end: I have had no consideration at all either to thy service or to my glory ... I desire therein to be viewed as I appear in mine own genuine, simple, and ordinary manner, without study and artifice: for it is myself I paint. ... Thus, reader, my self is the matter of my book: there’s no reason thou shouldst

41) Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 110–111.

42) As quoted in: Lynch, *Aristotle’s School*, 44. Original: Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, 270–271 [Book 6: 24].

43) Michael Chase, “Black Swans, the Brain, and Philosophy as a Way of Life: Pierre Hadot and Nassim Taleb on Ancient Scepticism,” *Academia.edu*, 1, accessed August 29, 2018, https://www.academia.edu/243295/Black_Swans_the_Brain_and_Philosophy_as_a_Way_of_Life_Pierre_Hadot_and_Nassim_Taleb_on_Ancient_Scepticism.

employ thy leisure about so frivolous and vain a subject. *Therefore farewell.* Michel de Montaigne, 12/6/1580.⁴⁴

Certainly, the Skeptics meant to develop a mode of philosophical life, and to incite their fellows to this mode of living. Montaigne is no exception, despite his strategic protest in the *Essays*. That said, the reforms they proposed were largely private and individualized. They did not directly aim to make more immediate cultural reform. Unlike for the Skeptics, for philosophical wanderers, philosophy is an unstable, risky, and most importantly, public business. Again, philosophical wanderers channel their reflection into a critical embodiment, as a way of walking, enacting, and inciting others in the world. In the center of the *agora*, there was no time for the leisurely intellectual life of the Peripatetics at the Lyceum, or the private peace of the Skeptic in their hermitage from judgement.

Without a stable “school,” philosophical wandering relies on the iconoclastic individual philosopher to maintain it here and there, with their own odd students. It rarely lasts more than a few generations before becoming dormant, waiting for a revitalization of its cosmopolitanism. Such a recurrence has appeared today in a few notable figures. We will focus on one American icon of this mode, Cornel West.

Cornel West and Prophetic, Pragmatic Wandering

Cornel West revitalized philosophical wandering as his prophetic, pragmatic response to the inadequacies of professional philosophy. As Socrates was a model to Diogenes of an embodied approach to philosophy as a force for incitement to critical and ethical reflection, so philosophers like Martin Luther King Jr. and John Dewey are models to West. Also, like Diogenes in his day, West thinks many of his philosophical contemporaries have failed to incite a much-needed critical transformation of public life. It is his claim of being the successor of prophetic figures like King, as we shall see, that has initiated “charges of impiety” being brought against him. Being a gadfly is one thing, calming the prophetic voice is another.

In an infamous piece for the political and literary magazine *The New Republic*, Leon Wieseltier wrote a scathing critique of Cornel West, charging him with being: “...noisy, tedious, slippery (in *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, ‘evasion’ is a term of praise, a description of an accomplishment), sectarian, humorless, pedantic and self-endearing....” Further, “West’s eccentricity is surpassed by West’s vanity.”⁴⁵ In the next section, we will see that other critics of West have tended to echo Wieseltier. The critique amounts to three important charges: West is an unsystematic sectarian, a slippery sophist, and an egotistical jerk. By now these charges should sound all too familiar to us. They could be applied to Diogenes as easily as to West.

For those close to West, an even more serious charge has been given; one of impiety for claiming the prophetic mantle, while withdrawing from academic work. We will return to these charges, but for now let it suffice to note that I will not disagree with the claims that West is egotistical and has rejected a certain kind of systematicity. However, as a philosophical wanderer, he upholds a certain mode of truth, and does so with impious integrity. Before we can address these charges, some context for West’s emergence as a philosophical wanderer needs to be given.

44) Matthew Sharpe, “Chapter 6: The Renaissance of Philosophy as a Way of Life,” in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: A Primer* (London: Bloomsbury Press, forthcoming), 31–32. Matthew Sharpe has kindly given me two pre-type set chapters from this forthcoming volume. My page number references in these chapters refer to my copies. They were given to me as stand-alone essays and are not yet sequenced as a unified volume.

45) Leon Wieseltier, “All and Nothing at All: The Unreal World of Cornel West,” *The New Republic*, March 6, 1995.

Throughout his life West has engaged in activist work. From demanding black studies courses in his high school, to his protests at Yale for a clerical union and for the school to divest from apartheid South Africa, to his infamous debate with Harvard President Lawrence Summers, West has always wanted to do something more than write about the nature of reality. Wandering from position to position (he has worked at well over six major institutions), West has made his own route, and has never narrowly identified with any of the institutions in which he has been housed. The *nomos* of higher education never lured him away from a broad commitment to an ethical cosmos (*phusis*). He was a wanderer both physically and in terms of his cosmopolitan rejection of academic norms. He has maintained, both vocationally and reflectively, his own unique uprooted path. His use of the Marxist and pragmatic traditions of philosophy is grounded in his interest in reconstructing culture and serving the oppressed, especially people of color. His continued social justice work, his intellectual creativity, his personal style, and his deep roots in the black church, soon launched him to stardom. His public speaking engagements developed into popular books such as *Prothesized Deliverance* (1982) and *Beyond Eurocentrism* (1993). After performing in movies like *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) and *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003), he realized he had the Weberian charisma to have a career speaking to broader publics.

Yet when Michael Eric Dyson first met West in 1982:

West had not yet freed himself from reading his lectures to develop the rhetorical style for which he is justly celebrated: an extemporaneous exploration of ideas that features the improvised flourishes and tonal colors of a jazz musician and the rhythmic shifts and sonic manipulations of a gospel preacher. Yet even then West mesmerized, effortlessly surfing the broad waves of Western thought, defending the notion of black humanity while laying siege to white sectarianism—proving by his own impossibly literate performance that white superiority was a lie, at least as long as his gap-toothed mouth spit out esoteric knowledge.⁴⁶

Even in 1982, Dyson already noted that West's very embodied performance as a person of color challenged white-supremacism in American cultural life. In an attitude that should be all too familiar to us now, West's embodied performance was inciting critical reflection. In the following two decades, West came to realize he had the potential for a career as a charismatic (ego-oriented) public intellectual, one with a new voice and style, that opened up others, through his performance, to black humanity; "the other" that continued to be dismissed and oppressed by American white supremacist structures.

At the same time, a correlate radical transformation developed in his understanding of the mode in which he was doing philosophy. Throughout the 1980s, West was sorting out for himself just what it meant to do the kind of philosophy that could make a difference in the lives of the suffering. His early scholarly work was an exploration of the nature of meaningful philosophy for the ethical work of the present. What he found was a prophetic pragmatism, as is well documented in his *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*:

Prophetic pragmatism understands the Emersonian swerve from epistemology – and the American evasion of philosophy – not as a wholesale rejection of philosophy but rather as a reconception of philosophy as a form of cultural criticism that attempts to transform linguistic, social, cultural, and political traditions for the purposes of increasing the scope of individual development and demo-

46) Michael Eric Dyson, "The Ghost of Cornel West: What Happened to America's Most Exciting Black Scholar?," *The New Republic*, April 20, 2015.

cratic operations. Prophetic pragmatism conceives of philosophy as a historically circumscribed quest for wisdom that puts forward new interpretations of the world based on past traditions in order to promote existential sustenance and political relevance. Like Emerson and earlier pragmatists, it views truth as a species of the good, as that which enhances the flourishing of human progress. This does not mean that philosophy ignores the ugly facts and unpleasant realities of life and history. Rather, it highlights these facts and realities precisely because they provoke doubt, curiosity, outrage, or desperation that motivates efforts to overcome them. These efforts take the forms of critique and praxis, forms that attempt to change what is into a better what can be.⁴⁷

Furthermore,

If prophetic pragmatism is ever to become more than a conversational subject matter for cultural critics in and out of the academy, it must inspire progressive and prophetic social motion.⁴⁸

West began to realize that the current academic world, and especially philosophy, whatever its intentions, was not well equipped to create this “progressive and prophetic social motion.”⁴⁹ This conclusion coincided with his realization of his power as a (albeit often self-indulgent) performer. As his popularity grew, he began to see that his effective power would not be in written academic treatises on prophetic pragmatism for a primarily academic audience. From the stage as performing pop figure and preacher, his philosophy could do more work as a critical praxis to create change than on the bedside table of academics as written work. He believed his prophetic pragmatism would only be successful if it were channeled through a new mode of doing philosophy, a mode of philosophy in contradistinction to that of philosophical technicians.

He wrote himself out of seeing philosophy as the primarily discursive, scholarly praxis that his teachers at Ivy Leagues had drilled into him. Ironically, it was one of his Ivy League philosophical mentors that helped push him toward philosophical wandering. Richard Rorty’s performative indifference to his attackers, his political misreading’s of other philosophers, and his proposal for philosophy as cultural politics,⁵⁰ taught West that philosophy was more than a discursive act of writing for a merely possible audience that one day might actually read one’s work (if one was lucky). Rorty exemplified how philosophy could be performative and lived as what Hadot has called “philosophy as a way of life.”⁵¹ Rorty also reinforced something West already knew from his broad engagement with cultural life: that systematic thought expounded as a lecture or written as an essay was not the only way to have effective critical reflection. One’s very performance can be a critical exercise. In short, Rorty was a living role model of philosophy as a gadfly activity.

47) Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 230.

48) *Ibid.*, 234.

49) West has not completely rejected the academy. He still, after all, lives and works in it. It is the inward facing, snobby, and often culturally ineffective, academic scholarship that has always bothered him. For more on West’s sometimes critical views of scholastic academic habits, see: George Yancy and Cornel West, “Cornel West [Interview],” in *African-American Philosophers: 17 Conversations* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Cornel West, “Why I Left Harvard University,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 47 (Spring 2005).

50) For more, see: Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 4. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

51) For more, see: Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995).

Instead of keeping one foot in the technical (professional) mode of philosophy (as Rorty did), West fully committed to what I call philosophical wandering. West in fact criticized Rorty on just these grounds. Just as Diogenes did with his fellow Socratics, so West would criticize his fellow pragmatists for not fully committing to peripatetic political action in the *agora*:

Rorty's anti-epistemological radicalism and belletristic anti-academicism are refreshing and welcome in a discipline deeply entrenched in a debased and debilitating isolation. Yet, ironically, his project, though pregnant with rich possibilities, remains polemical (principally against other professional academics) and hence barren. It refuses to give birth to the offspring it conceives. Rorty leads philosophy to the complex world of politics and culture, but confines his engagement to transformation in the academy and to apologetics for the modern West.⁵²

In short, West criticized Rorty for not fully enacting what I am calling philosophical wandering, as a public and ethical praxis. West chose to commit to philosophical wandering in the *agoras* of modern cultural life. West now imagines his critical work as that of a "preacher" lighting a prophetic fire. He does this work instead of organizing a systematic philosophy. He uses his critical force as a performer to provoke others to a different way of living.

Even his clothes exude this critical force. West's clothing is a *habitus*. His clothing is not merely a sign of social status but is a real symbol (in the Peircean sense)⁵³ of a way of life.⁵⁴ West's clothes are meant to engage reflection. Instead of the single use "doubled cloak"⁵⁵ of the Cynics, West wears, on almost all occasions, simple, unadorned, black suits. Such suits are the *habitus* of the tradition of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. West's hair is pride in blackness and of his ancestors; the small black scarf around his neck is a memorial and reminder of the nooses that strung the necks of people of color in the United States. His prose has its own symbolic energy; he does not offer a linear essay argument from front to end, but a sermon performed to light energy, hope, criticism, and desire for action.

West's *habitus* suggests something that even those who were close to him tend to downplay: West is not inducing *propositions* as system, but critical reflection that moves beyond the *nomos* of our culture to the broader *physis* of recognition of those deemed irrelevant. West is provoking us to recognize people of color (and others) as critical persons worthy of dignity (whether we would like to recognize them or not).

Dyson on West: An Academic's View of the Philosophical Wanderer

Although in theory philosophical wandering may sound alluring, in practice this lived philosophy tends to incite the consternation and anger of even friends and allies. For our purposes, I will look at perhaps the most personal and caustic example of the performative utterances of West as a philosophical wanderer; his corrosive criticisms of his mentee, colleague, and friend, Michael Eric Dyson. This example will reveal the value, weaknesses, and aggravation caused by philosophical wandering.

52) West, *The America Evasion of Philosophy*, 207.

53) I mean that the symbol is a real relation of the world that suggests another real relation, and/or entity, and is not merely a linguistic construction. For more see: Charles Sanders Peirce, "Of Reasoning in General," in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, ed. The Peirce Edition Project, vol. 2 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

54) For a good overview of how to think about *habitus*, clothes, charisma, and material culture more generally, see: William Clark, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 3–33.

55) For more, on the "double cloak" of the Cynic tradition, see: Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, 265 [Book 6: 14, Footnote 18]. Also, for Diogenes' use of it, see: *Ibid.*, 270 [Book 6, 22].

West's attacks came in response to Dyson's strong endorsement of President Barack Obama as the pragmatic choice to lead the progressive movement. On the November 9, 2012, episode of "Democracy Now,"⁵⁶ alongside his compatriot Tavis Smiley, West made the following inciting criticism:

But we're living in a society where everybody is up for sale. Everything is up for sale. And he [Dyson] and Brother Sharpton and Sister Melissa and others, they have sold their souls for a mess of Obama pottage. And we invite them back to the black prophetic tradition after Obama leaves. But at the moment, they want insider access, and they want to tell those kinds of lies. They want to turn their back to poor and working people. And it's a sad thing to see them as apologists for the Obama administration in that way, given the kind of critical background that all of them have had at some point.⁵⁷

As Dyson notes:

West was just warming up. After a fiftieth anniversary celebration of the 1963 March on Washington on the National Mall, a celebration Sharpton led and at which I spoke, West argued that Martin Luther King Jr. "would've been turning over in his grave" at Sharpton's "coronation" as the "bona fide house negro of the Obama plantation," supported by "the Michael Dysons and others who've really prostituted themselves intellectually in a very, very ugly and vicious way." And recently, while promoting *Black Prophetic Fire*, West argued "the Sharptons, the Melissa Harris-Perrys, and the Michael Eric Dysons ... end up being these cheerleaders and bootlickers for the President, and I think it's a disgrace when it comes to the black prophetic tradition of Malcolm and Martin."⁵⁸

It is worth noting the choice of venue: All these attacks were done in public, highly charged places, where critical response would be immediate. In response, about two decades after Wieseltier's article, Dyson wrote in *The New Republic* a lengthy, rigorous, critical, and personal response to Cornel West's scathing attacks of his (Dyson's) support of Obama. In the tradition of Nietzsche's *Schopenhauer as Educator* and *Richard Wagner at Bayreuth*⁵⁹, it is a love letter from a disillusioned student and companion:

West's attacks on me were a bleak forfeiture of 30 years of friendship; it was the repudiation of fond collegiality and intellectual companionship, of political camaraderie and joined social struggle. I was a mentee and, according to West, who was kind enough to write a blurb for one of my books, "a rare kind of genius with organic links to our beloved street brothers and sisters." But I had somehow undergone a transformation in West's mind: I was an Obama stooge who had forsaken the poor. In November 2012, West, friend and mentor, one of the three men whose name is on my Princeton doctoral dissertation, let me have it in the national media.⁶⁰

56) Amy Goodman, Cornel West, and Tavis Smiley, "Tavis Smiley, Cornel West on the 2012 Election and Why Calling Obama 'Progressive' Ignores His Record," *Democracy Now*, 2008. Chicago: Democracynow.org.

57) As transcribed in: Dyson, "The Ghost of Cornel West."

58) As quoted in: *Ibid.*

59) To read these essays, see: Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, edit. Daniel Breazaele, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

60) Dyson, "The Ghost of Cornel West."

Although strongly repudiating Wieseltier's 1995 dismissal of West's work, he noted that perhaps the overall conclusions might have had more merit than he would have liked to admit:

Leon Wieseltier famously derided West's work as "almost completely worthless" in these pages 20 years ago. And although I strongly disagree with Wieseltier's views of West's early works, it would be fitting for West to downsize his ambition and accept his role as a public intellectual, social gadfly, or merely a paid pest. There's nobility in such roles, and one need not dress up one's intellectual vocation as a prophetic one. West may draw on prophetic insight; he may look up to prophets on the front lines; and he may even employ prophetic vocabularies of social dissent. But none of that makes him a prophet. One of West's heroes, Malcolm X, said that just because a cat has kittens in the oven doesn't make them biscuits. That's what philosophers call a category mistake.⁶¹

Dyson recognizes and values West's central vocation as (or, at least, should be) that of what I call a philosophical wanderer ("public intellectual, social gadfly, and paid pest"). Dyson charges West with a modern-day form of impiety: He thinks West has an uncritical self-conceit of being prophetic, especially when it leads to simplistic reductions of those scholars of color who have worked with Obama. This charge of impiety is but the groundwork for other charges against West:

It is not only that West's preoccupations with Obama's perceived failures distracted him, though that is true; more accurate would be to say that the last several years revealed West's paucity of serious and fresh intellectual work, a trend far longer in the making. West is still a Man of Ideas, but those ideas today are a vain and unimaginative repackaging of his earlier hits. He hasn't published without aid of a co-writer a single scholarly book since *Keeping Faith*, which appeared in 1993, the same year as *Race Matters*. West has repeatedly tried to recapture the glory of that slim classic by imitating the 1960s-era rhythm and blues singers he loves so much: Make another song that sounds just like the one that topped the charts.⁶²

Dyson criticizes West for relying on his old techniques and not reconstructing culture with a new angle of vision that might provide fresh cultural insight, a task West had articulated initially as part of the task of prophetic pragmatism. Dyson wistfully believes that if West returned to his more technical, academic vocation, he perhaps would have the capacity to cultivate the kind of nuanced deep scholarship that made his earlier work paradigm shifting. He could regain his status in academic *nomos* and could be forgiven his transgressions. In particular, Dyson believes that West should return back (at least some of the time) from speaking to writing:

West's rhetorical genius is undeniable, but there are limits on what speaking can do for someone trying to wrestle angels or battle demons to the page. This is no biased preference for the written word over the spoken; I am far from a champion of a Eurocentric paradigm of literacy. This is about scholar versus talker. Improvisational speaking bears its wonders: the emergence on the spot of turns of thought and pathways of insight one hadn't planned, and the rapturous discovery, in front of a live audience, of meanings that usually lie buried beneath the rubble of formal restrictions and literary conventions. Yet West's inability to write is hugely confining. For scholars, there

61) Ibid.

62) Ibid.

is a depth that can only be tapped through the rigorous reworking of the same sentences until the meaning comes clean – or as clean as one can make it.⁶³

Here we find one illuminating and implicit assumption in Dyson's charges against West: For Dyson, the depth and clarity provided by (systematic) academic written work could counter-balance the limits of West's oral philosophy, and cure him (West) of his illness of shallow, self-aggrandizing performance. West could recover from being an egotistical public intellectual saying the same old story. This assumption seems obvious and self-evidently reasonable, especially from a former mentee and colleague, and from one who even appreciates his mode of philosophical praxis.

Yet, as Dyson suggested, West does best as a cultural critic and paid pest. Despite what he says, Dyson seems to want West to be the critical philosophical "speculator" and not the cruel, obnoxious, "Socrates gone mad," Diogenes. So why did West go "Diogenenly mad?" It is because he found, like Diogenes, that his persona incited critical discussions in the streets of the *agora*. His academic prose never had such an effect on cultural life. Philosophy as a critical, reflective force is maddeningly annoying, but that is just what it is supposed to be. West's often redundant critical performance shakes people loose from their narrow conceptions. This force has been more culturally effective at invoking ethical reflection among a broad cultural audience than the clean systematic depth of scholars like Dyson. As painful and annoying as it is to admit, West's hyperbolic gadfly activities have probably incited more critical reflection than anything he could write and publish. Even by academic standards, the West and Dyson debate has been fruitful to systematic reflection,⁶⁴ as has West's more recent Diogenic acerbic criticisms of Ta-Nehisi Coates.⁶⁵

West's truth lies not in the assertion but in the jabbing, sometimes cruel, critical performance. In West's words previous cited, truth is "... a species of the good, as that which enhances the flourishing of human progress."⁶⁶ West never promised such truth as ethical enhancement would be an easy, smooth or happy process. To the contrary, the process is inherently tragic and painful. One's best of intentions inevitably betray one's own most cherished causes.⁶⁷

In short, to be a Diogenes or a West is problematic. They can be the cruelest of the philosophers; they have prose that often act as provoking vitriol, especially for those closest to them. To make matters worse, they are always close to becoming self-conceited dogmatists. Yet, philosophical wanderers escape dogmatism by their success at inciting critical reflection (albeit often caustically), not by systematic reflection measured in how much novel work they publish. They are masters at waking the public to critical thought. Though most of Dyson's criticism is fair, to criticize West for not returning to technical, academic philosophical writing, is like telling Tolkien that Middle Earth is a sloppy piece of Scandinavian philology, which distracts him from proper academic work. Dyson acknowledges, but was hurt by, the effect of having a philosophical wanderer as mentor and colleague. He says he respects West's gadfly vocation, but he has not tolerated having his own flesh bitten.

63) Ibid.

64) To name just one example, see: Robert Greene II, "Beyond Dyson and West," *Society for US Intellectual History Blog* (blog), April 26, 2015, <https://s-usih.org/2015/04/beyond-dyson-and-west/>.

65) For more, see: Cornel West, "Ta-Nehisi Coates Is the Neoliberal Face of the Black Freedom Struggle," *The Guardian*, December 17, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/17/ta-nehisi-coates-neoliberal-black-struggle-cornel-west>.

66) See footnote 46.

67) For more on West and the tragic in moral progress, see: Cornel West, *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times*, vol. 1, Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1993), 31–58; Cornel West, "William James and Josiah Royce – On the Tragic and Tragicomic: The Relevance of Royce" (lecture, Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, MA, May 27, 2007). West also often associates this trope with the plays and other writings of Anton Chekhov.

He feels the wound was unjustified, as have almost all who have been bitten by the philosophical wanderer. This situation makes Dyson long for a West that could be different, that could be other than a “mad Diogenes.” West’s job is not to speak truth as free-floating fact, but to incite us to reflectively respond to our ethical situation. Dyson’s lengthy response shows that West is doing his work exciting broader critical discussions, even if it is sometimes painful to those who are injured by it.

The truth is that West is no longer the academic philosopher, but a philosophical wanderer. West’s acerbic criticisms of Obama and Dyson are meant to incite reflections on who is getting counted. Are our leaders *de facto* supporting cultural activity that excuses extrajudicial drone strikes of dark-skinned people worldwide as an unfortunate necessity of *nomos*? Have we just become adjusted to the *nomos* of injustice? Why not be “maladjusted to injustice,” and live in light of the moral arc of the cosmos? To be so “maladjusted” is to follow the philosophical wanderer, who never compromises *phusis* for *nomos*. Perhaps West’s attacks on Dyson, with an ironic, Diogenic, gratingly sharp pitch, show Dyson’s betrayal to his own causes, in just the way we all betray our most cherished work.

Conclusion: The Modes of Truth

We have still left untouched the problem of Odysseus: Is the wanderer truthful? As there are many kinds of wanderers and wanderings the full question must be left to another occasion. We will, however, bring the question to the case of the philosophical wanderer. Whether it is Plato’s incredulousness of Diogenes, or Dyson’s dismissal of West, even philosophers are unsure of the veracity of philosophical wandering as a mode of philosophy. Are the hyperbolic “high pitches” of the philosophical wanderer as chorus master, Odyssean guile? What does seem clear is both Diogenes and West *sincerely* engage in their work provoking critical reflection. There is no reason to doubt them on this front. Their words match their actions; they indeed incite critical reflection.

Perhaps, then, when assertions of the merit of philosophy are taken as mere fact with no pre-supposed meta-orientational whole, it is mere formalism. We might have found ourselves in the strange situation where truth as formalism, by itself, is critically inadequate to understand the merit of philosophy. Where do we go from here? Maybe instead of truth, meaning is a far better measure. In this case, in true pragmatic fashion, *modes* of truth are *signs* of the success of different modes of inquiry.

Thus, an interesting conclusion might be drawn from our very preliminary study of philosophical wandering as a mode of philosophy. This mode of philosophy has its correlate *mode* of truth. Traditionally, formal epistemology has given different formal accounts of “true knowledge” (Truth with a capital “T”). Truth has been considered a matter of logical coherence within the rules of a particular system, or of logic in general (coherentism); or as based on absolute, or postulated, or ontological, and/or necessary, premises (foundationalism); or as successful, time-proven, predictive veracity as intelligent control of events (warranted assertibility); or what ideally situated inquiries would agree upon in the infinitely distant future (pragmatism); or some mix of the above, or some other scheme. It is rare for philosophers to think there is more than one kind of truth. Truth pluralism has been regularly assaulted as relativism.⁶⁸

Philosophers such as Randall Auxier (building on Cassirer) suggest that although truth is a real *function* of all inquiries, there are different *modes*, in different kinds of inquiry, in which the veracity of truth is signi-

68) William James has regularly been assaulted for his view of truth. Although there are a lot of woeful misreading’s of James, there are certainly potentialities for truth pluralism (though he hated that term), within his work: For more on his theory of truth, see: James, *Pragmatism*, Lecture VI.

fied.⁶⁹ If this is the case, the *sign* of truth veracity may look different in different modes of philosophy (that enact different kinds of inquiry). By saying there are *modes* of truth, I did not mean to say that there are *different* truths, but that the *sign* of truth can be intelligibly different in different modes of inquiry. For the philosophical wanderer, the *sign* of truth (the mode of their truth) is not given in a proposition about the world, but via a qualitative (and sometimes quantitative) measure of how well they are inciting critical reflection. We trust the philosophical wanderer not by deciding if their stories are propositionally true in some correspondence schema of the world, but by our interpretation of their success at inciting critical reflection.

Of course, philosophical wanderers can become self-indulgent liars inadequate to bring forth productive critical thought in culture. That is always a real danger for philosophical wanderers. They can be “untruthful” by leading to unreflective, amoral cultural activity. In such a case, they maintain the *nomos* of culture. They can also be more interested in the provoking gesture than their duties to serve others toward a “better” world. Dyson is not wrong to see that as a problematic aspect of West. The potential itself lures the philosophical wanderer away from “the concrete other,” to “the other” that could be, to citizens that (if only provoked), might start seeing the starry heavens of which they are members. Alas, the dream of that “better” person is often so distant from the present world, that it blinds such philosophical wanderers to the person in front of them. Perhaps West is indeed shortsighted because of his frustrations with Obama and what Obama could have been. It is good to appreciate, but not get lost in, one’s cosmic citizenship. The possible, and especially the potential, are alluring, and we ought to love, respect, and be wary of them as fickle friends. No matter the circumstance, we should attend to others in all their actual complexity.

Despite these dangers, this mode of philosophy has immense value. The Diogenae have been exacerbating us for more than two millennia, but we would be lost without them. Thanks to the philosophical wanderers, oneself and one’s community can be jostled free of overly narrow habits, and new perspectives can emerge. West stays true to prophetic pragmatism in his incitement of the public to new angles of vision, in a way a new academic book would never be able to. The philosophical wandering mode of truth’s signature is found in a critically, reflective culture. More than that, as West shows, it is a mode of philosophy that incites us to see the dignity of the other, and to frankly recognize our own failings at serving a better world. The public performance provides an intense and immediate felt contrast from narrow cultural habits. Philosophy as performance has a felt power which makes academic discourse but a poor suiter. The philosophical wanderer has, and will continue to, give an irreverent, impious, performance that is a vital contrasting energy in the center of our cultural life. Its impiety is an iconoclasm that breaks the shackles of blind *nomos*. Diogenes’ lamp continues to hurt our eyes and forces us to turn our gaze towards the stars.

69) For more, see: Randall Auxier, “In Vino Veritas,” *Southwest Philosophy Review* 30, no. 1 (January 2014).

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