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## Philosophy for the Soul

### Abstract:

Among the themes this article explores are the following: Can philosophy truly help us in times of crisis? What are the distinctive ways in which philosophy can be therapeutic and provide solace? What possible barriers exist to a person being able to be helped by philosophy? What is it to be genuinely *open*, to ideas, to life? What are the dynamics of pain and struggle in authentic searching? What is it to *see yourself* in such searching? What ways of teaching philosophy can allow students to derive maximum sustenance from philosophy?

### Keywords:

openness, philosophical searching, individuality, public philosophy, receptivity, teaching philosophy

*The readiness to receive is all. Without that what can be given?*<sup>1</sup>

Henry Bugbee

### I

Why is it so difficult to write something on demand? And, add to that, with a topic given to me by another? Even as I write this question, I recall all sorts of instances in which people have said that writing such a piece is actually easier for them. In light of this, I should ask rather, why do I find it so much more difficult to write such

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1) Bugbee, *The Inward Morning*, 112.

a piece on demand? Well, as a first thought, it does not feel like the writing is coming from a source of inspiration. But, the question I will be addressing in this essay – can philosophy genuinely help us in times of crisis – is one that has been at the center of how I try to teach and do philosophy for years now. Indeed, it has been at the center of my very view of what philosophy is. Given this, I realize that the above worry perhaps needs to be restated. In writing this essay, it may not feel as though I am starting from a place of inspiration, but it is just that I am not starting from a place of *originary, occurrent inspiration*. I have often felt great inspiration when discussing this view of philosophy and its importance. So, in a way, writing this piece involves inspiration one step removed. And I can *recreate*, or *re-enter into* the inspiration. This is a key point. And, furthermore, once I start to truly think about all of these issues, even though the *original* reason for thinking about them was not occurrent inspiration, all sorts of new inspiration and excitement to explore these themes anew comes up. As I write this right now, I feel the bubbling up of this new inspiration. Fascinating. Although the *original* motivation for writing this piece was not purely one of inspiration, once I start, new inspiration arises in me, and I find myself writing from a source of inspiration once again. Beautiful.

This realization leads me to reflect anew upon the ancient practice of invoking the muse at the beginning of a work. Granted, that usually occurred at the beginning of an epic poem, which is not what I am writing here. But, although I did not begin with an invocation of the muse, and it has never occurred to me to do so, I ended up doing something quite related. It makes a lot of sense that the question of the inspiration for writing is a human issue, and one that comes up naturally in a thinker, and indeed has done so in various contexts throughout human history. In this case here, I found myself rather beginning with the concern that the muse was not present, and then experiencing the beautiful realization that the muse is in fact present in force – it just took a different route to arrive than it usually does in me.

With the inspiration firmly in place, let us see if we can explore this issue now. Can philosophy help us in times of crisis and despair? Can it provide a genuinely therapeutic role and offer real consolation? And are there ways to try to pinpoint what *philosophy* can do that is deeply helpful, which is *different* from other sources of consolation and genuine assistance? Let us begin at the most basic level, and see if we can build up our account from there.

What do people often do in times of despair for solace, for genuine consolation? They might spend some time in nature, or meditate or do yoga, or talk to a friend or partner, among many other things. Let us look a little more at talking to another, as at first pass that might seem to have the potential to be closest to philosophy. The act of talking to a friend/partner might help them in a number of ways. The other person could offer support, love, and/or a feeling that they are not alone. Sometimes just the act of talking to someone else, even if they do not offer any advice, and in some cases even if they do not even utter a single word, can itself be very helpful. The other can be a kind of witness for your suffering. And by telling the other person, your suffering is no longer only your own. You have now shared it with another person. And that very sharing itself can be a source of consolation. Even if you feel the person does not understand you fully, or perhaps not nearly as well as you would like.

The friend can also help you understand the situation better. Okay, now we are starting to get closer to the realm of what philosophy can do. But it depends upon the ways in which the friend helps you understand the situation better. If it is just explaining something to you, giving you information you did not have, then that might be very helpful, but it is not doing philosophy. For example, if you have been struggling with a difficult situation at work, that has been causing you great despair for a long time, and he suggests a course of action that you had not thought of, or gives you advice based upon information he has that you were not aware of, such advice might indeed help you. For example, he might be familiar with companies like yours and, based upon this knowledge, suggest that you speak to this or that person, or that you stop a certain kind of behavior

which you previously had not understood was causing a significant problem. His advice might even help you finally solve the problem. And you might even experience genuine consolation from his advice. But this is not doing philosophy. It is rather more like providing a solution to a problem. To take an obvious example, imagine someone asks you, what is the best way to get to the supermarket? If you provide a good answer, you have helped him and, we could say, have solved his problem, but your contribution is not *philosophical*.<sup>2</sup> We need to try to pinpoint, to clarify what *philosophy* can do that can provide its own special contribution, different from other forms of deep consolation. And if indeed it does have its own unique form of assistance at all.

As a way into this question, I would like to start with a powerful experience a student had in a philosophy course I taught years ago. Her experience occurred in a course I taught years ago on Meaning and Life and Themes in Existential Philosophy. When I teach this course, in addition to covering the major thinkers of existential philosophy, I also like to show students that the themes characteristic of this area of philosophy occur in a variety of eras and cultures. In this spirit, I do a week on whether immortality would be desirable, and I use an excerpt from *The Odyssey* in which the beautiful goddess Calypso offers Odysseus immortality, and eternal pleasure with her and on her ideal island. I pair this with an article by Bernard Williams entitled “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on The Tedium of Immortality.”

Even though he is offered an eternal life with Calypso, Odysseus pines for his wife, and his homeland. He chooses to return to them, and live a human life, which is a mortal, and thus finite, life. The strong implication is that he misses Penelope because she is *his* wife, and Ithaca is *his* homeland. There are many interesting intersecting themes here, but what is so significant for our purposes is that in one of the most foundational texts of Western Culture, the hero embraces his mortality, his finitude.

The piece by Bernard Williams provides a different, and yet complementary reason for embracing the fact that we do not live forever. He argues that immortality would be a state of affairs marked by an inescapable boredom. One might say, “but I would explore everything in life. I’d listen to, say, all of Beethoven’s sonatas.” But, now imagine that you listened to all of Beethoven’s sonatas an *infinite* number of times. Williams thus thinks that it is not just that immortality would be undesirable, but he wants to make an even stronger claim. “The point is rather that boredom, as sometimes in more ordinary circumstances, would be not just a tiresome effect, but a reaction almost perceptual in character to the poverty of one’s relation to the environment.”<sup>3</sup> He thus claims that it would almost not be possible for us to live a life that is recognizably human if it lasted forever. Our relation to our world would have so little of the usual content, be so impoverished, at almost the physical level of perception itself that the implication is we would almost shrivel up, physically and perhaps spiritually – as it were, if we were to try to live eternally.

In the course of the discussion, I suggested that an idea that emerges from these texts is that, perhaps counterintuitively, mortality, and thus finitude, is actually a state that we *want*. But, it is not a very funny kind of want. For the very large majority of people, at virtually any moment of their lives, if someone asks them, “would you like to die now, today?” they would strongly answer “no.” But, if one finds the ideas put forth in *The Odyssey*, and by Williams, to be powerful then although at no *particular* point will a person want to die, he is glad, as it were, or he believes it is a good thing that overall he will die one day.<sup>4</sup>

This is thus a strange kind of desire. It is something that we virtually never want directly, but we do want it overall. It almost feels wrong to use the word “want” here. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that we do

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2) See Marcel’s distinction between a problem and a mystery for a related notion here. Marcel, *Being and Having*, 117.

3) Williams, “The Makropulos Case,” 95.

4) I say “virtually” because there are certainly cases in which someone might want to die on a particular day, such as cases of suicide, or when one feels ready to die at the end of a life.

not want a life that is not finite, and thus we are led to see finitude as, perhaps paradoxically, a desirable state. And, it is furthermore not paradoxical that when a loved one dies, say, we will still grieve deeply, and that that is right, and deeply human. We can, in a background or overall sense, believe that it is good thing that this person did not live forever, but we can still deeply grieve their death. In a way, this amounts to embracing what *a human life is*.<sup>5</sup>

In many ways, the phenomenon of grief has the same structure. For the huge majority of people, if you ask them on any given day, would you like to be deeply, painfully, sad right now, they would say “no.” Prior to any philosophical reflection, they might think that they would always like to be experiencing feelings of happiness at each moment of their lives. But, if you ask them, “what about when a loved one dies or a deeply meaningful relationship comes to an end? Would you like to be happy at those times of life?” In such cases, they would almost surely answer “no.” They will thus come to see that although deep sadness is not something that they will perhaps ever want at any particular moment, a human life without it would somehow not be recognizable as a human life. Sadness and grief are, thus paradoxically states that although we do not want at any particular moment, we believe overall that they are good and important, perhaps essential parts of a human life.

In the days after this class, the student in question told me that her grandmother was dying, and that she had been seriously struggling with it, and had not really been able to process it or make sense of it. But, she said, she had had a very powerful experience in the class and in the days after. The class helped her see the whole situation in a very different light. She was able to make sense of, and affirm her grief, but also to see it against the background of this ultimate affirmation of mortality.

So, what does this example illustrate? Philosophical insight gave the student a fundamentally *new way to think about the situation she found herself in*. The situation *had not changed*. But after philosophical reflection, she now saw it in a different light. But it is even more than this. Because she viewed it in a substantially different light, her whole *emotional orientation* to the crisis changed. In a deep sense, she was no longer in despair in the way she had been before. It is fascinating that what seemed to be *cognitive* reflection led to a shift in the person’s *emotional* state. In such a case, philosophy played a genuinely therapeutic role.<sup>6</sup>

Below, we will discuss various barriers to a person experiencing this kind of deep emotional assistance from philosophical reflection. But before we explore that issue, I would like to discuss a few additional ways in which philosophy can provide genuine assistance in times of crisis. Another way that philosophy can truly help us is to enable us to understand what might be called the *terrain* of the issue in question. That is, philosophy can help us see the various interrelated strands of ideas, confusions, issues, and concerns that are all playing a role in the overall issue. As such, philosophy can often help us see the *complexity* of the situation we are in. Seeing the complexity of a crisis can amount to an important form of understanding, even if you do not have what traditionally might be thought of as a solution to the crisis.

When a person is in despair, he may not have even formulated clearly exactly what the nature of the problem is. He may just feel lost. Even if he knows certain basic facts about the crisis – such as, there is a pandemic – he may well not be able to pinpoint exactly what about the crisis is causing him such despair. This is another crucial role for philosophy – to be able to ask the right questions, and thus help a person to formulate exactly what is the cause of the despair.

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5) Perhaps paradoxically, this idea of embracing life in all of its aspects comes up at the end of Nietzsche’s account of the eternal recurrence as perhaps the only way to handle the kind of eternal existence he envisions there. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 274.

6) See Camus’ interpretation of the myth of Sisyphus for a different but interestingly-related example of one changing his orientation to his predicament even though his predicament has not changed, and this new orientation engendering a full emotional shift in the person as well. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 119–23

Along these lines, when a person is doing philosophy in general, perhaps what she is actually doing is not coming to understand the *external* issue better, but rather coming to see *internally* what *she already thinks* about the issue, but just is not yet aware of it. She is making determinate a set of thoughts and feelings about the issue in question that are already in her, but have not been fully brought to consciousness. Not that they are unconscious in any strict sense. Rather, it is more like they exist in an indeterminate state within her, and the process of philosophical inquiry can help her give them form – can help make them determinate.<sup>7</sup>

For instance, in the example above about immortality, what was it that caused the student to find the viewpoint I suggested powerful? An important question that emerges here is, whenever one feels that they have *seen* something new philosophically, is it that they have actually seen something *new*, or is it rather that it feels like an insight, but that is really because it matches up with something that they already think, but were not yet aware of. Doing philosophy can thus also amount to an important kind of self-exploration. It is fascinating that we have now arrived at a link between doing philosophy and self-knowledge.

Now, in this process of coming to understand oneself better, and the role that it plays in the doing of philosophy, the threat of self-deception is always present. It is essential to be deeply aware of the ways in which one's own particularity might be biasing, or distorting one's insights. But does not philosophy aim at *truth*? And not just coming to see what you yourself think? A way that philosophy can help us avoid going down this road is that it is crucial to be able to support your approach with rigorous criteria. But what about the possibility that a kind of deep inner knowing can guide us in the doing of philosophy? It seems that such an inner knowing would not be using what we normally think of as criteria. A crucial point here is that a person can shape herself through various practices so that she can eventually come to *trust* her inner knowing. These ways of shaping herself, and *how* and *why* she comes to think that she can trust one's inner knowing amount to an important kind of criteria.<sup>8</sup> In order to become much more skilled at seeing how and when one's particularity might be distorting one's insights, it is essential to know oneself. It is fascinating that this discussion of criteria has come back to the issue of self-knowledge again. There are large questions here about the relationship, or tension between aiming at truth, and aiming at or trying to find one's *own way* in the doing of philosophy. In this piece, I will discuss the latter further, but it is important to note – as always in the doing of philosophy – the complex tensions and interrelations between ideas and questions that have arisen here, and that merit further inquiry.

These are just a few of the particular contributions that philosophy can make to our lives; the ways in which philosophy can genuinely help us in general, and in times of despair. I will not present an exhaustive discussion of these ways here, but will rather now move on to the issue of what barriers exist in people to having philosophy actually *help* them.

## II

The above example concerning immortality was from a course that I taught at the Philosophy Institute, an Institute I founded in 1999. Because it is relevant for the questions we are exploring in this piece, I would like

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7) This is similar in form to Charles Taylor's notion of expressivism. But in that case, he is focused on the role of language in making determinate the indeterminate. See chapter 1 of his *Hegel*. Here, we are looking at how philosophy itself can do this. An even more apt analogy is perhaps to Gendlin's account of "felt sense." Gendlin developed an entire school of psychotherapy based upon this idea, that clients work with the vague, indeterminate, inchoate feelings inside them, and through a therapeutic process, they slowly make these inchoate feelings determinate. Gendlin, *Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy*.

8) I explore these themes in much greater detail in a book in progress entitled *Modes of Being: Phenomenological Explorations*.

to say a few brief words about the Institute. The Philosophy Institute is dedicated to bringing philosophy into society. Classes are open to everyone – there is no background in philosophy required. The goal is for people to see how philosophy can help us, both as a society and in our individual lives. But I do not alter, or “water down” the content for these courses. The content is the same as the college courses I teach. What is so interesting in the context of this essay is that students often would remark that the classes were actually *helping them* in their lives. I remember a few students smiling and saying, “I no longer need therapy, I have J.P.’s classes” or something to that effect. Yet these are fundamentally philosophy classes – they have nothing to do with group therapy, as valuable as that can be sometimes.

Along these lines, last year I taught a course which we can use as another example in our inquiry. It was entitled “Exploring Our New Reality Philosophically.” It was designed to address the many difficult questions that have arisen for all of us while living during the pandemic. To give a brief sense of the course, some of the weekly topics included: (readings in parentheses): Solitude, (Rilke, Thoreau); Orienting Ourselves Towards Uncertainty (Nietzsche, Marcel, Bugbee); The Value of Community (Sandel); Boredom and The Value of the Ordinary (Suzuki, Svendsen); and Is Genuine Freedom Possible within Constraint? (Sartre, Camus).

In this course, many students remarked how much it truly helped them come to make sense of what is going on in our world and in their lives during these very challenging months. They received a real kind of sustenance from doing philosophy concerning the many difficult questions that have arisen because of this worldwide crisis. This is not to say, “Gee, isn’t my Institute great,” but rather to flag that philosophy has indeed helped these people in a very difficult time in their lives.

But how about all of the times when a student is in class, and you present a new way to think about a difficult situation to her, a new way to orient herself to the situation, *and it does not help her*? Or, you present it in conversation with another, and the same thing happens. Or the situation is reversed, and you are the one who is struggling, and the new way of thinking about the situation is right there, right in front of you, and you *cannot see it*. Or, you just do not receive any true assistance from it? Something is blocking you from being able to receive the sustenance that this new way of thinking is offering. What are the various barriers that can hinder or block a person from having philosophy help her?

There are a few aspects to this problem, and I would like to take them one at a time. One set of barriers concerns the state of mind that the person herself is in when she is doing philosophy. And another has to do with the way philosophy is taught, the approach and orientation that the professor takes toward the students. With respect to the first set of issues, it is actually broader than the state of mind the person is in. It is rather something more akin to the *mode of being* of the person when she is in philosophical discourse with you. What do I mean by this? Well, for example, how *open* is she to actually being *receptive* to the new way of thinking about the situation? Is her very self open to seeing and receiving these new ways of thinking?

What does it mean to be open to a new way of orienting yourself to a situation? To begin with, let us start by trying to clarify openness in general. Think about a situation where you are at a get-together, you meet someone, and you are hoping that they might become a romantic partner. They are being polite, and saying “all the right things” – using words that could easily be interpreted as evincing interest in you, but you can just *feel* that they are not interested in even the possibility of a relationship. In some real sense they are going through the motions. They are not *open* to the possibility of becoming involved with you. One could easily imagine a friend of theirs saying, beforehand, “c’mon, you should come to this party – you might meet someone.” “No, I’m not going to meet anyone there that I like,” or, “I’m not ready to get back out there and try to meet people.” Before they even arrive, they have already *closed themselves off* to the possibility of a new relationship beginning. Now imagine a second case. In this case, they utter the same exact physical words as in the first case during the conversation. But in this case, you can feel, you can

*sense*, that they are interested in getting to know you. They are receptive to the idea, open to the possibility of becoming involved with you.

It is fascinating that there might be no *physical* way to tell whether someone is open to you or not. It is something you can *sense*. Thus the same physical words uttered in each case. In a physical system however, say an electrical circuit or in the process of osmosis, you can see the blockage. Indeed, osmosis is a natural way to think about this notion of openness. It is as if you are a membrane, and the new viewpoint, the new philosophical perspective is presented to you, and *it is able to go into you*. You do not block it, or prevent it from entering. And there are no blockages going on within you that you are not aware of. Indeed, the blockages relevant here can often be subconscious. It is as if you are in a prior state in which, *if there is some new viewpoint that is presented to you, you will be able to receive it*. This does not mean that you will automatically *adopt* the new viewpoint, just that you will “let it in” so that you can sincerely consider it, feel it, and reflect on it. In this sense, the way openness works in a human being is not exactly the same as the process of osmosis in a purely physical system. You are always free to reject the new viewpoint after this genuine entertaining of it. Just by virtue of your being open to it does not mean that it will automatically become a part of you as it would in a purely physical system. Of course, you can also consider a new viewpoint while being closed off to it, but this will be a fundamentally different process. In this case, you are already prejudiced against the new viewpoint, as it were. Even more to the point, you just will not be able to even *see* or *feel* many salient aspects of the new viewpoint, by virtue of being closed off to it. As the American philosopher Henry Bugbee put it,

Last night the humidity kept dropping, the air cooling off, and a full moon rose. At mid-morning the day is still as clear and fresh as it might be in the High Sierras. The effect of this day, and of Beethoven’s Opus 135, to which I have just listened, is to make me conscious that the readiness to receive is all. Without that what can be given?<sup>9</sup>

He realized that if his *very being* had not been so radically open – so wholly receptive, he would not have had the powerful experience of the beautiful day and music that he did. He would have heard the same music, that is, the same notes, and experienced the same weather, but he would not have had anything remotely like the experience he had. The magic of the music and the day could not be *given* to him. Not because of anything about the music and day, but because of the mode of being he was in.

The fact that the blockages to openness are often subconscious suggests another important aspect of openness. In addition to what we discussed above, it could also be crucial for a person to be able to gently, perhaps over time, relax his defense mechanisms, or gently work through them, so as not to be a prisoner to them. Such a process is long and difficult, and requires great self-awareness. But it could enable a person to see and feel certain things that he previously could not. One could perhaps call this kind of openness *psychological openness*. I will not address this in depth here, but I just wanted to flag it as an even more radical form of openness which could allow philosophy to help one to an even greater and more powerful degree.

Interestingly, with respect to openness, an important point to note is that a person cannot be *too* open. She needs a self, a baseline, to provide a place from which to judge at all. The openness cannot include having new viewpoints automatically flow completely through her and take over her self. If she is completely open to this degree, then she will not be able to engage in *her* own searching. She will just end up adopting whatever viewpoints are presented to her.

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9) Bugbee, *Inward Morning*, 112.

Now, a consequence, or a result of being genuinely open in the helpful ways discussed above is that a person will not just be open to new viewpoints coming in from an external source. He will also be open to various emotions, feelings, and ideas coming up from within himself. One particularly important result of this for the doing of philosophy is that one will be open to experiencing the difficulty of not understanding – one will be open to pain. To the pain of confusion, of not having an “answer,” of not even knowing exactly how to go about finding an answer. Genuinely doing philosophy involves not only questioning the topic one is exploring, but also questioning the very means and criteria that one is using to do this exploring. As such, it is possible to feel that there is no firm ground beneath one’s feet. There are clearly many complex issues here, and different approaches throughout the history of philosophy – some arguing for a certain foundation, others trying to show that there is no such foundation. At the very least though, *presupposing* a certain approach, or a certain foundation, seems antithetical to the very spirit and deepest nature of what philosophy is. As such, one needs to be okay with – indeed, to be able to embrace – the feeling of swimming around in a sea of questions, questions which include the very means one is using to answer these questions.

Relatedly, if one is in despair, or in a crisis, the ability to be able to stay in the despair, to accept it, and perhaps even to embrace it, as opposed to running from it in some way, is essential for genuine exploration. If one cannot do this, if one’s orientation to the crisis is one of desperation, one will be very susceptible to looking for a “solution” to the crisis, and often grasping at a possible “solution” too quickly, as opposed to, say, finding a new way of understanding the situation, a new way of orienting yourself to the situation. Not that it is not possible to find a way out of one’s despair, but it is crucial that one do so we might say authentically, as opposed to because one cannot handle the despair. Furthermore, if a person denies his despair, or pushes it away in some way, then philosophy will not be able to actually help him, because in some real sense, the despair does not really exist for him. It does, but not at a conscious level.<sup>10</sup>

*But*, one might say, are you advocating that one should just be okay with not-understanding, in the sense of, “that’s fine, no problem, and we’ll leave it at that”? In other words, that the person just exists in the state of confusion, without any concomitant desire to move out of that state? There are certainly cases in which the healthy approach is not to try to explore a given issue. We are all finite – we cannot explore everything. Although even in such cases, would not one want to know, to explore, at some level? There does seem to be a natural movement of the soul, in a way, to try to understand. In this way, Aristotle is perhaps correct, when he says “All men by nature desire to know.”<sup>11</sup>

Given this natural desire to understand, we could ask, is it possible to both *be okay with* the experience of confusion – to embrace not-understanding – and also want to move out of that state, also want to try to understand? Is it even possible to do both *at the same time*? From what we have said so far, it seems that doing philosophy can often require precisely this ability. One way that it might be possible to inhabit both states at the same time is if in some way the despair, the lack of understanding is *local*. What I mean by this is if the despair is not total, if it does not feel like it encompasses your whole life. Rather, it is limited to one sphere of your life. Or, to try to see that that is indeed the case, that even though it might feel total, that actually there are aspects of your life that are solid, that are firmly in place, and that are not sources of despair. Then, being able to both search for understanding while also being okay with not-understanding – that is, doing philosophy

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10) In many places in his *Letters to a Young Poet* Rilke exhorts us to trust in our moments of pain, as these are actually crucial times when something deep inside us is shifting, and it is crucial to be quietly attentive to this shift, and allow it to occur at its own pace, so that this change can occur. If we rush through it, or push it away, we will just end up preventing this important change from occurring deep within us. Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*.

11) Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, 1.



– is perhaps a Neurath’s boat type of situation. Neurath’s boat is a conceptual model that imagines a person is at sea in, say, a wooden boat. A few of the wooden planks on one part of the boat start to leak. He realizes that he clearly needs to repair the boat. There is no possibility of getting to land, where one could *get out of* the boat to repair it. He must repair it while somehow still standing *inside* of it. So, he must find some planks in the boat which are firm, which he can stand on, while he repairs the faulty planks. Analogously, if a person is in despair, he cannot just step out of his life, as it were, to repair it from the outside. He needs to find a place to stand that is firm, or at least temporarily firm – while he tries to work on, to explore the situation that is problematic. Such a place of firmness could be an area of his life that is stable, or some inner strength – anything that he can “stand on” while attending to the despair.

A crucial point is that if one is completely in despair, or completely traumatized, then in such a case philosophy might very well not be what the person needs. It could even add to the trauma. For the reasons we just stated with respect to Neurath’s boat, a person might not have a firm place in his life that he can stand on in order to explore fruitfully. For such a person, it could well be just too painful to explore at all. What he needs is perhaps love, or just being in place of spiritual safety in which his spirit can curl up, as it were, so he can rest and heal. In such a state, he will not be ready to explore his despair. Once some healing has occurred, and he has at least some internal place of local firmness that he can “stand on,” he can begin to explore his crisis. He can begin to do philosophy.

Now, I would like to look at another important benefit of being okay with the pain of genuine searching. It is perhaps precisely by allowing yourself to experience the discomfort and struggle of the search, that when you do come up with something that resonates with you it will be much more powerful for you. There is a much greater chance that you will have a genuinely therapeutic experience. There is something important, (perhaps essential?), in going through the *process* of searching in this genuine sense. Why is it more powerful? It is as if your very soul is now prepared to recognize the insight *when it comes*. If you are looking all over town for a lost dog, and this goes on for hours, and then you finally find him, it is *all the more powerful* than if you were just sitting at home, waiting for someone else to find him, and then you receive word from them that they have found the dog. But is this really the case? One could be sitting at home because one just cannot handle the pain of the search. One just needs someone else to do it, because the prospect of losing the dog is just too painful. And when the person actually doing the looking reports to you that he has found the dog, it is certainly possible that your elation, or relief will be just as great as the case in which you are the one doing the searching. But still, it does feel that there is an important difference between these two scenarios, searching yourself versus sitting at home while someone else searches. What is this difference? Perhaps it is something like the case when you do a task for the first time in your life, that someone else has always done for you. For example, let us say you paint your house by yourself for the first time. Each time you arrive home, and see your house, you feel different about it than you used to. In the past, although you certainly might have appreciated the paint job that the painters did, you now feel something fundamentally new. You can feel inside, in a way that you did not before, *the work, the time, and effort* it took to paint the house. You are much more *a part of* the paint job. Marx would say you see yourself in the paint job. Yes, you know, in your bones, what it took to paint the house.

Analogously to return to the main example we have been discussing, you are more aware of what went into the search if you engage in it yourself. And furthermore, to carry the analogy further, you will *see yourself in the search*. Just as the paint job is yours, so the search will be *yours*. It is *you* doing the searching. As such, it will be *you* who has arrived at the insights. The insights you arrive at will thus be yours in an important sense. Not in a possessive sense, but rather, they will inevitably be tailored to your life, will provide some closure, or

consolation, for your particular distress. The insights are thus yours in a way that they well might not be, *yes, this is the point*, if someone else provides them for you.<sup>12</sup>

But in the earlier example involving the student finding genuine consolation from the class on immortality, was it not the case that I presented the new way of thinking about the issue to the students? I suggested that way of viewing mortality. If so, then why was it still so powerful for her? Perhaps an important point here is that although that student did not arrive at this insight fundamentally on her own, she was genuinely struggling with the issues throughout the whole discussion. She was in a mode of genuine searching – with the concomitant openness, and pain of the struggle that we have discussed above. That is the key point. So, when I finally suggested a certain way of thinking about the issue, the effect was almost as if she has arrived at it herself. Because she was truly in an open orientation of searching, she was able to naturally light upon the aspects of the approach that I suggested that fit her particular situation. And she thus found these insights to be truly powerful, truly therapeutic for her despair. She was actually going through the process of doing philosophy herself, in the way we discussed earlier. Her prospects of being genuinely helped by the philosophical discussion were almost certainly completely different from a situation in which she was in a more passive mode of being, not fundamentally involved in the search.

One might think that the student in this case is perhaps somewhat like the person sitting at home during the search for the dog. She is still deeply invested emotionally, even if she is not the one doing the search. And thus the insights suggested by the professor *matter* deeply to her. But this analogy to the person sitting at home would be incorrect. As we have seen, the student is *actually searching*. She is thus much more like the person actually out on the street looking for the dog. As we said earlier, if she had arrived at the insight *herself*, instead of recognizing the relevance and power of the insight I suggested for her situation, the new viewpoint she arrived at might have been even more *her own*. And thus, perhaps even ultimately more helpful, and more therapeutic. But, since she was in an orientation of searching, she could have, for example, heard the insight suggested by the professor, and ended up adopting the opposite viewpoint, because that viewpoint fit her particular situation. The point is that she is taking the suggestion presented to her, and then making it her own.

This discussion now puts us in the position to answer a question that we raised in the original discussion of this student. At that point, we noticed that it is perhaps very intriguing that her *cognitive* reflection – the philosophical thinking – engendered an *emotional* shift in her. But how did this occur? One point to make that might seem obvious, but is actually crucial, is that the questions she was exploring *mattered* to her. If a person is in despair, then, one might say, of course the questions, and the philosophical exploration, matter to her. But, one can also see the importance of such mattering in a class in which the students are not experiencing a particular crisis. If they do not *feel* that the questions matter, they will not be helped by the philosophical investigations. In both cases, though, an important point emerges – that philosophy is not *disinterested inquiry*. It is inquiry that *matters* to individual people, and individual lives. Disinterestedness is often touted as a value. But perhaps there is a confusion here which we can unpack. Perhaps what people are trying to avoid by advo-

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12) Kierkegaard has a particularly powerful way of thinking about these issues, about the essential importance of a person searching for her *own* insights, her own way: “the thing is to find a truth which is truth *for me*, to find *the idea for which I am willing to live and die*. And what use would it be in this respect if I were to discover a so-called objective truth, or if I worked my way through the philosophers’ systems... What use would it be to be able to propound the meaning of Christianity, to explain many separate facts, if it had *no* deeper meaning for *myself* and *my life*? ... Certainly I won’t deny that I still accept an *imperative of knowledge* ... but *then it must be taken up alive in me, and this is what I now see as the main point*.” (italics in original). Interestingly, his searching for a “truth for me” brings together the two strands of the tension we pointed out earlier, between philosophy aiming at truth, and philosophy aiming at a person finding her *own* way. Fully making sense of what a *truth* is, is nonetheless *for me* a fascinating philosophical project. Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard’s Journals and Notebooks*, Vol. I, Journals AA-DD, 19–20.

cating disinterestedness is that one's own particularity not distort or bias one's explorations. And especially not do so in a way that one is not aware of. People often think that in order to avoid such distortion, one needs to be detached from the material, to view it "objectively." But, one need not in any way be disinterested in order to not have one's own particularity distort one's philosophical efforts. Rather, one needs to develop the self-awareness necessary to prevent this from happening. But this in no way means that you cannot do philosophy in a way that *matters* to you.<sup>13</sup>

### III

The previous train of thought started with the reflections on openness, and generally, in what *mode* a student, or for that matter anyone, does philosophy. What happens if a student or anyone doing philosophy cannot be open in these ways, or does not know how to bring himself into such a mode of openness? What if he cannot in general handle the pain inherent in genuine searching, and thus cannot engage in the kind of genuine philosophical exploration we discussed above? Or, perhaps the nature of how he is suffering, or the situation he finds himself in are preventing him from being open. Can philosophy be genuinely helpful to such a person?

In such cases, a teacher's role is essential. *How* philosophy is taught can make a huge difference in whether philosophy can be genuinely therapeutic. For example, the environment that a teacher creates can make a massive difference. Creating a space in which students feel *safe* to explore is essential. It is much more likely that a student's very self will be open in the necessary ways if he feels that he is in a place of safety. Being open so often, perhaps always, requires a kind of vulnerability. A student will almost certainly not allow himself to be vulnerable if he does not feel safe. Writing about this is difficult. The words can fall flat, or feel stale and overused, or sound trite. So much depends upon the subtle internal experiential orientation of the professor himself toward his students. For example, does he genuinely want each student to find his own way?<sup>14</sup> Does he truly want to assist them in this process. Does he fundamentally respect their thought processes, even if they are different from his own, and different from the standard positions taken on the issue(s) in question. If in his own soul, he truly wants all of this for his students, it will come through to them. They will feel safe, and truly encouraged and supported in their searches.

Now, this does not mean that the professor does not have expertise, does not explain various ways of interpreting difficult readings, and does not provide all sorts of insights in other ways. And it does not mean that any material can be interpreted in any way. Not at all. It is rather something like, while doing all of this, he is nonetheless at the same time *allowing* the students the room to come to see certain things for themselves. At their own pace, and in their own way. A powerful way of thinking about this is Martin Buber's distinction between *imposing* and *unfolding*. For Buber, the way of imposing is akin to the propagandist. His goal is to get the other to agree with him. Opposed to this is the way of unfolding. In this way, "a man wishes to find and to further in the soul of the other the disposition toward what he has recognized in himself as the right... The other need only be opened out in this potentiality of his."<sup>15</sup> A teacher who follows the way of unfolding is thus

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13) As Nietzsche puts it, "In the philosopher, on the contrary, there is absolutely nothing impersonal; and above all, his morality furnishes a decided and decisive testimony as to WHO HE IS, – that is to say, in what order the deepest impulses of his nature stand to each other." Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Section 6, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4363/4363-h/4363-h.htm#link2HCH0001>.

14) As Zarathustra says, in describing his own searches, "This – is now MY way – where is yours?" Nietzsche, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, Section 55, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1998/1998-h/1998-h.htm>.

15) Buber, *The Knowledge of Man*, 82.

more like a midwife, helping to usher forth a student's as yet unborn authentic self.<sup>16</sup> He is gently guiding, and helping to facilitate this process, but in a way that is responsive to what is going on inside the student, as opposed to *dictating* how a student should view the material. If a teacher can adopt this approach, it is much more likely that the students will arrive at insights which are their *own*, in the ways described in earlier sections above.<sup>17</sup>

If we return for a moment to our discussion of the importance of being okay with the pain of the search, then we can now see that the teaching in this way can play a crucial role related to this issue. It is crucial that the teacher honor the pain of the students' searches. That she helps each student feel validated in their confusion, in their tentative starts and stops. That they feel that their confusion is worthwhile, and important, even while, say, she points out this or that flaw in their thinking, to help them move forward in their searches.

A teacher can also help students engage in authentic searching. Encouraging students to question anything and everything can be crucial here. For example, a professor can state something that might at first feel very overused, namely that there is no such thing as a silly question. But, in a philosophy class, there is a particular reason for saying this. That is that one of the things philosophy can do is to help us see phenomena that we usually cannot see because they are so familiar to us, they are so much a part of our everyday lives. Why, for example, do we have five days of school or work, and two weekend days? Why, when students sit in a seminar, do we sit in chairs about two to three feet from the next person? In our society, students are not pressed against the wall, to be as far from each other as possible. And they are not holding hands. This fact may seem so obvious as to feel silly to point out. But, it is when we question phenomena such as these, which seem almost silly to question, that we can often really start to get somewhere philosophically. These are often the most important philosophical questions. We start to actually question some aspects of our lives that are so familiar to us that we normally do not see them. If one can help students see this, they start to relax, and often engage in a kind of questioning that perhaps they have never engaged in in their lives.

In addition to what the professor says, *how* she herself thinks and searches in class itself is crucial. Often what is most important is not what she says, but how she *models* genuine philosophical questioning. So much is transmitted to the students nonverbally. If she can engage in genuine philosophical searching *occurently* in class, students will learn this even without it being explained to them.

#### [Phenomenology Interlude]

As I write this piece, one concern comes up. I can imagine someone reading the piece, and at some level "tuning out" with respect to some of the themes, such as vulnerability, pain, providing a safe atmosphere for students. He might think, "I've heard these 'buzzwords' so many times in certain books which seem to discuss them in ways that perhaps don't do justice to the complexity of them, and are marketed as a kind of easy solution to psychological difficulties." This precise worry constitutes an important point about why phenomenology is so crucial. Words themselves can be merely empty "pointers" without a concomitant powerful *experiential level* that corresponds to the word. The same words can be used by different people, but each person might have a very different (what we might call) *experiential extension* of the word. The key is not the word, but what is going on

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16) I first came across this image of the midwife to explain Buber's idea of unfolding in Vogel, *The Fragile "We"*, 73–79.

17) This way of one person helping another find his own way need not occur only in the context of teacher and student. Heidegger's notion of "liberating solicitude" is an account of how one person can help facilitate another finding his own way in life. In this account, the first person does not give the latter any particular advice. Rather, he helps to awaken his being at issue in the world for himself, he helps to open up a space of questions for the person to ask himself, and inhabit, about his life. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 153–63.

at an experiential level in each person when they use the word.<sup>18</sup> Each person needs to infuse these terms with their own experiential extension. In this way, these terms will come alive again, and the very real and human phenomenon that they point to will shine forth in their full experiential meaning.

As we wrap up our exploration, we need to discuss one final aspect of how philosophy can help a person. We need to address what happens *after* a student has left the class. If a student has had a powerfully therapeutic experience in a class, it is crucial that she not just go immediately back into the well-grooved patterns of her life. She needs to *internalize* the new viewpoint she has seen. She needs to help this new understanding that she has gained flourish, and become a part of her. A goal would thus be to live *in the light of* this new understanding. This would be the final step in her being able to be truly helped by philosophy in her life.

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18) Scheler has a powerful way to think about this phenomenon. In discussing the challenges for phenomenology to convey the experiential level in language, he says, about a traditional philosophy that unproblematically assumes symbolic communication: "It must answer the question whether, in any or all the speakers, the *sense* of the utterance fulfills itself in *something given* and whether the object which is obtained in this way is perhaps merely a universally accepted *fable convenue*, completely empty of insight and cognition. The problem, to put it figuratively, is whether there are sufficient funds to cover all these great transactions of exchange and speech!" The "funds" he mentions are the underlying experiential level that will be the content that fleshes out, or "fulfills" the linguistic utterance. Scheler, "Phenomenology and the Theory of Cognition," 154.

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