Humanlife and the Advent of Philosophy: A Theory of Philosophical Autobiography

David Frank Hoinski

Follow this and additional works at: https://dsc.duq.edu/etd

Recommended Citation
HUMANLIFE AND THE ADVENT OF PHILOSOPHY:
A THEORY OF PHILOSOPHICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

A Dissertation
Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By
David Frank Hoinski

December 2013
HUMAN LIFE AND THE ADVENT OF PHILOSOPHY:
A THEORY OF PHILOSOPHICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

By

David Frank Hoinski

Approved November 15, 2013

________________________________
Dr. Ronald Polansky
Professor of Philosophy
(Committee Chair)

________________________________
Dr. Patrick Lee Miller
Associate Professor of Philosophy
(Committee Member)

________________________________
Dr. George Yancy
Professor of Philosophy
(Committee Member)

________________________________
Dr. James Swindal
Dean, McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts
Professor of Philosophy

________________________________
Dr. Ronald Polansky
Chair, Philosophy
Professor of Philosophy
ABSTRACT

HUMANLIFE AND THE ADVENT OF PHILOSOPHY:
A THEORY OF PHILOSOPHICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

By
David Frank Hoinski

December 2013

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Ronald Polansky

This dissertation presents a theory of philosophical autobiography. It includes studies of the autobiographical writings of Plato, Augustine, Descartes, Vico, and Nietzsche. I argue that philosophers write autobiographies in order to present and give an account of philosophical first principles. I also argue that Plato invented philosophical autobiography.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of Wilhelm S. Wurzer and Eleanor Holveck, two philosophers who taught me to think differently.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Philosophy Department at Duquesne University generously gave me a grant to do research for this dissertation during the 2010-2011 academic year.

I am very grateful for the opportunity I have had to study with the excellent graduate students and philosophy professors at Duquesne. Among graduate students, I especially want to thank Adam Roos, Joe Cimakasky, and Jim Bahoh for their friendship and encouragement. I also want to thank the members of the Duquesne Greek group, past and present. Among professors, I especially want to thank Thérèse Bonin, Tom Rockmore, and Dan Selcer for their advice, and for answering so many of my questions over the years. I also want to thank Jennifer Bates and Jay Lampert for their encouragement and for allowing me to sit in on their seminars. I am also very grateful to James Swindal for his unswerving support and friendship over the years.

I want to give special thanks to my colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh, including Raja Rosenhagen, Preston Stovall, Topher Kurfess, and the members of the Deutsches Frühstück, past and present. I am also very grateful to Robert Brandom for allowing me to attend his seminars.

Many scholars were kind enough to correspond with me about topics in the present dissertation. I especially want to thank Julian Baggini, Donald Phillip Verene, and, above all, James O’Donnell, who answered so many of my questions about Augustine.

I want to give special thanks to John Harvey, whose friendship and erudition I value so much. He has been my teacher and companion in so many studies, and I have benefitted immensely from our conversations ranging across every topic and field.
I want to thank John Fritz and Clayton Bohnet, other selves, for their constant and incomparable friendship over the years.

I have been very lucky to have Patrick Miller and George Yancy as readers of my dissertation. They have stimulated my thought and helped me to write a much better work than I would have done without their advice and encouragement.

I am and will have been eternally thankful for the good fortune I have to study with my director, Ron Polansky. Meeting Dr. Polansky has been by far one of the happiest accidents of my life. He has given me an image of what a philosopher can be.

I am most grateful to my parents and parents-in-law, and to my whole family, for their continued love and support.

Above all, I want to thank my wife Heather for her strength, good sense, humor, and love. Probably I could never have done this without her, and certainly I wouldn’t have wanted to.

Finally, I want to thank our daughter Iris for not crying too much and for being such a good baby in general.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgement</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1, Introduction: A Theory of Philosophical Autobiography</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2, The Platonic Paradigm of Philosophical Autobiography</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3, Augustine's <em>Confessions</em></td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4, New Sciences in Early Modern Philosophical Autobiography</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nietzsche</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>288</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Human Life and the Advent of Philosophy: A Theory of Philosophical Autobiography

Of starting points (or principles), some are grasped by induction, some by perception, some by a sort of habituation and others in other ways: one must try to get hold of each sort in the appropriate way and take care that they are well marked out, since they have great importance in relation to what comes later. For the starting point of something seems to be more than half of the whole, and through it many of the things being looked for become evident.

In my beginning is my end.—T. S. Eliot

Chapter 1
Introduction: A Theory of Philosophical Autobiography

In this subject as in others the best method of investigation is to study things in the process of development from the beginning (Εἰ δὴ τὶς ἐξ ἀρχῆς τὰ πράγματα φύσει βλέψειν, ὥσπερ ἐν τοῖς ἄλλοις καὶ ἐν τούτοις κάλλιστ’ ἄν οὕτω θεωρήσειν).—Aristotle, Politics, 1252a24-26.¹

1. Intimacy, aversion, ambivalence.—There is a forgotten intimacy between philosophy and autobiography. Yet today among philosophers we are witnessing a burgeoning awareness of the importance of the relations between these two phenomena, and from this awareness, the emergence of a new area of studies concerning the autobiographical dimension of philosophical practice and life. What makes this development so intriguing and exciting is that it offers us a way to think anew about philosophy itself, about what it is, what it can do, and what it is supposed to be, especially in light of the concepts of self, life, and writing that are central to autobiography. The present work aims to foster this incipient philosophical awareness of the intimacy between autobiography and philosophy by providing a theory of philosophical autobiography rooted in the study of some of the most significant and influential philosophical autobiographies in the history of

philosophy, including those of Augustine, Descartes, Vico, Rousseau, Mill, Nietzsche, and (perhaps surprisingly) Plato.² A clear and coherent theory of philosophical autobiography that aims at a kind of comprehensiveness is greatly to be desired under present circumstances, where an increasingly vital interest in the topic struggles to put itself into words, seeks to give itself theoretical shape and articulation. In trying to understand the philosophical significance of the phenomenon, a theory of philosophical autobiography is useful because it gives us a companion to think with and against. The theory I develop emphasizes the connection between philosophical autobiography and philosophical principles, while it also illustrates some of the ways that philosophers have employed autobiography in order to flesh out a conception of philosophy not as simply an academic specialization or profession, but as a βίος or way of humanlife.³

The intimacy between philosophy and autobiography is not, however, unproblematic. Stanley Cavell (1994, p. 3) has written of philosophy’s “ambivalence toward the autobiographical,” and philosophy might even be seen to harbor a longstanding and profound aversion to autobiography and its subject matter, the life of some particular human being. This aversion is nicely illustrated by a passage from the beginning of Porphyry’s biography of Plotinus:

Plotinus, the philosopher of our times, seemed ashamed of being embodied. As a result of this state of mind he could never bear to talk about his people or his parents or his native country. And he objected so strongly to sitting for a painter or sculptor that he said to Amelius, who was urging him to allow a portrait of himself to be made, “Why really, is it not enough to have to carry the image in which nature has encased us,

² In the present work I present only my studies of Plato’s autobiographical writings, Augustine’s Confessions, Descartes Discourse, Vico’s Life, and Nietzsche’s Ecce Homo. While this dissertation is also based on studies of Rousseau’s Confessions (and his other autobiographical writings) and of Mill’s Autobiography, it was not possible for me to get these studies ready for presentation at this early date.
³ On the neologism “humanlife,” please see below.
without your requesting me to agree to leave behind me a longer-lasting image of the image, as if it was something genuinely worth looking at?” In view of his denial and refusal for this reason to sit, Amelius, who had a friend, Carterius, the best painter of the time, brought him in to attend the meetings of the school—they were open to anyone who wished to come, and accustomed him by progressive study to derive increasingly striking mental pictures from what he saw. Then Carterius drew a likeness of the impression which remained in his memory. Amelius helped him to improve his sketch to a closer resemblance, and so the talent of Carterius gave us an excellent portrait of Plotinus without his knowledge.⁴

This passage might readily be taken as illustrating philosophy’s antipathy to embodiment rather than to autobiography, yet a couple of things should be noted. First of all, although I am not going to say a lot about embodiment in the present work, it is necessary to admit that embodiment is one of the conditions of the possibility of both autobiography and philosophy. Having a body may be the true cause neither of philosophy nor of autobiography, but it is almost certainly a necessary condition of them both (unless the gods, for example, write autobiographies and philosophize). Second, it is worth attending to Porphyry’s characterization of Plotinus as disliking to talk about his background, “his people or his parents or his native country.” Since the subject matter of autobiography is life or specifically humanlife, and since humanlife is conceptually and therefore essentially inextricable from having a background, a country, a people, parents, and so forth, it is not such a stretch to interpret Plotinus’ intolerance for discussion of this kind as a severe censure on autobiography. Indeed Plotinus seems to have despised the very subject matter of autobiography, which is humanlife and, in particular, the humanlife of a single individual such as Plotinus, “the philosopher of our times.”

Here, however, it is also important to note that Porphyry and Amelius represent the opposite pole from their master. After all, we only know of Plotinus’ disdain for his own particularity due to the fact that Porphyry wrote his biography. Amelius, meanwhile, went against his master’s express wishes, and with the help of the painter Carterius, surreptitiously produced a portrait of him. Both Carterius’ portrait and Porphyry’s *Life of Plotinus* (ΠΕΡΙ ΤΟΥ ΠΛΩΤΙΝΟΥ ΒΙΟΥ) serve to memorialize certain aspects of Plotinus’ particularity that will have remained long after the master himself is dead and gone. Thus what Plotinus resisted, his pupils cultivated. Philosophy’s ambivalence to the autobiographical is thus exemplified by this trio. Nor are Porphyry and Amelius the most striking representatives of the autobiographical spirit in the history of philosophy.

2. *A version of the aversion.*— Why does philosophy have a difficult relationship with the autobiographical, the biographical, and, in general, with particular individuals and lives? The main problem seems to be this, that autobiography concerns the lives of particular individuals, whereas philosophy is interested in universals, for example, in the question “what is a human being as such?” (τί... ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος, *Theaetetus* 174b4), and so on. Reflecting this conception of philosophy, Georges Bataille once wrote that “there cannot be any philosophy of the individual and the exercise of thought cannot have any other outcome than the negation of individual perspectives.”⁵ One might beg to differ, but on this version of affairs, philosophy’s conception of self-knowledge has little or nothing to do with knowledge of oneself as a particular individual, a historically-situated being who has a country, parents, and so forth. On the contrary, Bataille’s claim is that

---

philosophy and the exercise of thought tend to destroy “individual perspectives” altogether.

The philosophical tendency to abolish individual perspectives has at times been given more elaborate expression. Philosophy, it has been argued, does not concern itself with the character and inclinations of particular individuals, their “peculiarities, passions, and weaknesses,” as Hegel rather forcefully puts it in the following passage from his (1830) Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences:

The knowledge of mind (Die Erkenntnis des Geistes) is the most concrete, hence the highest and hardest. Know yourself (Erkenne dich selbst), this absolute commandment (Gebot)…does not mean mere self-knowledge (Selbsterkenntnis) about the particular capacities, character, inclinations and weaknesses of the individual (des Individuums), but rather it means the knowledge of the truth about a human being as such, the truth in and for itself, or knowledge of mind (Geist) as the essence of a human being. Just as little does the philosophy of mind have to do with what passes for knowing about people (Menschenkenntnis), which endeavors to search out the peculiarities, passions, and weaknesses of other people, as well as probing the so-called intricacies of the human heart. Knowing about people presupposes knowledge of the universal (Erkenntnis des Allgemeinen), hence knowledge of the human being as such and hence essentially knowledge of mind. But what’s called knowing about people busies itself with accidental, insignificant, and untrue features (Existenzen) of mental life, and it doesn’t press on to what is substantial, to the mind itself.6

Hegel argues that we know ourselves when we know ourselves as mind (Geist), and also that philosophy is entirely indifferent and even disdainful of the human desire to “know about people” in the way Hegel describes. Indeed Hegel implies that there is something vulgar and disreputable about this desire when viewed from a properly philosophical standpoint. Since, moreover, self-knowledge as he conceives it is in principle open to,

---

and the same for, all human beings, it has nothing to do with the differences between particular individuals and individual lives.

Not only is it claimed that philosophical thought has nothing to do with particular individuals and their lives, but sometimes it is even maintained that reference to personal experience may have a pernicious effect in philosophical contexts. “Arguments from one’s own privileged experience,” writes Deleuze, “are bad and reactionary arguments.” Perhaps this was not one of Deleuze’s finer moments, but it is a telling indication of a strain in philosophy that views the autobiographical as retrograde and inimical to universal principles, not only in the sphere of theory but also in that of politics and ethics.

Finally, if philosophy is only about arguments and articulating the correct position, the lives and characteristics of particular individuals might seem irrelevant to this enterprise. As a contemporary philosopher once put it, “the philosopher’s life belongs to a different logical category from his teachings. A thoroughly immoral man might propound a correct moral theory, and it would be correct nonetheless.” Apparently one may relish certain texts while relinquishing contact with their authors, and there is hope that we may obtain the correct theory even from monsters.

3. *Plato, Nietzsche, and philosophy's autobiographical affinities.*— Yet since the time when Plato decided to present his philosophy in the form of written dialogues, philosophy has also recognized that character, time, and place are among the indispensable conditions of philosophical activity. Plato, in fact, always depicts philosophy in the context of conversations between particular individuals, and he never assumes the (im)posture of the treatise that affects an impossible objectivity that is really only a

---

pseudo-objectivity. As suggested by certain writings on philosophical autobiography, an objective discourse, if it fails to take the subjective element into account, is not truly objective. It follows that what Hegel, for example, views as a defect in Plato’s manner of presenting philosophy is actually one of its greatest strengths, which is that it takes the relation between philosophy and particular individuals into account.

At the same time, Plato can appear as Janus-faced as anyone with regard to the role of particular individuals in philosophy. For, apparently at odds with his evident concern for particular persons, Plato at one point has Socrates characterize the philosopher as someone who does not even know his own neighbor, and also as one who is only interested in such questions as “what is a human being?” (τί...ἐστιν ἄνθρωπος, Theaetetus 174b4), “what is kingship?” and so forth. Plato’s ambivalence toward the autobiographical is nowhere more poignantly illustrated than in the Phaedo. Here, in the same dialogue, Plato has Socrates tell an autobiographical story while yet advising his interlocutors (and Plato’s readers) to “give little thought to Socrates and much more to the truth” (σμικρὸν φροντίσαντες Σωκράτους, τῆς δὲ ἀλήθείας πολὺ μᾶλλον, 91c1-2). The proximity of aversion and affinity to the autobiographical in the Phaedo itself, as well as in Plato’s work as a whole, suggests a certain persistent ambivalence toward autobiography within philosophy.

It was really Nietzsche who most consistently and intelligently argued for the affinity between philosophy and autobiography, that is, even though he believed that

---

9 I have in mind Davis (1999) and Yancy (2002). For full references, see note below and the Bibliography.
most philosophers were unaware of the intimacy between autobiography and philosophy. In Nietzsche’s writings we may also encounter a strong resistance to the idea of philosophy as somehow detached from human life. In a discarded draft from *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche wrote, “I speak only of what I have lived through, not merely of what I have thought through; the opposition of thinking and life is lacking in my case” (*ich rede nur von Erlebtem, nicht bloss von ‘Gedachtem’; der Gegensatz von Denken und Leben fehlt bei mir*) (EH Kaufmann trans., p. 340/KSA 14: 484-485). Already in *The Birth of Tragedy, Schopenhauer as Educator*, and other early writings unpublished during his lifetime, Nietzsche returned again and again to the idea of philosophy as something inseparable from human life and also as a unique way of human life that needed to be defended in a world at best ambivalent toward and at worst inimical to philosophy. Nietzsche also held that life was the true test of a philosophy. In *Schopenhauer as Educator*, for example, he contends that the most important measure of a philosophy is “whether one can live in accordance with it” (*ob man nach ihr leben könne*) (1997 §8/KSA 1: 417). Nietzsche also conceives of the philosopher as being dedicated first of all to making his life a kind of artwork, and he views the life of the philosopher as immensely more significant than any of his particular “works,” such as writings and talks at conferences. In a note from this period, he puts this sentiment quite nicely. “Das Product des Philosophen,” he says, “ist sein Leben (zuerst, vor seinen Werken). Das ist sein Kun­stwerk (summer/fall 1873, KSA 7: 712).” Which I translate: “The product of the philosopher is his life (first, before his work). That is his artwork.” For Nietzsche, the real proof of what a philosophical teaching is worth is the human life of the philosopher whose teaching it is.
Our discussion so far has concerned the subject matter of philosophical autobiography, which is the human life of a particular individual who philosophizes. The very fact that philosophical autobiographies exist demonstrates that at least some philosophers have taken their own particular lives into account as part of their philosophical activity. Having addressed the subject matter of philosophical autobiography as well as philosophy’s ambivalence toward it, it is now time to investigate the thing itself.

4. **Historical antecedents of the theory of philosophical autobiography.**— An autobiography is a retrospective story, or history, of a human life told by the person who lived it. Throughout the history of philosophy, many philosophers have written autobiographies, some of which are among the most widely studied and influential works in that history. Yet the word “autobiography” is really an anachronism as applied to these works, at least prior to the nineteenth century, when it first gained common currency in English and then spread to other European languages.\(^{12}\) Sometimes a new word is

\(^{12}\) The Oxford English Dictionary has the word first appearing in a periodical in 1797, in William Taylor’s review of Isaac D’Israeli’s *Miscellanies*. “Self-biography,” Taylor observes, seems to be an “illegitimate” expression, because “it is not very usual in English to employ hybrid words partly Saxon and partly Greek: yet autobiography would have seemed pedantic.” Yet Robert Southey (1813-1843), one of the Lake Poets, used the word in 1809 with approval, and by 1828 it had received the imprimatur of Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), when he suggested how greatly we would value an “Autobiography of Shakspeare (sic).” As Peter Gay notes (1995, p. 103), Carlyle also refers in *Sartor Resartus* to “these Autobiographical times of ours.” Upon a recent reading of Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* (1791), I had occasion to observe that the word “autobiography” was not in common usage as recently as the late-eighteenth century. This is shown by a passage where Boswell states that: “Had Dr. Johnson written his own life, in conformity with the opinion which he has given, that every man’s life may be best written by himself; had he employed in the preservation of his own history, the clearness of narration and elegance of language in which he has embalmed so many eminent persons, the world would probably have had the most perfect example of biography that was ever exhibited” (my emphasis). Boswell is clearly speaking of autobiography rather than biography in our sense of these words, so it is reasonable to surmise that the word “autobiography” was simply unavailable to him. See James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. R. W. Chapman, (Oxford World’s Classics edition, 1980, 1998; first published by Oxford University Press, 1904) p. 19. It bears saying that “biography” is a much older word than
required in order for people to recognize the common qualities and being (οὐσία) of diverse beings, and in this case, the new, autobiographical awareness begins to come on the scene historically together with the word. As Georg Misch remarks in his grand study of the history of autobiography, “this term of relatively recent formation…only raises to the level of clear and distinct consciousness a practice that has continued through the literature of all ages.” Yet if this consciousness is truly “clear and distinct,” it is nevertheless still in its infancy.

Certainly philosophers have hitherto paid little attention to autobiography, whether qualified as philosophical or not. Wilhelm Dilthey, Misch’s teacher and father-in-law, is one notable exception. Dilthey accorded autobiography a prominent role in his lifelong endeavor to give a philosophical account of the human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften). In a passage much-quoted in the academic literature on autobiography, he contends that “in autobiography we encounter the highest and most instructive form of the understanding of life.” In an account reminiscent of Vico’s philosophy of history, which contends that we only know what we make, Dilthey attempts to explain why he considers autobiography to be the superlative form for the understanding of life. This passage is worth quoting at length, especially since Dilthey’s

“autobiography.” Again according to the OED, the word goes back to Byzantine Greek around 500 CE and entered English as early as the late-seventeenth century, for example, in John Dryden’s 1683 discussion of Plutarch.


work is not too widely known, and because it addresses a number of central themes within the theoretical discourse about autobiography:

(In autobiography) a life-course stands as an external phenomenon from which understanding seeks to discover what produced it within a particular environment. The person who understands it is the same as the one who created it. This results in a particular intimacy of understanding. The same person who seeks the overall coherence of the story of his life has already produced a life-nexus (Lebenszusammenhang) according to various perspectives, namely, in the ways he has felt the values of his life, actualized its purposes, worked out a life plan, either genetically when looking back or prospectively when looking forward to a highest good. These various ways of producing a life-nexus must now be articulated as a life-history…The constituents of this nexus can be found in conceptions of lived experience (Erlebnis) in which present and past events are held together by a common meaning. Among these lived experiences, those that have a special worth, both for themselves and for the overall life-nexus, have been preserved by memory and raised from the endless stream of forgotten events. A coherence is formed within life itself…(and hence) the work of historical narrative is already half done by life itself. Lived experiences provide its constituents; from the infinite plurality of them, a selection of what is worth narrating has been prepared. And between these parts a connection is seen, which, to be sure, neither is, nor is intended to be, a simple copy of the actual passage of a life of so many years, but which, because understanding is involved, expresses what an individual life knows about its own connectedness. Here we approach the roots of all historical comprehension. (Dilthey 2002, pp. 221-222, my emphasis).

For Dilthey autobiography is not only the highest form with respect to the comprehension of human life, it is also at the roots of historical comprehension as such. Autobiography is, like history, retrospective, and so, as Dilthey proceeds to say, it gives a “second life to the bloodless shadows of the past” (2002, p. 222). Autobiography is different from other kinds of history in that the author has a special intimacy with the subject matter of the writing, because it is her own life in the past. Memory thus plays a central role in the autobiographical work, especially by highlighting those life-moments that the author experienced as significant. For Dilthey, as for Augustine and others, memory is not understood as a merely passive repository for lived experiences (Erlebnisse), but as an
active and selective faculty that raises certain lived experiences “from the endless stream of forgotten events.” Dilthey also makes the perhaps obvious but certainly important observation that autobiography is not intended to be a “simple copy” of a human life, a topic to which I return below.

Duly noting the important contributions of Dilthey and Misch, Donald Phillip Verene (1991, p. 55) nevertheless recognizes that “autobiography as a subject of literary, historical, and philosophical investigation is a twentieth-century phenomenon.” This investigation really only got under way in the latter half of the century, especially in the 1970s with the works of James Olney and Philippe Lejeune. In light of the relative novelty of autobiographical studies, it is unsurprising that the question of the philosophical significance of philosophical autobiography has barely been broached, at least not in a sustained, focused, and systematic way. Indeed philosophical

15 “Apart from Dilthey’s attention to autobiography as a philosophical idea, and Misch’s attempt to use this as a guide for a history of autobiography, little has been done to understand autobiography in philosophical terms. Even the fairly large range of broad-based works of literary criticism on autobiography offer little systematic thought on the nature of autobiography” (Verene 1991, p. 73).

16 See the Bibliography for full references to Olney (1972) and Lejeune (1975). Olney, it’s worth noting, has spoken of how his own work was inspired by Georges Gusdorf’s 1956 essay “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography.” See Olney’s essay in Olney (1980), and his translation of Gusdorf’s essay in the same volume.

17 J. Lenore Wright’s monograph, The Philosopher’s “I”: Autobiography and the Search for Self (SUNY, 2006) has a claim to being one of the first sustained studies of the topic by a single author, but Shlomit C. Schuster’s The Philosopher’s Autobiography: A Qualitative Study (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2003) deserves mention as well. (Apparently, Schuster’s book began as a dissertation written under the direction of Maurice Friedman, the great Martin Buber scholar who also wrote one of the classic studies of literary modernism and existentialism, to deny our nothingness, 1967. Friedman contributed a short Foreword to Schuster’s book.) Schuster stresses both the novelty of her subject matter and the introductory character of her study (see, pp. 1, 16). Her book also has the merit of providing an inclusive, in my opinion too-inclusive, list of philosophical autobiographies throughout history (pp. 7-10). As Schuster, too, notes, the term “philosophical autobiography” seems to have been coined by William C. Spengemann in his monograph The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre (Yale, 1980), which includes studies of Augustine’s Confessions and Rousseau’s. In German, however, the term appears earlier, perhaps originating with Karl Jaspers who titled his own autobiography...
autobiography has scarcely been recognized as a distinctive literary genre, a fact that has inspired astonishment in at least one scholar.\textsuperscript{18}

It is therefore possible and perhaps wise to draw a distinction between philosophical autobiography, which is an old phenomenon, and the theoretical (or philosophical) awareness of philosophical autobiography, which is something relatively new. A certain qualification, however, is in order. In his Introduction to Poetics, Tzvetan Todorov observes that “discourse about literature is born with literature itself.”\textsuperscript{19} The same could be said with respect to the special case of philosophical autobiography, because here too discourse about philosophical autobiography is to some extent born together with the thing itself. In other words, philosophical autobiography (not the word, 

\textit{Philosophische Autobiographie} (published posthumously in its entirety in 1977). Michael Davis’ often brilliant but somewhat strange The Autobiography of Philosophy: Rousseau’s The Reveries of the Solitary Walker (Rowman & Littlefield, 1999) is for many reasons harder to accept as a systematic study of philosophical autobiography per se. Davis’ argument depends on personifying philosophy and then viewing an array of philosophical works as autobiographies of philosophy thus personified. In other words, Davis inclines to make all philosophy and philosophical works autobiographies of philosophy itself, which explains his attempts to read Heidegger’s \textit{Being and Time}, Nietzsche’s \textit{Genealogy}, Plato’s \textit{Lysis}, and the first book of Aristotle’s \textit{Metaphysics} as autobiographies. For example, Davis writes that “in Aristotle…philosophy seems to be autobiographical; whatever it first appears to be about, in the end it is about itself” (p. 3). In this way, Davis’ argument tends to identify philosophy with autobiography thus understood (as “about itself”), and a major consequence of this is that he tends to obscure the idea of autobiography as a distinctive literary genre both within and without philosophy. Since this footnote has become a short bibliographical essay, one should also mention Stanley Cavell’s forays into the area of philosophical autobiography, especially in A \textit{Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises} (Harvard, 1994) and in his own, recently published autobiography, \textit{Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory} (Stanford, 2010), a poignant, moving book. Also worthy of note is George Yancy’s thematic introduction to his edited collection of short autobiographies by contemporary philosophers, \textit{The Philosophical I: Personal Reflections on Life in Philosophy} (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002). The collection entitled \textit{Autobiography as Philosophy: The philosophical uses of self-presentation}, edited by Thomas Mathien and D. G. Wright (Routledge, 2006) contains both a thematic introduction to the topic and diverse articles by a variety of scholars on the autobiographical writings of Augustine, Abelard, Montaigne, Descartes, Vico, Hume, Rousseau, John Henry Newman, Mill, Nietzsche, Collingwood, and Russell.

\textsuperscript{18} Schuster (2003, 12): “with so many worthy philosophical autobiographies available, one can only marvel at the fact that very few researchers have discovered this genre so far.”

but the thing) already becomes thematic to some extent within many of the autobiographical writings of the philosophers, especially in Rousseau, Vico, Descartes, and Augustine. Writing autobiographies, philosophers tended—and tend—to speak reflectively about what they were—and are—doing within the context of doing it.20 Descartes’ *Discourse*, for example, contains a criticism of autobiography *avant la lettre*, and Augustine meditates both on how such works should be read as well as on the cognitive conditions of the possibility for their production, especially memory as he conceives it. Thus the thematization and even theorization of philosophical autobiography is to some extent coeval with its production. At the same time, philosophical autobiography is not the same thing as theory of philosophical autobiography. An autobiography is a retrospective story, or history, of a human life told by the person who lived it, and a philosophical autobiography is a story like this, but told by a philosopher for interrelated philosophical reasons.21 Philosophers write autobiographies for the sake of turning others toward philosophy as a way of human life and in order to present, advance, and in some sense account for first (or ultimate) philosophical principles. Their primary goal, in other words, is not to give an account of what philosophical autobiography is.

5. *The historical emergence and contemporary efflorescence of philosophical autobiography.*— Although the word “autobiography” is relatively new, the connection between philosophy and autobiography has a long and interesting history. This history

---


21 Schuster (2003, p. 5) describes philosophical autobiographies as “documents typically providing two kinds of information: how philosophical thought processes influence the praxis of the philosopher, and how life situations influence philosophical thought processes.”
begins, I argue, with Plato, who established, as it were, the form of philosophical autobiography that, knowingly or not, all subsequent philosophical autobiographies imitate. As a model subtending so many epochal works, from Augustine’s *Confessions* to Descartes’ *Discourse on the Method* and beyond, the Platonic paradigm of philosophical autobiography is like a melody in jazz, upon which the generations improvise countless variations but that remains, for all that, the same melody. The argument for Plato’s primacy in this domain is laid out in Chapter 2 and below.

While investigation into the historical causes of autobiographical awareness within philosophy is certainly desirable, it is not the aim of the present work, which attempts to contribute to this awareness rather than to explain its sources. Insofar as it is historical, my aim is to establish that at certain critical junctures in the history of philosophy, philosophers have cultivated autobiography as a means of doing and communicating philosophy. Another important historical fact I want to note provides evidence that autobiographical awareness within philosophy is both real and becoming increasing powerful. This is that the twentieth century witnessed an historically

---

22 Peter Gay provides a helpful and insightful account of the nineteenth-century preoccupation with autobiography in *The Naked Heart* (1995). As he writes (p. 103): “Until the advent of psychoanalysis in the late 1890s, autobiographies served as the deepest soundings into the inner life the Victorians had at their disposal. The autobiography is, of course, an ancient form of self-definition. Any historical retrospect must go back at least to St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, medieval clerics conducting devout investigations into the condition of their soul, Montaigne probing his inner life, which never ceased to fascinate him, Descartes boldly attempting to ground philosophy in the thinking self, scores of seventeenth-century Puritans and eighteenth-century Pietists solemnly compiling self-questioning balance sheets. But the nineteenth century spawned far more autobiographers, and far more readers for their work, than any of its predecessors. As early as the 1830s, in *Sartor Resartus*, that sensitive barometer of cultural strains, Thomas Carlyle had already called attention to ‘these Autobiographical times of ours.’” Jürgen Habermas’ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (MIT 1991) provides a philosophically-oriented history of the emergence of modern attitudes to subjectivity that bears on the study of autobiography as a specifically modern phenomenon. The aforementioned work by Misch (1951, etc.), as well as Momigliano’s important study (1993) seem indispensable aids to the comprehension of autobiography, and specifically philosophical autobiography, as historical phenomena.
unprecedented proliferation of autobiographies written by philosophers, including those of Russell, Santayana, Collingwood, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Lyotard, Jaspers, Ayer, Sellars, Gadamer, Hook, Derrida, Quine, and many, many others. This development within (the history of) philosophy constitutes a further incentive both to the study of philosophical autobiography and to the attempt to cultivate theoretical understanding of it.

6. **The basic series of questions and the three major theses of this dissertation.**— Starting from the fact that there are a number of autobiographies written by philosophers, I ask: why do these works exist? In other words, why have certain philosophers written autobiographies? Is there a common reason? Or rather, is it for different reasons in each case?

This leads me to ask: what are these works? Which means: what is their form (or structure), and what are their principle elements? Like Aristotle, who in his *Poetics* identifies the basic form and elements of tragedy, those who study philosophical autobiography should desire to comprehend it in terms of its most important constituents.

Like Aristotle, too, one may ask about the telos or goal of philosophical autobiography. What are such works trying to achieve? Do they tend to a common purpose, or is it different in different cases?

---

23 Other twentieth-century autobiographies by notable philosophers include those of Paul Feyerabend (1996) and Bryan Magee (1997). In the twenty-first century, Colin McGinn (2002), Morton White (2004), and Stanley Cavell (2010) have made significant contributions to the genre. A short, but intriguing autobiography by Hilary Putnam appears as the Introduction to his book *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life* (Indiana University Press, 2008). One might also mention the collections of short autobiographical essays by contemporary philosophers in the abovementioned text edited by Yancy (2002) and in *Portraits of American Continental Philosophers*, edited with photographs by James R. Watson (Indiana University Press, 1999). Clearly philosophical interest in autobiography transcends the (in my opinion) outmoded Continental/Analytic divide. Finally, one might mention the autobiography of Count Hermann Keyserling (1927), an interesting work by a neglected philosopher who had a significant influence on twentieth-century literature. See my Bibliography for full references to the autobiographies mentioned here and above.
Is one in fact entitled to comprehend philosophical autobiography as a distinctive literary genre?

Although in practice there may be many reasons why philosophers write and have written autobiographies, the proposition of the present work is that philosophical autobiographies share certain common features that are centrally important for appreciating and understanding what philosophical autobiography is. What I attempt to establish is a concept of philosophical autobiography that reflects three primary qualities of the genre. The first two qualities have to do with its telos or purpose, while the third relates more to its structure as a specific kind of narrative that concerns a particular philosophical becoming. My procedure will be to articulate these three qualities in the form of three propositions. Within the framework thus established, it will, moreover, be possible to note a number of other, in my view, subsidiary elements that characterize philosophical autobiography. The four studies that make up this dissertation demonstrate the validity of the following propositions and show how they have wide application. The studies complement the theory, and the theory complements the studies. When one has read the whole dissertation all the way through (preferably twice), the idea of philosophical autobiography will have become much clearer, and one will gain a reasonably comprehensive knowledge of the form.

My first proposition states that:

*Philosophers write autobiographies for the sake of presenting and giving an account of philosophical first principles.*

More elaborately, what I mean by this is that philosophical autobiographies present readers with a special kind of argument for philosophical first principles, an argument that accounts for such principles in terms of a life-story. If it doesn’t do any harm, one
might call this kind of argument a life-proof, that is, even though it is only a form of literature we are considering here and not life itself. In general terms, philosophical autobiography constitutes a scene of instruction, to borrow a phrase from Cavell (1994, p. 14). More specifically, it is concerned with presenting and giving an account of philosophical first principles.

It is important to note that philosophical first principles are not susceptible of strict demonstration. Because they are first, such principles cannot follow from prior premises. By definition, they are neither the necessary nor the probable conclusion of an inference. Since this is the case, philosophers have reason to seek other ways of giving an account of first principles, and the autobiographies of the philosophers constitute themselves around this goal, attempting to show how first principles were discovered through the course of the particular humanlife of the author. Philosophers who write autobiographies situate their search for wisdom in the context of a narrative about their own lives, showing how they pursued wisdom through the course of their lives, how this search affected them, and how it determined, and was determined by, the experiences of their lives. In Schuster’s words (2003, p. 5), philosophical autobiographies concern and provide information about “how life situations influence philosophical thought processes,” and my claim is that these kinds of stories pertain especially to philosophical first principles. Thus, while J. Lenore Wright (2006, p. 3) is certainly correct, when she observes that philosophers “incorporate philosophical concepts and language into the recounting of the self and/or their lives,” my claim is the rather different one that philosophers recount their lives in order to introduce philosophical concepts. In the aforementioned study of Vico’s Life, Verene (1991, p. ix) asks, “Is the life-narrative of
the philosopher part of his philosophy itself, a form of its verification?” With my first proposition it can be seen that I answer this question in the affirmative.

Philosophical autobiographies are of course literary works, and literary works are written speeches. There are, of course, many different kinds of speech. My contention is that philosophical autobiographies present us with a type of speech directed toward the articulation of philosophical principles, what the Greeks called οἱ ἐπὶ τὰς ἀρχὰς λόγοι, speeches directed toward principles, as opposed to οἱ ἀπὸ τῶν ἀρχῶν λόγοι, i.e., speeches from principles (demonstrations or deductions). The nature of principles is not hard to understand, but there are different kinds of principles that have to be taken into account. As opposed to secondary or derived principles, philosophical autobiography is concerned with first, primary, or ultimate principles. First principles are principles that by definition cannot be proven. Yet that first principles are in need of some kind of account follows from the fact that philosophy is a critical discipline, which means at least that philosophers are, and should be, fundamentally averse to making unsupported dogmatic assertions, much less ones in which the entire philosophical life is to be rooted.

In the end, of course, it may be the case that philosophy must proceed on the basis of at least one hypothesis or assumption; the system is perhaps always incomplete, perhaps always rooted in hypothetical principles that are themselves the basis of everything else. And even where ultimate principles might seem to be more solid, it is wise to examine them critically. Plato, for example, shows again and again throughout his dialogues that he is willing to subject even the ultimate principles of his philosophy to scrutiny, as part

---

24 The principle of an argument may be the conclusion of a prior one, but in that case we are dealing with a derived principle and not an ultimate one. If I argue, for example, that sense-perception gives beings like us accurate information about beings in the world, and I sense-perceive that the sun moves across the sky, I can conclude that at least some being moves. I may then take the proposition that some beings move as a premise in a further argument.
of the philosopher’s never-ending search for an unhypothetical first principle (compare Rep.510b-511e and 533a-539e). The theory of ideas is itself subjected to critique, highlighting its limitations (most famously in Parmenides) and casting doubt upon its coherence and validity. It would be unphilosophic not to examine one’s principles in this way. “To have doubted one’s own first principles,” Justice Holmes once wrote, “is the mark of a civilized man.”

Philosophical autobiographies also endeavor to show that the ultimate concepts or principles that a philosopher holds are intimately linked with a particular way of human life, which leads to my next proposition:

*Philosophers write autobiographies in order to provide prospective philosophers and others with paradigms of a philosophical human life.*

In other words, philosophical autobiographies are, and ought to be, exemplary philosophical lives that show what a philosophical human life is and that such a life is both possible and good. Philosophy as a way of human life is intimately related to philosophical principles. As we have seen, this idea had special appeal for Nietzsche, who insists that the crucial measure of a philosophy is “whether one can live in accordance with it” (ob man nach ihr leben könne).

In recent decades, the idea of philosophy as a way of human life has become increasingly current within the academy, in large part thanks to the works of Pierre Hadot (1995 and 2002). Hadot developed this idea through his work on ancient philosophy, including the study of Plato, Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, Plotinus, and others. In a wonderful text that presents twentieth-century Jewish philosophy as a guide to life,

---

Hilary Putnam (2008, p. 13) characterizes Hadot’s contribution and shows how it can be connected with the philosophical practices of Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, and (with some qualifications) Ludwig Wittgenstein:

Hadot does not believe that we can simply return to one or another of the ancient philosophical schools. But he does believe that the ancient idea of transforming one’s way of life and one’s understanding of one’s place in the larger scheme of things and in the human community is one that we must not lose. Philosophy certainly needs analysis of arguments and logical techniques, but is in danger of forgetting that these were originally in the service of this very idea…the idea of philosophy (or philosophia) as a way of life.

Philosophical autobiography presents philosophy as a possible way of human life. Such writings suggest that this way of life is possible, and it is possible because the philosophers who narrate their life stories tell how they have lived in this way. To quote Lewis Carroll, “if it was so, it might be.” Philosophy is distinguished by seeking comprehensive knowledge in theoretical and practical domains with the ultimate goal of living a good human life, and philosophical autobiography shows how such a search can come to be and why it is worthwhile.

By focusing attention on their own lives, those who write philosophical autobiographies also bring their own character into the equation. The character (ἦθος) of the speaker is one of the three means of rhetorical proof (πίστις) Aristotle lists in his Rhetoric (e.g., at 1356a5-15). Aristotle argues that the speech itself is decisive for establishing the good character of the speaker in relation to the audience, and he explicitly denies that prior knowledge of the speaker’s character on the part of the audience is relevant. Rather, he suggests that the character of the speaker as it presents itself in the speech may be the most persuasive proof of the speech’s value (Rhett. 1356a13). Along the same lines as Aristotle, I suggest that philosophers use
autobiography in order to bring their whole life and character to bear on whatever they are trying to prove. In Lionel Trilling’s words, this proof is partially based on the idea that “(the author) is the man; he suffered; he was there.” The authors of philosophical autobiographies claim to speak from experience.

Philosophical autobiography situates philosophy in the context of a life-story about the unique human life of a particular philosopher. These stories, moreover, share a common structure. They are marked out by three moments or rather periods: the period leading up to the discovery of first principles, the moment of discovery, and the discussion of what follows from this discovery, not only logically but also what follows in terms of life. Hence my third proposition is that:

*Philosophical autobiographies concern a particular human life and narrate the philosophical becomings and conversions that mark this life.*

In other words, they depict change over the time of life. An autobiography is a retrospective story, or history, of a human life told by the person who lived it. Philosophical autobiographies are stories about philosophical lives and hence about how the author came to be the philosopher that he is. To borrow a word from the religious context, philosophical autobiographies describe formation. This formation is also, of course, a transformation, as Bakhtin (1981) and others have recognized. This transformation, moreover, tends to be progressive, that is, it’s a change from worse to better.

Philosophical autobiographies make a peculiar kind of argument, an argument rooted in a narrative that the philosopher tells about her life. This narrative has a distinctive form or structure: the philosopher discusses her search for truth, traces the

---

course of her education, and discusses her dissatisfaction with existing modes of knowledge. The culmination of this narrative comes when the philosopher relates her discovery of the ultimate principle of her philosophy. This is the moment of reversal or conversion, akin to what Aristotle calls περιπέτεια (peripeteia) in his discussion of tragedy, except that conversion in philosophical autobiography often comes from the inside, as the result of a judgment or decision that the philosopher makes in her own mind and for which, she suggests, her life up to that point had been preparing her. At the moment of reversal, there is always a decision close by, and in some cases the decision is itself the reversal. In philosophical autobiography, the presentation of the principle coincides more or less with the peripeteia, turning, or conversion.

For this reason, philosophical autobiography is closely connected with paradigm shifts within philosophy, insofar as major changes in (the history of) philosophy depend for the most part on the adoption of new philosophical principles. As Vico says, a new science can hardly be based on old principles. This is not to say that autobiography is the only way for philosophers to present new philosophical principles, but philosophical autobiography has a special intimacy with principles. It is possible to make a good argument that philosophy begins with an autobiography in the writings of Plato and that modern philosophy (insofar as there is such a thing) does so as well with Descartes’ autobiographical Discourse on the Method. The autobiographies of Augustine, Vico, Rousseau, and Nietzsche—even Mill’s Autobiography—could all be plausibly construed as representing moments in the history of philosophy when the paradigm shifted and something new began.

27 All references to Vico’s Life are to the translation by Max Harold Fisch and Thomas Goddard Bergin, published as The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico (Cornell, 1944), p. 187.
Philosophical autobiography thus charts a certain path toward philosophical principles. Paraphrasing the structure of what philosophers relate in their autobiographies, I put it as follows. “I will try to show you how my whole previous life led up to this principle, the principle of my philosophy, and also, since I’ve come to it, how this principle, has been, and will be, decisive for the remainder of my life.” The ultimate philosophical principles that emerge in the course of a life are characterized in relation to other principles and approaches to philosophy that the philosopher has rejected in the course of his life and on the basis of his experiences. Thus philosophical autobiography can be thought of as showing how one makes and comes to live a philosophy through the course of life. According to the theory I propound, then, these three propositions express what philosophical autobiography basically does and hence is.

7. *The method of discovery employed in the present work.*— How did I arrive at this conception of philosophical autobiography? It is worth saying that I did not begin the present study with these ideas in mind. Rather, I was initially thinking along certain lines that are, as I have since discovered, among the predominant ones within the (relatively scant) literature on this topic. Initially I was thinking about philosophical autobiography as a philosophical literary genre primarily concerned with the time-honored philosophical longing for self-knowledge, exemplified by Heraclitus’ haunting aphorism—“I sought myself.”—and Socrates’ famous words from Plato’s *Apology*—“the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being.” Hegel, in the passage quoted above, reiterates this concern and ties it to what he calls the highest, hardest, and most concrete type of philosophical cognition.
Now it seems natural that the topic of philosophical autobiography is apt to occasion reflection on the concept of self, especially insofar as this concept can be tied to what some contemporary philosophers call narrative identity. Wright, for example, in her study of philosophical autobiography sees the search for self as the central theme and purpose of philosophical autobiography, and consequently she tends to view these works as having an exploratory character, as depicting the search for self-knowledge, which in some cases they certainly do. On the whole though, I now tend to read them rather as expository than exploratory, as elaborating both a prior search and discovery, as well as showing how this discovery has been decisive for the philosopher’s subsequent practice.

Narrative identity is tied to the humanlives of particular individuals. Loosely, what narrative identity means is that a person is, in some important sense, nothing other than the stories she can tell about herself. Now, while the question of the relation between the self and humanlife is clearly an important one, I have also come to believe that humanlife rather than self is the principal subject matter of philosophical autobiography. Even the most self-searching autobiographers, Augustine and Rousseau, seem to be more concerned with exploring the meaning of their lives than in searching for an answer to the question who or what they are. Of course humanlife and self are intimately connected, but they are also not the same thing. A self has a humanlife as well as a biological one, which is to say that these things belong to some self. If the one that has is different from what one has, it follows that self and life are not the same thing. Further proof of the distinction between self and humanlife is that they have a different relation to time. From the standpoint of the present, much of the life of the self is in the past, whereas the self

itself has not fallen into the past in the same way. As long as it is, self is present, which is not to preclude the possibility that it changes over time. On the contrary, philosophical autobiography tends to show that the self does change as a result of what it suffers and does and that life, especially human life, shapes the self.

When I began studying Socrates’ autobiography in Plato’s *Phaedo*. 95e7-102a1, my thinking about philosophical autobiography started to go in a different direction away from the concern with self-knowledge. What occasioned this study was an article by O.S.L. Gower (2008), entitled “Why Is There an Autobiography in the *Phaedo*?” Professor Polansky, the director of my dissertation, knew I was working on autobiography in Plato and others and asked me to review Gower’s article for *Ancient Philosophy*. Although I disagreed then, and still do with Gower’s interpretation of Socrates’ autobiography and its function in the *Phaedo*, his article encouraged me to look more closely at Socrates’ autobiography and to work out my own interpretation. Through the course of this study, I realized that the main reason Socrates narrates a story about his life is that he wants to give his interlocutors (and Plato’s readers) an account of the ultimate principles of his philosophical activity. He wants to give them such an account, moreover, because he wants them to accept these principles so that he can then, on their basis, go on to a (very interesting) proof for the immortality of the soul. In his autobiography, Socrates explains what, as a young man, he was seeking and how he sought it. He describes his disappointments and how they changed him, and what he did in light of his failure to find what he had been looking for. He also wants to impress his addressees with the relation between philosophical first principles and the need for philosophical decision or judgment.
So one of the central propositions of my theory derives from an intellectual perception I had while studying the *Phaedo*. Todorov has argued quite compellingly for the interdependence of theory and textual exegesis (or “close reading”), which is to say, he advocates a conception of poetics that derives its concepts from the careful study of particular texts, rather than imposing concepts on the text, as it were, from outside. Todorov, of course, recognizes that we cannot help coming to texts with certain prejudices. This theme was also amply developed in the last century by Hans-Georg Gadamer in his attempt to elaborate the principles of philosophical hermeneutics and to put these principles into practice. A point that Gadamer reiterates throughout his work is that the best we can do is to try to make our hermeneutical assumptions (*hermeneutische Vorgriffe*) explicit.

Upon gaining this insight into the form and function of Socrates’ autobiography in the *Phaedo*, my next task was to see whether or not I could discover the same form and function in other philosophical autobiographies. What I found and believe myself to have shown in the following chapters is that other philosophical autobiographies do share the same basic structure, elements, and function, that is, despite their obvious myriad differences at the level of their content.

But I want to go back even further, because in the background of my dissertation lies a question about the relationship between philosophy and *humanlife*. The neologism *humanlife* (which is inaudible, but one sees when reading) is justified because our word “life” is equivocal, since it can refer either to biological life (what the Greeks called *zoë*), or to a way of life that is specifically human (the Greek *bios*). The latter of course presupposes the former, but it is with *humanlife* that I am presently concerned. Another
way to put this would be to say that I am interested in philosophy as *lived*, which is to say, as it functions in the lives of various individuals (including, naturally, my own). As it turns out, others share this interest, and it is also becoming more prominent within philosophy thanks to the works of Hadot, Putnam, Davis, Yancy, Cavell, and others.

There might be many reasons why philosophical autobiography is an intriguing subject, but the initial impetus to the current work came to me from Nietzsche, from the study of his writings in general, but also in particular from sections 5 and 6 of *Beyond Good and Evil*. Probably the most famous passage comes at the beginning of section 6, where Nietzsche writes:

> Allmählich hat sich mir herausgestellt, was jede grosse Philosophie bisher war: nämlich das Selbstbekenntnis ihres Urhebers und eine Art ungewollter und unvermerkter mémoires; insgleichen, dass die moralischen (oder unmoralischen) Absichten in jeder Philosophie den eigentlichen Lebenskeim ausmachten, aus dem jedesmal die ganze Pflanze gewachsen ist (BGE §6/KSA 5:19-20).

Which I translate:

> Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been, namely, the confession of its creator, and a kind of involuntary and unacknowledged memoirs; at the same time, that the moral (or immoral) intentions constitute the authentic kernel of life of every philosophy, from which the whole plant has grown.

At first, what I found striking about this passage was the idea, familiar to readers of Nietzsche, that philosophers’ explicit views stemmed from implicit presuppositions that were, moreover, deeply rooted in their lives, psychological constitutions, and personal histories.\(^{29}\) For me, this called to mind aphorisms like “On the origin of scholars,” from the *Gay Science*, where Nietzsche argues that most scholars and philosophers are much

\(^{29}\)Although his claim that there are two basic types of philosopher appears rather too reductionist, William James makes a similar argument in his famous *Pragmatism* lectures.
more influenced by their upbringing and background than they usually know or care to admit (see GS §348). Thus the possibility opened up for me that the great (and not only the great) philosophies were themselves, at least in part, a kind of confession, memoirs, or autobiography, albeit an “involuntary and unacknowledged” one, as Nietzsche says. I was intrigued by the idea that the overt discourse of the philosophers could be shown to reveal the historical background and perhaps even the unconscious motivations behind a given philosopher’s work, their secret hopes and desires and fears. The background question is, how intimately is philosophy twined together with the particular personality and life history of the philosopher? A question that Louis Althusser (1993, pp. 160, 169), for example, took seriously in composing his own autobiography, as can be seen from his repeated intention to describe “how I came to invest and inscribe my objective, public activities with my subjective phantasies,” “to elucidate if possible the deep-seated, personal motives, both conscious and especially unconscious, which underpinned (my) whole undertaking beneath its outward and visible form.”

The more I thought about it, however, the more it seemed to me that the existence of so many philosophical autobiographies, both before and after Nietzsche, cast serious doubt upon his suggestion that philosophers had only written autobiographies involuntarily and without acknowledging what they were doing. It now appeared to me that, far from ignoring or suppressing the connection between their philosophies and their lives, at least some philosophers, by writing autobiographies, had made this connection an explicit theme of their philosophical investigations and an integral part of their philosophical activity. Obviously this didn’t preclude even in these cases that there might still be unconscious presuppositions, unacknowledged hopes and desires, behind what we
encounter on the surface. What is worse, autobiography itself may be just one more “means of self-concealment,” as Freud is reported to have said of Goethe’s autobiography, *Dichtung und Wahrheit.* Nothing, however, precludes these possibilities, even if one has made great progress in replacing “it” with “I,” to use the Freudian language. Assuming one admits the reality of the unconscious (and not all philosophers admit this), the project of making the unconscious conscious is still, by Freud’s own admission, an “interminable” work with which no one will ever be finished. Nonetheless, it seemed to me that many of the philosophers who had written autobiographies made remarkable progress toward understanding how their lives informed their philosophical beliefs and, vice versa, how their philosophical beliefs shaped their lives. To pull Nietzsche’s beard, one might say that philosophical autobiography is the voluntary and acknowledged attempt of philosophers to consider the connection between their humanlives and their philosophy.

8. *Philosophical autobiography and humanlife.*— Philosophical autobiography makes the connection between philosophy and humanlife explicit. The uniqueness of philosophical autobiography is tied to the way it brings the connection between philosophy and humanlife to the foreground. The neologism humanlife seems defensible and even desirable given the marked equivocity of the word “life.” The subject of autobiography, as of biography, is actually humanlife and, more specifically, the humanlife of some particular individual. Humanlife is to be distinguished above all from biological life. As John Dewey once wrote, “When we see a book called the *Life of*

---

Lincoln we do not expect to find within its covers a treatise on physiology.” Life is equivocal since it can mean both biological life (in our sense of “biology”), or what the Greeks called ζωή, and also specifically human life, or βίος in Greek. The dialogue of the Phaedo, for example, includes by turns consideration of both senses of life, which is fitting because βίος, a human way of life, presupposes and indeed depends on ζωή. Yet the central theme of the Phaedo and the Apology as well is really βίος. For although βίος depends on ζωή, it is nevertheless not wholly subservient to it, as indeed Socrates’ predicament clearly demonstrates. For Socrates’ βίος or way of life is somehow the cause of the impending termination of his biological life. Socrates further insists that in no case would he change his way of life in order to preserve his biological one. The dialogue is really about the fact that a human being has two interrelated but distinct lives, a βίος and a ζωή, and what Socrates argues is that of the two, the βίος is by far the most important.

In The Human Condition (1958, p. 97), Hannah Arendt describes human life and draws a crucial connection between it and the human capacity for biography and autobiography:

The word “life”...(can) designate the time interval between birth and death. Limited by a beginning and an end, that is, by the two supreme events of appearance and disappearance within the world, it follows a strictly linear movement whose very motion nevertheless is driven by the motor of biological life which man shares with other living things and which forever retains the cyclical movement of nature. The chief characteristic of this specifically human life...is that it is itself always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a biography; it is of this life, bios as distinguished from mere zôê, that Aristotle said that it “somehow is a kind of praxis.” For action and speech, which...belonged close together in the Greek understanding of politics, are indeed the two activities whose end result will always be a story with enough coherence to be told, no matter how accidental or haphazard the single events and their causation may appear to be.

---

Of course this does not mean that such stories are completely unproblematic, or that one should accept them naively and uncritically. It is good to keep in mind that, as William Gass has written, “stories break up the natural continuum of life into events,” and so they are in some sense deceptive and certainly selective.\textsuperscript{32} It is therefore important to read them with discretion, as Descartes suggests (see my Ch. 4).

Philosophy and life are distinguishable. For finite beings whose life is conditioned by time, before any philosophical question emerges, there is a life. Before one becomes a philosopher, an empiricist, a rationalist, an idealist, a materialist, a Wittgensteinian, a Heideggarian, a Continental, or an Analytic, one is born. One is born into a life-world and becomes self-conscious. No one is born a philosopher, and at most some (or all?) are born with philosophical potential, in the way that people are born with athletic or artistic potential. For the individual human being that each of us is, life comes before philosophy in the order of time. This fact explains why philosophers going back to Plato and Aristotle recognized the need for protreptic discourses, which are basically discourses that aim to convert individuals to philosophy or the belief that a life devoted to philosophical activity is best. Pace Rousseau, human beings are not by nature born what they ought to be, and philosophical autobiography aims to foster philosophical becoming.

9. \textit{What this dissertation isn’t about}.— The topic here is likely to be confused with some others, perhaps above all with the aforementioned question about the nature of the self. At least a few other themes are worthy of note.

The study of autobiography raises curious questions about the relations between fact and fiction, especially germane to the philosophy of history. One cannot help but

worry about the referent of autobiographical texts, raising the question of how truthfully or accurately the text refers to its subject, the life of its author. One source of this problem is that one may discover disparities between the biographies and autobiographies of philosophers such as Augustine, Rousseau, and others. As Derrida has written, autobiography seems to occupy an impossible zone between fiction and truth, and the distinction between fiction and autobiography is on his account an “undecidable” one, “in whose undecidability…it is impossible to stand.” In most cases, it is impossible to verify or falsify what is presented in autobiography as the truth about a human life. Rousseau (Pl. I.5) says he will present readers with “un homme dans toute la vérité de la nature,” and the autobiographies of the philosophers are replete with promises to tell the truth. Yet in most cases, how could we readers ever be certain of the truth of such stories? It seems the best one can do is to strike a balance between trust and discretion.

Philosophical autobiography is, to repeat, a kind of literature, and, to paraphrase Nietzsche, books are one thing and life is another (EH “Books”§1/KSA 6: 298). Literature, it bears saying, is not life. Just as Borges’ map of the empire as big as the empire highlights the absurdity of an exact correspondence between the thing itself and its representation, it would be similarly absurd to think of autobiography as an exact truthful replica of a human life. Dilthey, as we have seen, clearly recognized this truth. It takes a narrative to tell the story of a life, and this means it takes time. To quote Boethius, “Nothing situated in time can at one moment grasp the entire duration of its life” (2000,

p. 110, *The Consolation of Philosophy* 5.6.5). Beings situated in time require a narrative, and narrative is through time (diachronic). A life, moreover, is not repeatable. Yet although it is not in the nature of a human life to be graspable in a single moment, much less repeatable, it is clearly possible for us to give a retrospective account of our lives. Because, after all, autobiography exists. But the question how this account could ever be adequate to the thing itself raises so many difficulties that it is perhaps wiser to sidestep the question altogether. On the other hand, what is known about our lives neither by us nor by others is that which is simply unknown about them, having sunk in Dilthey’s “endless stream of forgotten events,” where most things ultimately go.

Although one naturally thinks about memory in relation to autobiography, this dissertation does not undertake, except incidentally, a philosophical investigation of memory, of what it is and how it works, both in general and also with respect to the human capacity for autobiography. Memory is clearly one condition of the possibility of autobiography, which is something that Augustine emphasizes in his *Confessions*. This dissertation concerns autobiographies as opposed to the process of composing autobiographies, i.e., it isn’t about how autobiographies are written. Just as one may distinguish the study of histories from historiography understood as the study of how history is written, so the study of autobiography may be distinguished from that of how autobiographies are composed.

This dissertation does not spell out a theory of human life. The broadest concept of human life would have to be divided into increasingly specific types all the way down to the human life of particular individuals. When a particular individual says “my life,” she sometimes refers to her unique human life, and in that case the referent of the term is both
unique and in principle unrepeatable (unless the eternal recurrence is literally true). There is a class of countless propositions that only hold true when they are said by a particular individual. (For example, I can say “My grandfather, Frank G. Sabo, attended my graduation from Xavier University in 2000,” and this is true. But no one else can say it truly.) The most general or basic concept of human life, meanwhile, would have to attend to the natural stages of human life, as for example Plato and Rousseau do in *Republic* and *Emile*, respectively. The basic concept of human life would also involve many of the investigations traditionally undertaken by philosophers, for example, into human nature, including our intellectual abilities and emotional propensities. Of course the study of the autobiographies of the philosophers can make some contribution to this endeavor, especially since they concern individuals. Being an individual and having a unique human life determines conceptually and essentially what it means to be human.

Autobiography in general promises knowledge of the lives of particular human beings, and when we read autobiographies, we expect to learn something about the lives of others, though this is not all. Since autobiography is an essentially retrospective and reflective discourse, we also expect to learn something about how others think about their lives, how they judge what they’ve done and suffered, and how this judgment affects their sense of what their lives have meant. Autobiographies can also, however, teach us about human nature in general and even about ourselves, insofar as we recognize, or fail to recognize, the actions, passions, and patterns that we find in these texts reflected in our own lives and the lives of others we know.

10. *Reason, judgment, and the event of mind in human life.*— Reading the autobiographies of philosophers such as Plato, Augustine, Descartes, Vico, Rousseau,
Mill, Nietzsche, and others, it is possible to come to an understanding of philosophy as a way of human life dedicated to the search for truth. This search is intimately related to the goal of becoming as wise as it is possible for a human being to be. At the center of this enterprise is *reason* (λόγος). Because philosophy relies on reason, it necessarily involves principles. Principles are the starting-points for reason, and first principles are starting points in a superlative sense. As such, first principles are not, and by definition cannot be, the product of an inference, at least not in any straightforward way. Instead they are the product of judgment. Judgment, or decision, follows from mind, and therefore mind (νοῦς) and judgment are also at the center of philosophy. Judgment differs from mind, because (in my way of framing this) judgment is an active decision to accept what mind gives. Philosophical autobiography thus concerns the superlative event of mind and the judgment that decides on first principles. It places this event and this decision in the context of the human life of a philosopher who tells a story about his life.

In the autobiographies of the philosophers, philosophical first principles also come forward as matters of ultimate philosophical concern and indeed, one may venture to say, as life-giving. They appear as both the telos and the beginning of a philosophical human life that has reason (λόγος) at its core. Reason itself proceeds from first principles as does a river from its source. But unlike a river, reason can, and should, occasionally question its source. Reason itself demands this, and there is nothing higher or better than reason (λόγος), except perhaps for mind (νοῦς) and philosophical judgment. The life of wisdom depends on reason, mind, and judgment.

The structure of philosophical autobiography imitates but also creates the structure of a human life dedicated to philosophy. Such a human life, when it comes to be,
begins by seeking its principle. In other words, it begins by seeking its beginning, not in the sense of some historical or natural origin, but rather as a way to begin. Philosophical autobiography then proceeds to describe the discovery of this beginning as an event of mind and a judgment. At last, the philosophical autobiographers go on to show how this judgment has been, and continues to be, definitive of their subsequent life and activity. Among the many things that philosophical autobiography wants to tell us, perhaps the most important is that a humanlife like this is possible because it has been. This, at least, is the teaching of the philosophical autobiographies as I read them. They are works that attempt to show how, for a particular individual, a philosophical humanlife begins.
Chapter 2
The Platonic Paradigm of Philosophical Autobiography

The materials for a genuine biography of Plato exist in his letters and in the indirect evidence of his dialogues.—Cornford

ὑμεῖς μέντοι, ἃν ἐμοὶ πείθησθε, συμφέρον φροντίσαντες Σωκράτους, τής δὲ ἄλλητείας πολὺ μᾶλλον. (You, however, if you might be persuaded by me, will give little thought to Socrates and rather much more to the truth. Phaedo 91b8-c2, my translation.)

1. Plato’s invention of philosophical autobiography.— Those who track the historical origins of philosophical concepts and methods move along a path that leads, sooner or later, and more often than not, to Plato. It is therefore hardly surprising that in the case of philosophical autobiography, too, one finds Plato at the origin. Plato invented philosophical autobiography, as, arguably, he invented philosophy. The real surprise here is not really that Plato invented philosophical autobiography, but rather how thoroughly Plato already worked out the possibilities of this genre, how highly developed this form was already to become in his hands. We should not allow the deviations and enhancements of philosophical autobiography over millennia to blind us to the fact that the basic elements and structure of the form are already to be found in Plato’s writings, in the “spurious” Seventh Letter and, above all, in the dialogues. Plato devises philosophical autobiography as a genre that emerges at certain critical junctures within his dialogic universe, in the Apology, when Socrates is on trial for his life, and in the Phaedo (95e7-36 “The Unwritten Philosophy” in The Unwritten Philosophy and Other Essays, (Cambridge University Press, 1950, 1967) p. 34.

37 Unless otherwise noted, translations of Plato come from Plato: Complete Works, eds. John M. Cooper and Doug Hutchinson (Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

38 For the claim that Plato in some sense invents philosophy, see Andrea Wilson Nightingale’s philologically astute and intellectually perceptive, Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construct of Philosophy (Cambridge, 1995). See especially pp. 9-12. See also Bernard Williams, The Sense of the Past: Essays in the History of Philosophy (Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 148 and so forth. In Reading Plato (Routledge, 1999), Thomas A Szlezák maintains that “Plato defined the standard of what could from then on in Europe be called philosophy” (translation by Graham Zanker).
102a1), when he is facing imminent death. Like the *Apology*, the autobiographical *Seventh Letter* also addresses itself to a political crisis where Plato’s own character is on the line. Hackforth suggests that “Plato writes partly with the object of meeting charges brought against him” by Dion’s followers, so it is possible to view this letter also as a kind of apology.\(^\text{39}\) The birth of philosophical autobiography therefore takes place at moments of great pitch, scenes of extremity, in which philosophical principles and character are put to the test. Philosophical autobiography thus emerges as a response to crisis, at moments in the dialogues and (possibly) in Plato’s life, when something of great importance is to be decided, and judgment is required. In the *Apology* and the *Seventh Letter*, philosophical autobiography assumes a public face, addressing itself to some political community. In the *Phaedo*, by contrast, it assumes a more intimate character, as Socrates confides a life-story to a select and sympathetic group of those already striving to lead a philosophical life. In both cases though, the dramatic contexts suggest that Plato sees philosophical autobiography as answering to the most demanding situations, suggesting the possibility that in the last resort, autobiography comes first for the philosopher.

Some scholars may find vague anticipations of philosophical autobiography even earlier than Plato, in the writings of the so-called Presocratic philosophers. But, of those authors whose writings have come down to us from Greek antiquity, Plato is clearly the first to work out the form of philosophical autobiography, establishing its basic elements, developing its function, and, in the process, demonstrating the close connection between

\(^{39}\) Hackforth, 1913, p. 98.
autobiography and philosophy.\textsuperscript{40} Even Plato’s role in establishing this genre has scarcely been appreciated by scholars.\textsuperscript{41} The almost universal neglect of Plato’s role here may be partially explained in terms of the kind of historical change I indicated in the Introduction. Human beings are for the most part only able to think in terms of the concepts and categories that are available to mind at a given epoch in human history, and, to repeat, theoretical awareness of autobiography is a relatively recent historical phenomenon that simply didn’t exist prior to modern times.\textsuperscript{42} How exactly this new consciousness arose is, as I’ve said, something of a mystery, but \textit{that} it has come to be is beyond a doubt. In light then of the insight into the relative historical novelty of autobiographical awareness, it is understandable that Plato’s contributions to philosophical autobiography have hardly been appreciated up till now.

Right at the outset of our discussion of Plato’s autobiographical writings, however, we encounter a problem, and one that arises due to the fact that the autobiographies appearing in Plato’s dialogues are written by one man, Plato, but are about another and put in the mouth of another, Socrates. Consideration of Plato’s autobiographical writings quickly leads to a peculiarly enigmatic encounter with the so-

\textsuperscript{40} Due to the fragmentary character of the texts we possess from the Presocratic philosophers, it is impossible to know how far any of them in particular produced autobiographical writings. We have, for example, a fragment from Xenophanes of Colophon, consisting of four lines, in which the author discusses his own life. For this fragment, see Daniel W. Graham, \textit{The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy} (Cambridge, 2010), Xenophanes, fragment 11, p. 104 (the source, incidentally, is Diogenes Laertius). Parmenides’ “philosophical poem,” as Graham calls it, has a kind of autobiographical character, albeit a completely fantastic one. Can one reasonably consider such a dream-like work as Parmenides’ poem to be an autobiography? It is, in any case, a narrative kind of work.

\textsuperscript{41} It is telling that the aforementioned collection of essays entitled \textit{Autobiography as Philosophy: The Philosophical Uses of Self-Presentation} (Routledge, 2006) contains no chapter devoted to Plato’s autobiographical writings.

\textsuperscript{42} The qualification “for the most part” is necessary because human beings are not simply bound to think in terms of the available concepts or ideas. There is such a thing as a new idea, after all.
called Socratic problem. Ralph Waldo Emerson nicely symbolized the intractability of this problem, when he wrote that, “Socrates and Plato are the double star which the most powerful instruments will not entirely separate.”\textsuperscript{43} Christopher Rowe, a well-regarded contemporary Plato scholar, calls this “one of the standing problems of scholarship…the so-called ‘Socratic problem’”\textsuperscript{44}. Perhaps if we begin with a few facts we can avoid becoming disoriented by this problem and can distinguish the double star sufficiently for present purposes. The first thing to note is that it is, of course, the character “Socrates” who speaks as an autobiographer in Plato’s \textit{Apology}, \textit{Phaedo}, and in other dialogues. Now in these dialogues Socrates \textit{speaks} his life-story and doesn’t write it, but the distinction between speaking and writing need not trouble us here. The problems of authorship and reference, or the attribution of certain ideas to certain individuals, might appear comparatively more bothersome. The questions about the authorship and referent of Plato’s Socratic autobiographies is a special instance of the more general problem of how to understand the relationship between Plato and Socrates. There are three possible ways of resolving this problem. Either the Platonic dialogues, and by extension some of the Platonic autobiographical writings, are purely Plato’s invention, or they are simply verbatim reports of actual Socratic conversations (Leo Strauss 1964, p. 55 calls this “the most unintelligent assumption”), or they are a mixture of invention and reportage.

In his fine study of biography and autobiography in the ancient world, Momigliano observes that the \textit{Apology} and \textit{Phaedo} appear to present instances of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[44] Rowe (2003, p. 2).
\end{footnotes}
“biography disguised as autobiography.”45 If this is correct, then Plato would be making the literary character Socrates articulate certain autobiographical accounts whose referent is the life of the real, historical Socrates. In that case, Plato might still be inventing the autobiographical gesture, that is, the historical Socrates may never have narrated a retrospective story about his life, and Plato only makes the literary character do so. Was Socrates, rather than Plato, the inventor of philosophical autobiography? It isn’t really possible to answer this question definitively, but it would also be a mistake to think that anything of philosophical importance hangs on it either way. Certainly from the point of view of this study, which focuses on the form and function of philosophical autobiography, even the question of the referent is not especially pressing.46 For, even if we should think of these autobiographies as, on some level, biographies in disguise, it is nevertheless true that within the context of the dialogues where they feature, they act like autobiographies and perform the functions of philosophical autobiography elaborated in the Introduction and below.

There is, however, another possible way of interpreting these autobiographical passages, especially the one in Phaedo, namely, not as biographies of Socrates disguised as autobiographies, but as autobiographies of Plato disguised as autobiographies of Socrates. This was Nietzsche’s view of the autobiographical passage in the Phaedo, a view which he expressed in his lectures on the “Preplatonic philosophers” (as Nietzsche called them). “Socrates never came to know physics, since that which Plato narrates concerning the studies of Anaxagoras at Phaedo and so on is certainly only Plato’s own

46 This is not to say that the problem of reference is not an important philosophical problem. Quite the contrary is true, especially with regard to the philosophy of history. The focus of the present work, however, is elsewhere.
historical development.” It is, then, clearly possible to maintain that Plato put his own autobiography into Socrates’ mouth. Nietzsche’s rather bold gambit is, however, open to serious doubts. According to Burnet, Socrates’ autobiographical account of his enthusiasm as a young man for the study of nature “is confirmed in a striking way by our earliest witness, Aristophanes.” So if Burnet is correct, and the real Socrates was for a time deeply engaged in the study of nature, then perhaps Socrates’ autobiography in the *Phaedo* is a biography disguised as an autobiography after all, as Momigliano suggests.

Certainly we do not, and shall probably never know whether and to what extent these autobiographies are truthful biographies of Socrates or inventions of Plato, whether referring to the real person Socrates or, perhaps in some cases, to Plato himself. These problems are rather more historical than philosophical, however, and from the point of view of the present investigation, we can and indeed must bracket these historical dilemmas. The safe claim that Socrates and Plato initiate the tradition of philosophical autobiography *together* provides a perfectly adequate basis on which to build. But, keeping this cautionary word in mind, I think one is nonetheless entitled to speak of Plato alone as the inventor of philosophical autobiography, since he alone is the writer. Socrates himself never wrote anything, at least nothing that has come down to us (such as the hymn to Apollo and the versification of some of Aesop’s fables discussed at *Phaedo* 60c-61b). We will probably never know whether the historical Socrates ever related a

---

47 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, trans. and ed., with an Introduction and Commentary by Greg Whitlock (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), pp. 143-144. N.b., Nietzsche called them Preplatonic, as opposed to Presocratic, philosophers, which suggests that for Nietzsche the big turn in philosophy comes with Plato. Plato becomes one of the principal targets in Nietzsche’s campaign against what he calls “anti-natural” belief-systems, which I discuss in Chapter 6.

48 Burnet, op. cit., p. xxxix; cf. Notes, p. 95.
spoken life-story, though it is at least likely that the real Socrates would have given some kind of account of his life in the context of his trial in 399 BCE.

The autobiographies embedded in Plato’s dialogues are not, however, Plato’s only autobiographical writings, and it would be strange not to consider the autobiographical letters in this study, especially the *Seventh Letter*, which Momigliano calls “the greatest autobiographical letter of antiquity.” For Plato scholars the question of the *Seventh* and other letters is a complicated one, fraught with anxieties and, if I may say so, cathexed with all the energy of a neurotic symptom. As is well known, the primary question is mainly the historical one about whether Plato himself was truly their author. Momigliano poses the question in the following way. “The question we have to ask…is whether Plato’s *Letter 7*, the greatest autobiographical letter of antiquity, is a real autobiography or a biographical letter disguised as autobiographical. Did a pupil of Plato write Plato’s *Letter 7* just as Plato wrote Socrates’ *Apology*?” Some scholars have argued against the *Seventh Letter’s* authenticity. The majority, including Momigliano, have argued that the *Seventh Letter* was in fact written by Plato. In defense of this position, Momigliano

---

49 Perhaps the historical Socrates said nothing in his own defense at his trial? The possibility is suggested in *Gorgias* by Callicles. Apparently Libanius and Maximus of Tyre preserved this story. See R. E. Allen (1980, p. 4).

50 Ibid.

51 Momigliano, op. cit., p. 60.


53 Reginald Hackforth argued for the authenticity of the *Seventh Letter* in *The Authorship of the Platonic Epistles* (Manchester: The University of Manchester Press, 1913). See also L. A. Post, *Thirteen Epistles of Plato*, (Oxford 1925), Introduction, pp. 1-11. Hegel, Grote, Nietzsche, Wilamowitz, Burnet, Hackforth, Cornford, Post, Bury, Ross, Gadamer, and Hadot all maintain the authenticity of the *Seventh Letter*. Obviously, as Ross (1951, p. 3) says, “it is impossible to be
offers a couple of arguments that are fairly persuasive. His first argument in particular
seems to me especially strong:

The first argument is that…we do not know of any autobiographical letter
comparable to Plato’s Seventh Letter before Plato. I am reluctant to admit
that forgery preceded reality in the matter of autobiographical letters. The
letter seems to me an exceptional creation by an exceptional man, namely
Plato.54

The creator of the Seventh Letter, whoever it was, was an exceptional person who
invented an altogether new genre, the epistolary philosophical autobiography. Whoever
wrote it, in other words, there can be no doubt that the Seventh Letter is a finely wrought
autobiographical work that demonstrates a high degree of philosophical sophistication.

Now from the point of view of the present study, which is philosophical, it makes
little difference whether the Seventh Letter (or any of the Platonic letters) is authentic,
and in any case, I have neither the space nor the inclination to enter into this often
tiresome and sometimes absurd debate. Unlike some, I doubt that anything of great
philosophical interest hangs on the resolution of the authenticity question, and I certainly
do not think that our (collective, scholarly) interpretation of Plato would be much better
or worse than it is had the Seventh Letter never existed. I will say, however, that I am
considerably more unpersuaded by the arguments against the Seventh Letter’s

54 Momigliano, op. cit., pp. 60-61.
authenticity, than I am positively persuaded by the arguments for its being genuine. At the same time, when scholars labor to prove that the Seventh Letter is inauthentic, I can’t help but wonder why they are so anxious to do this. Is it because they are afraid of the political implications that would follow if the Seventh Letter were judged authentic? Well, no one needs the Seventh Letter to prove that Plato saw philosophy as having a political mission connected to the reform of actually existing societies. Or is it that the doubters are worried about the Seventh Letter’s suggestion that Plato had unwritten doctrines? That Plato thought his writings of only secondary importance with regard to the true goal of living philosophically? One can only smile at such naïveté. The labors of the doubters are fairly moot, except for the fact that, if the Seventh Letter is authentic, then we know that Plato himself really believed that his political teaching might be put into practice in the real world. This, I think, would hardly be an insignificant revelation.

As in the case of the Socratic problem, a safe claim is sufficient for present purposes, that either Plato or someone associated with Plato and/or Plato’s school wrote the letter, and so in any case, one is almost certainly justified in believing that this letter is Platonic. One is also therefore fairly certain of saying something true in saying that, historically, philosophical autobiography emerged either with Plato’s writings or with those of Plato and his school. But more on the Seventh Letter below.

2. Scholarly antecedents of the idea that Plato invented philosophical autobiography.—

The study of Plato’s autobiographical writings takes us to a place where history, literary

---

55 To cite Friedländer again (p. 236): “I repeat August Boeckh’s methodological principle that only forgery, not authenticity, can be proved conclusively—in the absence of external evidence, to be sure.”

56 To my knowledge, no one entertains the possibility that the Seventh Letter was written neither by Plato nor by some associate of his or of the Academy. The author of this letter is too knowledgeable about Plato’s philosophy and life to have been a stranger to either.
theory, and philosophy intersect. As we shall see, the claim that Plato initiated the tradition of philosophical autobiography is not wholly unprecedented, although those who were the first to make this claim were historians and literary theorists rather than philosophers. Georg Misch, for example, in his *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, already indicated Plato’s contribution to the development of biography and autobiography in fourth-century Greece:

Plato *led the way*…(in developing) a conception of the course of a man’s life in which, *for the first time*, we find biographical material treated from an evolutionary point of view…instead of one continuous life-story we have a succession of quite distinct phases considered as stages in a person’s development…(Plato) systematically surveyed the evolution of philosophy from the Ionian beginnings down to his own time; and at one time he gave in biographical form a description of the essential progress made in that development. In the *Phaedo* he makes Socrates tell the story of his career.\(^{57}\)

According to Misch, Socrates’ autobiography in the *Phaedo* encapsulates the entire history of philosophy up to that time. Misch further argues that Plato initiated an entirely new way of thinking about human life in terms of history and personal development. History means, above all, change, but Misch also emphasizes the role of progress in Plato’s autobiographical writings.\(^{58}\) Like some others, Misch makes a case that the

---

\(^{57}\) Misch (1951, pp. 106-107). My emphasis. For Misch’s account of autobiography as essentially developmental see, e.g., p. 62.

\(^{58}\) The one for whom this dissertation is written will have been haunted by Gadamer’s (1998, p. 16): “The concept of development has absolutely nothing to do with history. Strictly speaking, development is the negation of history. Indeed, development means that everything is already given in the beginning—enveloped in its beginning. It follows from this that development is merely a becoming-visible, a maturing process, as it plays itself out in the biological growth of plants and animals. This, however, means that ‘development’ always carries a naturalistic connotation. In a certain sense, therefore, discourse about an ‘historical development’ harbors something of a contradiction. As soon as history is in play, what matters is not what is merely given, but, decisively, what is new. Insofar as nothing new, no innovation, and nothing unforeseen is present, there is also no history to relate. Destiny also means constant unpredictability. The concept of development, therefore, brings to expression the fundamental difference that exists between the process-quality of nature and the fluctuating accidents and
ancients prior to Plato had a much less dynamic, much more static view of human life than we do.\textsuperscript{59} Plato thus innovates a way of thinking about a single human life as a historical and potentially progressive process, characterized by different stages, and furthermore as a process that has a kind of telos, end, or goal. Today people often take this way of thinking about human life for granted, that is, even if the Platonic-Aristotelian notion of telos appears somewhat foreign to our way of thinking. But even if we moderns tend to think of the process of human life as endless, it is certainly common for us to think of it in terms of concepts of progress and development. On the basis of extensive research into the history of autobiography, Misch located Plato at the beginning of a tradition that views human life historically, in terms of phases within a single human life, and that also introduces the idea of progress.\textsuperscript{60} Misch also believed, as did Cornford, that for Plato a single human life can be in some sense analogous to broader historical changes. Misch notes, for example, that Socrates’ life-story in \textit{Phaedo} mirrors the development of Greek philosophy “from the Ionian beginnings” up to dawn of the fourth century. Cornford believed that “it was not only the man Socrates, but philosophy itself that turned, \textit{in his incidents of human life. What comes to expression here is a primordial opposition between nature and spirit.”}\textsuperscript{59} Franco Moretti, in \textit{The Way of the World} (Verso, 1987), makes a similar case about the static view of human character in ancient epic. Moretti plausibly argues that Achilles and even Odysseus do not change or make progress in the course of the \textit{Iliad} and \textit{Odyssey}, respectively. One might also think of Lukács’ theory of the novel in this context as well, since according to him it is precisely personal change and the quest for self-knowledge that distinguishes the (modern) novel from the (classical) epic. See also Bakhtin’s essay on the \textit{Bildungsroman} (1986, pp. 10-59).\textsuperscript{60} Plato explores the concept of human life as development especially in the \textit{Republic}, where the rearing and education of human beings from infancy to maturity constitutes one of the major topics of discussion. Notably this concept figures much less prominently in the \textit{Laws}, which may add weight to Zuckert’s claim that this dialogue precedes all the others in the order of dialogic (as opposed to compositional) time.
person, from the outer to the inner world." It is therefore possible to maintain that Plato anticipated the Vichian, Rousseauean, and Hegelian insight into the analogy between the history of each individual human life and human history as a whole.

Misch’s *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity* appears, however, as more a compendium of facts than as a philosophical history determined by an integrating argument. Misch has nevertheless made significant contributions to our understanding of how the ancients thought about themselves and also of how the modalities of ancient self-consciousness changed over time. Misch does not, however, formulate anything like a concept of specifically philosophical autobiography, which is the primary concern of the present work.

Neither did Momigliano formulate a concept of philosophical autobiography, though he has also made significant contributions to the historical understanding of the emergence and development of biography and autobiography in ancient Greece and in the ancient world in general. It is especially noteworthy that Momigliano recognized the importance of the Socratics, including of course Plato, within the history of biography and autobiography:

---


63 Momigliano remarks on this characteristic of Misch’s *History*, saying it is “something of considerable interest in so far as it clarifies what the ancients felt about themselves,” but it is also “confusing as a history of autobiography.” Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography*, Expanded Edition (Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 18. Readers interested in the topic will nevertheless find *The History of Autobiography in Antiquity* a good source of information.
We have denied that the origins of biography are to be exclusively connected with Socrates and the Socratics. We have tried to show that the most ancient evidence for Greek biographical and autobiographical work is earlier than Socrates...But this does not mean denying the obvious – namely that the Socratics were the leaders in biographical experiments in the fourth century.⁶⁴

The fifth-century antecedents of fourth-century experiments in autobiography and biography need not concern us in the present context; suffice it to say that Momigliano recognizes nothing even remotely resembling philosophical autobiography prior to the fourth century. Noting the importance of Socratic contributions to biography and autobiography, Momigliano also goes on to indicate their problematic character in a way clearly applicable to Plato. “The Socratics,” Momigliano writes, “moved to that zone between truth and fiction which is so bewildering to the professional historian,” since their works occupy “an ambiguous position between fact and imagination.”⁶⁵ It isn’t quite clear, however, on what basis Momigliano draws the distinction between “truth and fiction” that he apparently finds so important. If written history is distinguished from fiction on the grounds that history has a real, as opposed to an imaginary, referent, it is nevertheless the case that our access to this real historical referent is, as a rule, problematic and in any case mediated by those writings that have come down to us, upon which the vast majority of our historical knowledge depends. It’s time to admit the fact that where history is concerned, we are for the most part dependent on the word of others. The distinction between fact and imagination is very thin.

Of all those scholars who have considered the question of autobiography in antiquity, the great twentieth-century literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin perhaps came

---

⁶⁴ Momigliano (1993, pp. 45-46), my emphasis.
closest to recognizing the original character of Plato’s autobiographical writings and to
forming something like a conception of philosophical autobiography. In his essay “Forms
of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” Bakhtin identified “two essential types of
autobiography in classical Greece,” which he calls Platonic and rhetorical autobiography.66
According to Bakhtin, Platonic autobiography is concerned with the
metamorphosis of the seeker after truth, which is clearly a central theme of Socrates’
autobiographies in the Apology and Phaedo, as it is of philosophical autobiography in
general.67 Bakhtin observes that the Platonic type of autobiography:

…found its earliest and most precise expression in such works of Plato as
the Apology of Socrates and the Phaedo. This type, involving an
individual’s autobiographical self-consciousness, is related to the stricter
forms of metamorphosis as found in mythology. At its heart lies the
chronotope of “the life course of one seeking true knowledge.” The life of
such a seeker is broken down into precise and well-marked epochs or
steps. His course passes from self-confident ignorance, through self-
critical skepticism, to self-knowledge and ultimately to authentic knowing
(mathematics and music).68

Bakhtin’s description of what happens in the Platonic autobiographies is somewhat
idealized, first of all because the starting point in self-confident ignorance and the end in
authentic knowing are both conjectural. Except perhaps in the Parmenides, which isn’t
autobiographical, Plato never presents Socrates as self-confidently ignorant, and in
autobiographical contexts, Socrates characterizes his younger self as someone seeking
truth rather than as someone who wrongly believed that he already possessed it. The
ultimate end of philosophical autobiography in “self-knowledge” and “authentic
knowing” are also more problematic in Plato’s writings than Bakhtin’s comments might
suggest, although Plato’s Socrates knows enough to know what he doesn’t know, just as

67 Bakhtin identifies Isocrates as the principal source of rhetorical autobiography.
68 Bakhtin, op. cit., p. 130.
he knows enough to die well. Bakhtin’s equation of philosophy with mathematics and
music is not unproblematic either, since for Plato there is clearly a distinction between
philosophy and these other kinds of knowledge (mathematics and music seem rather
“high” propaedeutics to philosophy for Plato, as suggested by Rep. Bk. 7, 521b-541b).
Bakhtin nevertheless clearly identifies an important element of Platonic autobiography,
when he points out the role of the metamorphosis of the seeker after truth. It is precisely
this dimension, as Misch too recognized, that allowed Plato to conceive philosophy as a
kind of end that individual human beings could pursue and, to some extent at least,
achieve. Bakhtin was also the first to recognize Platonic autobiography as a genre unto
itself, and indeed he was the first to give it a name. 69

One of the central characteristics of Platonic philosophical autobiography is thus
that it is dynamic, because the philosopher who narrates his life story tells how he has
undergone change through time, while also emphasizing how this change was for the
better. 70 In this way Platonic philosophical autobiography in some sense anticipates all
kinds of modern literary genres, including perhaps especially the Bildungsromane, or
novels of education, exemplified by the works of Rousseau and Goethe. Where the
subjects of Plato’s autobiographical writings are concerned, perhaps the most instructive
contrast is with Homer’s protagonist Odysseus, in some sense one of the first
autobiographers in history. In the Odyssey (Books 7-12), Odysseus relates to the court of
the Phaeacians the retrospective story of his many troubles. Aside from the obvious fact

69 For more of Bakhtin’s thought about autobiography and biography, see again his essay on the
Bildungsroman (1986, especially pp. 16-19).
70 One may extrapolate from Bakhtin’s emphasis on metamorphosis as a key feature in
philosophical autobiography a justification for excluding the (mostly biographical as opposed to
autobiographical) Socratic writings of Xenophon. Aside from the fact that Xenophon’s
Memorabilia is rather biographical than autobiographical, it is decisive that Xenophon’s Socrates
does not develop.
that Odysseus is a fictional character, the hard core of the distinction between the epic hero and the Platonic hero is perhaps that the epic hero does not change over time, undergoing no personal metamorphosis. Homer of course shows us Odysseus in all kinds of situations and adventures, but arguably Odysseus himself remains the same through it all. Plato, by contrast, is already modern, to the extent that in his autobiographical writings he presents human beings as changeable over time, demonstrating his concern with the intellectual formation and, indeed, *metamorphosis* of the single human being who tells his life-story. Now, the modern surely becomes *more modern* in the millennia that stand between us and Plato, and their can be no question that the subject of autobiography becomes more complicated.\footnote{Tennessee Williams: “time is the longest distance between two places.”} In his autobiographical writings, Plato limits himself to describing cognitive as opposed to noncognitive developments; he concerns himself primarily with intellectual and political, as opposed to private matters; and he never discusses childhood in autobiographical contexts.\footnote{See *The Way of the World*, Morretti (1987).} All this will have to wait until Augustine, who gives us the model of a far more comprehensive and psychologically complex autobiographical subject. Autobiography nonetheless already appears in Plato bearing most of its familiar characteristics, a retrospective narrative that relates some kind of personal progress, as well as certain other key features that I elaborate in the Introduction and further below.

Thus Misch, Momigliano, and Bakhtin already recognized the emergence of autobiography in Plato’s writings, and Bakhtin in particular even formulated something like a concept of philosophical autobiography. For whatever reason or reasons, however, these theorists failed to appreciate the central function of philosophical autobiography
within Plato’s work, which is to present and give some account of ultimate philosophical principles.

3. *Autobiography in Plato’s writings from the viewpoint of the whole.*— Surveying Plato’s entire body of dialogues, one will find numerous autobiographical elements but perhaps no fully realized autobiographies outside of the *Apology of Socrates*, the *Phaedo*, and perhaps the *Symposium*. My interpretation will focus on *Phaedo* and the *Apology*, but a few comments on the *Symposium* are in order. In *Symposium*, we get both a kind of autobiographical story told by Socrates and a kind of biography of Socrates, which Plato puts in the mouth of the drunken and loquacious Alcibiades. Autobiography and biography are thus juxtaposed and mutually reinforce each other, so the dialogue presents us with a fairly full portrait of Socrates’ personal history and character. Socrates’ account of his own education by Diotima is probably fictional, perhaps because, as Cornford suggests, this conceit gives him a way of politely softening his criticism of Agathon’s and the others’ inadequate conceptions of eros. By putting Diotima in the position of the master and himself in the position of the learner, Socrates can avoid seeming overbearing. Despite the fact that the whole story may be made up, Socrates’ speech looks autobiographical, and within the context of the dialogue there is no sign that the story he tells about his youthful experiences might be false. Certainly no one within the dialogue questions the veracity of Socrates’ report. Socrates’ story here is retrospective; he speaks about his own intellectual change and improvement; and he uses the autobiographical conceit to present an ultimate philosophical principle, in this case, “beauty itself (αὐτὸ τὸ καλὸν), absolute, pure, unmixed, not polluted by human flesh or colors or any other great nonsense of mortality” (211e1-3). Through the course of relating
his conversations with Diotima, Socrates shows his own beliefs changing, for example, when he learns that Eros is not a god but a powerful spirit (or daimonion).

Socrates talks about his background in other dialogues, for example, he refers to his mother in the *Theaetetus* and claims that he inherited the art of midwifery from her, while this passage also contains certain reflections by Socrates on his experiences conversing with young people about ideas (149a1-151d6). It is easy to obscure, and difficult to maintain, the distinction between any self-referential discourse whatsoever and autobiography as a unique literary form, which is both retrospective and progressive in the sense that the autobiographer narrates how he changed or became better over the course of time. As Momigliano observes, “any statement about oneself…can be regarded as autobiographical,” and in his own study, he wisely limits himself to “accounts, however partial, of the writer’s past life,” as opposed to “expressions of his present state of mind.”73 Perhaps even these strictures are not really sufficient, and in any case some surprising conclusions would follow from applying Momigliano’s criterion to Plato’s writings. The most surprising is that, on the basis of this criterion, the four dialogues Plato has Socrates narrate in their entirety, namely, *Republic*, *Charmides*, *Lysis*, and *Lovers*, are all autobiographies, because in these dialogues Socrates narrates a conversation in which he participated in the past. Other dialogues, such as *Euthyphro*, might also be read as autobiographical. Nor is Socrates the only character that speaks like an autobiographer in Plato’s dialogues. One might consider the eponymous Phaedo, for example, as an autobiographer, since he gives a retrospective narrative of a conversation he took part in that possibly changed his life. (Even Cephalus in Plato’s *Republic* looks

like an autobiographer, talking about when he was younger and describing how he has changed as he’s gotten older.) Yet it isn’t likely that anyone would insist on the autobiographical character of any of these works or speeches. But why not? Limiting ourselves to those dialogues narrated by Socrates, one may say that one reason not to read these dialogues as autobiographical is that in them Socrates neither draws attention to himself and his life, nor does he show how his beliefs changed over time. There is no conversion or peripeteia. Otherwise Republic, for example, shares certain characteristics of Plato’s other autobiographical writings, especially since here, too, Socrates can be seen to present ultimate philosophical principles. The emphasis in these dialogues, however, is not on Socrates and his philosophical becoming, that is, even if he happened to learn something in the course of the discussions he recounts. By contrast, in the three dialogues mentioned, the Symposium, the Apology, and the Phaedo, Socrates focuses on himself and his past life and provides various retrospective accounts of how he came to be what he is. He does so, moreover, for the express purpose of presenting and giving an account of philosophical principles.

Since philosophical autobiography first comes to light in specific contexts within Plato’s dialogues, it will prove worthwhile to consider the nature of the relationship between dialogue and autobiography. Perhaps we ought to recognize that the dialogic form is especially amenable not only to the incorporation and critique of other genres, as Nightingale suggests, but also to the invention of new genres, such as philosophical autobiography. Nietzsche, for example, sometimes interpreted the dialogue form with an eye to its capacity for invention. In The Birth of Tragedy, for example, he claims that Plato gave posterity the model (Vorbild) of a new art form (einer neuen Kunstform), the
model of the *novel (das Vorbild des Roman’s)*. Nietzsche goes on to describe the novel “as an infinitely enhanced Aesopian fable,” and perhaps philosophical autobiography is likewise a kind of fable, similarly “enhanced.” (As I discuss in Chapter 4, Descartes will suggest that the *histoire* he offers in the *Discourse on Method* can be taken as *une fable, si vous l’aimez mieux.*) According to Nietzsche, Plato subordinates poetry to philosophical ends, but in so doing he also creates a new literary form, namely, the novel. In similar fashion, I claim that Plato invented philosophical autobiography for the sake of advancing philosophy.

4. *Socrates’ autobiography in the Phaedo.*— Of all Plato’s dialogues, none is more autobiographical than *Phaedo*. Socrates’ autobiography at 95e7-102a1—and especially the pivotal passage at 99d4-100b9—constitutes the basic paradigm of philosophical autobiography, its structure, basic elements, and function. This epochal autobiographical narrative may therefore be viewed as the template that all subsequent philosophical autobiographies follow, knowingly or not. It stands to reason that if one grasps how this particular philosophical autobiography works, one will have understood the basics of philosophical autobiography. Even if someone were to discover an exceptional philosophical autobiography that deviated entirely from the pattern established in *Phaedo*, this pattern would still prove extremely useful as a point of comparison and contrast. Twentieth-century philosophical autobiography has some interesting specimens on offer, perhaps none so idiosyncratic as Derrida’s *Circumfession* (contained in the book entitled *Jacques Derrida*, including Geoffrey Bennington’s *Derridabase*, in French 1991, Chicago paperback 1999). *Circumfession* is arguably one of the most revelatory philosophical autobiographies there is (Derrida admits he was praying constantly, that he contemplated suicide, etc.), and the fact that this text is not better known may be due more to the traumatic character of what Derrida reveals

---


75 Twentieth-century philosophical autobiography has some interesting specimens on offer, perhaps none so idiosyncratic as Derrida’s *Circumfession* (contained in the book entitled *Jacques Derrida*, including Geoffrey Bennington’s *Derridabase*, in French 1991, Chicago paperback 1999). *Circumfession* is arguably one of the most revelatory philosophical autobiographies there is (Derrida admits he was praying constantly, that he contemplated suicide, etc.), and the fact that this text is not better known may be due more to the traumatic character of what Derrida reveals.
philosophical autobiography, of the form and function of this kind of writing. As Virgil says: *ab uno disce omnes*, from the example of one, learn them all.

Some of the most poignant and memorable interpretations of the *Phaedo* have been advanced by Nietzsche (perhaps because, as Heidegger suggests, it takes a genius to understand one). Nietzsche focused on different aspects of the dialogue over the course of his career, at one point arguing, as we have seen, that the autobiography at 95e7-102a1 relates nothing other than “Plato’s own historical development.” Later, in the relatively well-known aphorism from *The Gay Science* (§340), Nietzsche interprets Socrates’ last words to Crito as a condemnation of life, as saying that death is the cure for the disease of life. Obviously this is one possible interpretation of Socrates’ offering a sacrificial rooster to Asclepius, the god of medicine, but it is certainly not the only one. Earlier in his career, Nietzsche himself had suggested another, and I believe better interpretation, which deserves to be more widely known. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche writes:

> Socrates appears to us as the first who could not only live, guided by the instinct of science, but also—and this is far more—die that way. Hence the image of the dying Socrates (*das Bild des sterbenden Sokrates*), as the human being whom knowledge and reasons have liberated from the fear of death, is the emblem that, above the entrance gate of science, reminds all of its mission—namely, to make existence appear comprehensible and thus justified; and if reasons do not suffice, myth has to come to their aid in the end—myth which I have just called the necessary consequence, indeed the purpose, of science (BT §15/KSA 1: 99).

As we saw in the Introduction, Nietzsche was to maintain the belief throughout his career that the ultimate test of a philosophical teaching is, as he put it in *Schopenhauer as about himself than to its difficult style. See especially pp. 38, 56. We simply have a hard time talking about certain things, but philosophers must sometimes overcome shame for the sake of the good.

It would be strange to claim that all subsequent philosophical autobiographies consciously base themselves on this model, though it must be said that in many cases, if not all, the possibility of conscious imitation cannot be ruled out altogether. Autobiography, even if it is a historical phenomenon, possesses a logic inherent to itself.
Educator, “whether one can live in accordance with it (ob man nach ihr leben könne)” (§8/KSA 1: 417). For the young Nietzsche, Plato’s Socrates proved not only that he could live on the basis of his philosophy but also that he could die fearlessly because of it. The other reading of Socrates’ words last words is, therefore, that Socrates owes a sacrifice to the god of medicine because he has been cured of the fear of death. Of course, Socrates’ character and philosophical principles have something to do with this as well.

In Socrates’ autobiography, we witness the coming-into-being of a new kind of philosophy and perhaps, if Nightingale and others are right, of philosophy itself. Socrates’ autobiography foregrounds the human, historical origin of philosophy. Nietzsche was not alone in noticing that the Phaedo gives us valuable insight into the nature and development of philosophy as Plato understood it. Referring to Socrates’ autobiography, Cornford writes that “Plato has made Socrates himself describe the revolution of thought he effected—how he turned philosophy from the study of external Nature to the study of man and of the purposes of human action in society.”77 Now even if we admit, as I think with some qualifications we must, that the western philosophical tradition antedates both Socrates and Plato, it is nevertheless true, as Nietzsche recognized, that this tradition takes a great turn with them (see, for example, The Birth of Tragedy, sections 13-15). Plato and Socrates together inaugurate a new philosophical tradition, and philosophical autobiography plays a significant role within this foundation. In a striking historical analogy, Descartes’ Discourse on the Method, a text that is often taken to mark the beginning of specifically modern philosophy, is also autobiographical. So there is an affinity between philosophical autobiography and beginnings, which

77 Cornford (1966, p. 1).
coincides nicely with my claim that the primary function of philosophical autobiography is to present and account for first or ultimate philosophical principles.

Socrates’ autobiography concerns his own conversion (περιπέτεια) from being an enthusiast of “that wisdom they call inquiry into nature” to being a philosopher of speeches (λόγοι) and, as it turns out, of “forms” (see especially 99d4-100b9). Socrates decides to give an autobiographical narrative in response to Cebe’s argument that admits the existence of the soul before birth but calls into question its continued existence after death. The preeminent topic of discussion in the Phaedo is of course whether or not the soul is immortal, and prior to giving his autobiography, Socrates and the others advance a number of arguments that attempt to prove that the soul is truly deathless. They consider how opposites come from opposites, such as waking from sleeping, and suggest that the relationship between death and life is analogous (70c-72e). They adduce the idea of learning as recollection, which they all seem to accept and which further suggests the soul’s immortality (72e-77a). In yet another argument, Socrates shows that the soul resembles the immortal forms by being simple and invisible, as opposed to bodies that are complex and visible (78b-84c). Simmias and Cebe remain skeptical, however, and encouraged by Socrates, they take turns voicing arguments that cast serious doubts about the soul’s immortality (84c-88b). Phaedo, who narrates the dialogue, tells Echecrates how Simmias’ and Cebe’s arguments threw everyone present into sadness, confusion, and doubt about the arguments for the soul’s immortality, and Echecrates even interrupts Phaedo’s narrative to say that he feels “real sympathy” with the sorry state they were in at that point in the discussion. Yet Phaedo proceeds to say that he never admired Socrates more than for how he responded to these arguments:
That he had a reply was perhaps not strange (οὐδὲν ἄτοπον). What I wondered at most (ἐγωγε μάλιστα ἐθαύμασα) in him was the pleasant, kind, and admiring way he received the young men’s argument, and how sharply he was aware of the effect the discussion had on us, and then how well he healed our distress and, as it were, recalled us from our flight and defeat and turned us around (προύτρεψεν) to join him in the examination of their argument (89a1-8).

In what follows, Socrates easily shows that Simmias’ argument that the soul is produced by the body as a melody is produced by a lyre cannot withstand scrutiny from Simmias’ own point of view. Socrates admits, however, that Cebe’s argument poses far greater difficulties.

Cebes contends that it is possible that the soul is not immortal but rather very durable; it might go through many cycles of birth, death, and rebirth, before finally wearing out. Like the tailor who makes and wears out many coats over the course of his lifetime, the soul might finally die, never to be reborn, leaving behind nothing behind but the last body it inhabited, as the tailor leaves his last coat. After recounting Cebes’ argument, Phaedo tells us that “Socrates paused for a long time and within himself considered something” (Ὁ οὖν Σωκράτης συχνὸν ἐπισχὼν καὶ πρὸς ἑαυτὸν τι σκεψάμενος) (95e8-9). This is the essence of a dramatic pause, and given its proper weight, Socrates’ pausing or holding up (ἐπισχών) builds suspense and alerts us to the possibility that something important is about to happen. As at other key junctures within Plato’s dialogues (for example, at Symposium 174d-e and in the Phaedo itself at 84b), Socrates pauses to think, and as ever, we readers can never know what exactly Socrates has thought, since it is the nature of thought as silent internal dialogue not to reveal itself to others. All we know is the speech act, or acts, that emerge from this silent pondering.
(what Wilfrid Sellars calls “language entry transitions”), and in this particular case Socrates’ speech act will be his autobiography.

Why is autobiography an appropriate literary form (or way of speaking) in this context? As I argued in my Ancient Philosophy article (Fall 2008, pp. 347-355), Socrates’ autobiography aims to impress Cebes and others with the necessity of decision or judgment where philosophical first principles are concerned. It isn’t, however, simply this need that Socrates wants to emphasize. Rather, Socrates’ autobiography also works to present and advance a specific philosophical principle, as well as a kind of practice, or activity, based on it. The life-story he tells is his way of persuading his interlocutors (and Plato’s readers) to accept this particular principle that depends on Socrates’ judgment. Now, since first principles are by definition indemonstrable, philosophers such as Socrates need a way to account for first principles other than as following necessarily from prior premises.  

Socrates says that Cebes argument asks him to examine closely the cause of coming-to-be and passing away in general (ὅλως γὰρ δεῖ περὶ γενέσεως καὶ φθορᾶς τὴν αἰτίαν διαπράγματεύσασθαι, 95e10-96a1). This is no small matter, as Socrates says. In order to address it, Socrates offers to narrate his own experiences with respect to these things. The word that apparently everyone translates as “experiences” is τὰ πάθη (ta pathê), and it is important to note that the word “experiences” doesn’t quite convey all the connotations of the Greek word. The singular τὸ πάθος (to pathos) has a range of meanings, but foremost among them is surely suffering coupled with a sense of passivity.

---

78 One hardly needs to cite Aristotle in support of the claim that first principles are indemonstrable. This is basically an analytic statement inasmuch as the predicate is implicitly contained in the subject, i.e., it is like the statement that all bachelors are unmarried men. But, anyway, for Aristotle’s explanation of first principles see Post. An. ii 19 esp. 100b10-11.
(One might compare Homer’s use of the term at *Odys.* 1.4.) When Socrates says he will tell the story of his sufferings, he means it quite literally, and his autobiography is nothing if it is not also a tale of the agony involved in the odyssey of the search for truth. Socrates’ autobiography is also a startling and memorable testament to the courage and endurance required to persevere in such a quest.

What might seem strange, however, is that Socrates responds to what looks like an impersonal problem by giving a personal narrative. The related problems of coming-to-be, passing-away, and being certainly admit of non-autobiographical treatment, as is amply demonstrated by multiple texts throughout the history of so-called “Western” philosophy. In the context of *Phaedo* itself, Socrates might have presented the theory of ideas more straightforwardly, by means of a myth, through Socratic conversation (elenchus), or by means of another sort of speech. Yet autobiography can be seen to have a special appeal within the context of what Socrates is trying to do. Socrates wants to impress Cebes and the others with what it means to decide on first principles and why, in his own case at least, he found it necessary to make such a decision.

Socrates begins his autobiography by emphasizing the kind of knowledge that he sought as a young man. I quote Plato’s Greek then provide my own translation:

> ἐγὼ γὰρ, ἔφη, ὦ Κέβης, νέος ὃν θαυμαστῶς ὡς ἐπεθύμησα ταύτης τῆς σοφίας ἦν δὴ καλούσι περὶ φύσεως ἱστορίαν· ὑπερήφανος γὰρ μοι ἐδόκει εἶναι, εἰδέναι τὰς αἰτίας ἐκάστου, διὰ τί γίνεται ἐκάστον καὶ διὰ τί ἀπὸλλυται καὶ διὰ τί ἔστι (96a5-9).

Which I translate:

(Socrates) said, “I, Kebes, being young was wonderfully enamored of this wisdom, which they call the study of nature. For it seemed to me to be sublime, to know the causes of each thing, why each thing comes to be, and why it disintegrates, and why it is.
Wanting to know the causes (τὰς αἰτίας) of all the particular things, Socrates states that he believed the study of nature was the most promising route to such knowledge. It is interesting to note that this passage shows how there are certain limits to what Socrates’ autobiography attempts to explain, because Socrates never tells us why he wanted to know the causes in the first place; he only tells us that he wanted to know them. The origin of his desire to know the causes, therefore, remains shrouded in mystery. (In the Apology, by contrast, Socrates does give some answer to the question why he began his life of philosophical activity, namely, in order to understand the enigmatic utterance of the god that said Socrates was the wisest human. Of course this particular story is problematic, but see below about this.)

In searching for the causes, Socrates explains that he wanted to know three things: on account of what (διὰ τί) things come to be, on account of what (διὰ τί) they are destroyed, and, finally, on account of what (διὰ τί) they are at all. Especially with respect to the third question, why things are at all, one can see how Plato already implies the philosophical question formulated and reformulated throughout the history of philosophy, for example, by Leibniz and Wittgenstein, namely, why are there beings at all instead of nothing? Natural science cannot answer this question: it is therefore a question that marks the limit of what we are naturally able to know. Thus in the first few lines of Socrates’ autobiography the seeds of his subsequent disillusionment with natural studies are already present. He was looking in the wrong place for an answer to his question about the causes.

Socrates proceeds to describe how he went about studying nature, and his account of his natural studies is far more sophisticated than some scholars believe, perhaps
because they are somewhat too much taken in by Socrates’ protestations of ineptitude and ignorance (for example, at 96b). Socrates’ protests are undoubtedly ironical. As Kierkegaard, for example, noted, it is a great mistake to think that Socratic ignorance means that Socrates was wholly ignorant of empirical matters, such as those the natural sciences address.\textsuperscript{79} Socratic ignorance is about the source of beings, and so it is perhaps unsurprising that it should have a theological dimension, insofar as Socrates, in other contexts, regularly maintains that he has no knowledge of the character of god or the gods. His ignorance is not principally about empirical or even mathematical things, it is rather about the source of beings, why they come to be, why they perish, and why they are at all. Again, as Kierkegaard (1989, p. 169) says, “(Socrates) was ignorant of the ground of all being, the eternal, the divine—that is, he knew that it was, but he did not know what it was.”

In his autobiography, Socrates describes the character of his investigations into nature. He claims he thought often about heat, cold, and their mixture as it pertains to the composition of animal organisms; he considered whether the source of our ability to think came from blood or air or fire or the brain (ὁ ἐγκέφαλος); and he considered the “affections (πάθη)” of the heavens and the earth. In his account of these studies, he succinctly summarizes an entire theory of what we call cognitive psychology:

Is the blood that by which we’re thoughtful? Or is it air or fire? Or is it none of these, and is it the brain (ὁ ἐγκέφαλος) that produces the senses of hearing and seeing and smelling; and would memory and opinion (μνήμη καὶ δόξα) arise out of these, and in this way out of memory and opinion brought to a state of rest arises knowledge (ἐπιστήμη)? (96b3-9)

\textsuperscript{79} Søren Kierkegaard, \textit{The Concept of Irony}, trans. Hong and Hong (Princeton, 1989), especially p. 169.
Socrates presents this theory in the form of questions, thus escaping the strictures of what Aristotle would later call apophantic discourse (i.e., discourse that makes assertions that can be true or false). Questions are neither true nor false, but one can nevertheless state a theory by means of questions. Probably this particular series of questions indicates in outline Socrates’, or rather Plato’s, theory about how cognition works, but in the present context there is no need to go beyond the indication of this possibility.

At this point, Socrates introduces the first reversal in his life story. Having devoted substantial effort to the study of nature, he says that he finally came to believe that he was without natural talent (ἀφυής) for the kind of investigation (τὴν σκέψιν) he was attempting to conduct (96c1-3). He further promises to give Cebes a sure and sufficient proof (τεκμήριον) of his ineptitude, which leads into a rather strange passage in which Socrates talks about all the things he used to believe he knew, for example, that a human being grows by eating and drinking and that ten is more than eight because two has been added to the latter. This is strange because one might naturally think that human beings do in fact grow by eating and drinking and that ten is more than eight because two has been added. Cebes interrupts to ask how these things seem to Socrates now, which prompts the latter to swear by god that he is “far from thinking that (he knows) the cause (τὴν αἰτίαν) concerning any of these things” (96e6-7). Again, contrary to what some scholars seem to suppose, Socrates’ subsequent meditations on mathematics are hardly unsophisticated or without interest. Quite the opposite is true. Socrates offers a profound meditation on the nature of number itself in light of reflection on the basic operations of addition and division. That the one is in the two and the two is in the one is both
philosophically interesting and pertinent to the question of the relation between soul and body around which much of the dialogue revolves.\textsuperscript{80}

Here, however, a second reversal occurs, when, Socrates says, he chanced upon someone reading from a book by Anaxagoras (on the wide availability of Anaxagoras’ writings in Athens compare \textit{Apology} 26d-e). Socrates submits that when he heard Anaxagoras’ claim that “mind is that which both orders and causes all things” (νοῦς ἐστιν ὁ διακοσμοῦν τε καὶ πάντων αἴτιος, 97c1-2, my translation), he became once more full of hope. It is well-known that these hopes too were to be disappointed, but it is rather what Socrates says he \textit{hoped} to find in Anaxagoras’ writings that provides real insight into Socrates’ own beliefs about both mind and cause. With respect to the idea that mind (νοῦς) is the cause of beings, he says:

\[
\text{ταύτῃ δή τῇ αἴτιᾳ ἡσθην τε καὶ ἔδοξέ μοι τρόπον τινά εὖ ἔχειν τὸ τὸν νοῦν εἶναι πάντων αἴτιον, καὶ ἡγησάμην, εἰ τοῦθ’ οὖτως ἔχει, τὸν γε νοῦν κοσμοῦντα πάντα κοσμεῖν καὶ ἐκαστὸν τιθέναι ταύτῃ ὅπῃ ἀν βέλτιστα ἔχῃ· εἰ οὖν τῆς βουλομένης τὴν αἴτιαν εὑρεῖν περὶ ἐκάστου ὅπῃ γίνεται ἢ ἀπόλλυται, ἢ ἔστι, τούτῳ δεῖν περὶ αὐτοῦ εὑρεῖν, ὅπῃ βέλτιστον αὐτῷ ἐστιν ἢ εἶναι ἢ ἄλλο ότιον πάσχειν ἢ ποιεῖν· ἑκ δὲ δὴ τού λόγου τούτου οὔδεν ἂλλο σκοπεῖν προσήκειν ἄνθρώπῳ καὶ περὶ αὐτοῦ ἐκείνου καὶ περὶ τῶν ἂλλων ἂλλ’ ἢ τὸ ἄριστον καὶ τὸ βέλτιστον (97c2-d4).
\]

I was pleased by this cause and it also seemed to me that it was in some way good that mind be the cause of all things, and I believed, if this is how it is, ordering mind orders each and every thing in what way it would be best; and so if someone wished to discover the cause concerning each thing, how it comes to be or is destroyed or is, it is necessary to discover about this in what way it is best for it to be, or to suffer, or to do; and then from this what is proper for a human being with respect to this itself and all the other things is to investigate nothing other than what is noblest and best.

\textsuperscript{80} When you add one soul to one body, you get a two, namely, a soul-body composite that is also, however, a one, i.e., one composite; then again, when you divide the one composite, you get two halves, a soul and body, each of which is also one. Addition and division, therefore, both result in a kind of two. Yet the two of division seems to differ from that of addition in that, subsequent to division, each of the two halves goes its separate way.
Socrates admits that he thinks of mind (νοῦς) as that which orders things for the best (βέλτιστον). His hope was that Anaxagoras’ writings would show him how this was so, how exactly it is that mind orders beings in the best way. Socrates’ account thus clearly indicates the kind of cause he was seeking, which would seem to be a kind of divine, intelligent cause that orders everything in the best possible way. In a subsequent passage, he says that he never supposed that Anaxagoras, while advancing mind as the cause of beings, would explain beings in terms of any other cause than mind that looks to the best. Socrates seems to have believed that if mind were the cause of beings, then beings would be in the best condition it was possible for them to be in; if they came-to-be, or ceased-to-be, or were at all, then it would be because that was what was best for them. He says, “thus, once (Anaxagoras) had given the cause for each one and for all of them in common, I thought he’d go on to take me through the best for each and the common good to all” (ἐκάστῳ οὖν αὐτῶν ἀποδίδοντα τὴν αἰτίαν καὶ κοινὴ πᾶσι τὸ ἐκάστῳ βέλτιστον ὁμοθν καὶ τὸ κοινὸν πᾶσιν ἐπεκδημηγήσεσθαι ἐγαθόν) (98a9-b3, Brann, Kalkavage, Salem trans.). Socrates search, then, was a search for the good and for an understanding of how the good makes and governs the all.

It is only in the context of expressing his disappointment with Anaxagoras’ teachings that Socrates gives the real reasons that he became disillusioned with the entire approach taken by “natural studies” with respect to the question of the cause. This disillusionment has nothing to do with Socrates’ supposed ineptitude; rather, it stems from the fact that natural studies cannot even really explain natural beings, much less account for why human beings act as they do. The problem with Anaxagoras is that, although he recognized mind as a cause, he made no use of it when it actually came to
explaining beings. Instead, as Socrates laments, he spoke like those others who pursued the study of nature, referring to air, ether, water, and so on in his attempts to explain beings. Since today the ancient hope of providing a comprehensive naturalistic explanation of the cosmos is alive and well, Socrates’ critique of natural studies may prove quite relevant to a critique of the spirit of our own times. Socrates describes his dissatisfaction with naturalistic explanations in terms of an analogy. Those who explain things in terms of their material properties, like Anaxagoras and the other “students of nature,” are like people who would explain why Socrates is sitting in jail by referring to facts such as that he has a body, bones, and sinews. In opposition to such people and their ideas, Socrates maintains that “to call such things causes is exceedingly absurd” (λίαν ἄτοπον) (99a4-5). He explains this absurdity in terms of the nature lovers’ failure to distinguish between true causes (τὰς ὡς ἀληθῶς αἰτίας, 98e1) and what we might call secondary, or enabling, causes. Those who practice “natural studies” would explain Socrates’ sitting in prison in terms of enabling causes, such as that he has a body composed of bones, sinews, and so forth. Socrates, however, swears “by the Dog” and jokes that his bones and sinews would probably have emigrated from Athens, avoiding death, if it were up to them. Socrates himself is something different than these things, and in fact he regards these bones and sinews with something like the disdain expressed by Turenne: “Carcasse, tu trembles? Tu tremblerais bien davantage, si tu savais, où je te mène.”

Quoted by Nietzsche as the epigraph to Wir Furchtlosen (the title of Book 5 of Die fröhliche Wissenschaft).
Socrates recognizes that he could not be sitting in prison without bones and sinews; hence he realizes that they are enabling causes of his being there. He submits, however, that the true causes (τὰς ὡς ἀληθῶς αἰτίας) of his being there are that the Athenians believed it was better (βέλτιον) to condemn him to death, while he, for his part, has decided it better (βέλτιον) to accept the Athenians’ decision and to stay in prison awaiting death (98c2-99b2, especially 98e1-5). The implication of Socrates’ analogy is that material causes cannot explain actions within the human realm of political life, where decisions are made with respect to the good (n.b., good, better, best are the three modalities of a single idea). How much stranger would it be, then, to explain the entire cosmos, universe, or whatever one wants to call it, in terms of such secondary, enabling causes? That there could be no cosmos without air, ether, water, and so forth; that, in modern parlance, our world wouldn’t be at all without, for example, the chemical elements, tells us nothing about the true cause (or causes) of the world. For, to cite a familiar story, even if the cosmos is turtles all the way down, this in no way explains why there are turtles in the first place.

Having thoroughly explained his acquired belief about the inadequacy of natural studies to discover, much less teach, the true cause, Socrates is now ready to present the decisive reversal (περιπέτεια) in his autobiography, which is the moment when he became a philosopher of speeches and forms. As he says, he was never able to find a teacher of the kind of cause he was looking for, which he calls “the truly good and that which ought to bind and hold-together” (ὡς ἀληθῶς τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ δέον συνδεῖν καὶ
In the key passage of Socrates’ autobiography, he describes his “second sailing” in the following way:

After I had renounced these things, he said, it now (τοίνυν) seemed to me that investigating beings, it was necessary to beware that I might not suffer (πάθοιμι) in the way those suffer (πάσχουσιν) who contemplate and investigate eclipses of the sun; for their eyes are sometimes destroyed, if they don’t investigate the image of the sun in water or some other such stuff. I thought about something like this, and I feared that if I didn’t look at things (τὰ πράγματα) in stuff like water, my soul might be blinded, since I was attempting to grasp them by each of the senses (τῶν συσθήσεων). It seemed necessary to me then to take refuge in (or to flee into) speeches and in them to investigate the truth of beings. And yet perhaps I am making a likeness that is somehow not a (proper) likeness. For I do not at all concede that the one investigating beings in speeches investigates likenesses more than the one who investigates them in actions. Now, however, I began (ἐνίοις) this (investigation) in earnest, and hypothesizing in each case the speech that I judge (κρῖνω) to be the strongest, whatever beings seem to me to harmonize with this speech I set down as true, both with respect to causes and to everything else, and whatever doesn’t harmonize with it, I set down as false. I wish, however, to tell you more clearly what I mean; because I think now you don’t understand.

---

82 For the idea that there are only two ways of learning anything, learning from another or discovering for yourself, see Alcibiades I 106d.

83 My translation.
There are a number of things to note about this passage. First of all, it epitomizes the confidential character of autobiography, since Socrates confides (or at least purports to confide) the fundamental presuppositions of his entire philosophical practice. He tells Cebes and the others his belief that speeches (λόγοι) are no less true beings than are works, deeds, or actions (ἔργα). λόγοι, he believes, have just as much reality as ἔργα, and in both cases one investigates the truth of beings as one contemplates the image of the sun in reflective stuff like water. Human access to the truth of beings is through speeches and deeds, and although speeches and deeds may equally provide access to the truth of beings, Socrates prefers to investigate this truth through speeches. (In Apology, Socrates suggests that, in contrast to his own practice, the demos honors actions more highly than speeches and words, 32a4-5.) Speeches themselves, however, are also deeds, and it is therefore the case that, by investigating speeches, Socrates investigates deeds at well.

Even more important is Socrates’ revelation that his philosophical activity rests on judgment about the strongest hypothesis in any given instance. Socrates says “I decide” or “I judge,” κρίνω (krinô) and this is the only appearance of this verb in the Phaedo, which opens the possibility that it has been specially reserved for this moment, i.e., by Plato. It follows that the ultimate principle of Socrates’ philosophical practice rests on judgment or decision. More precisely, Socrates confides that his philosophical activity rests on a first, foundational choice and on the judgment about the strongest speech to hypothesize in each and every case. His first and fundamental decision is to turn to the investigation of speeches and then to hypothesize the strongest speech he can find in any given case. Socrates seems interested in exploring speeches in order to learn what they disclose. As the autobiography shows, this foundational decision is not ex
rather, it is based on the experiences of his life and the things he suffered in his search for the cause. His decision to pursue investigation of the truth of beings in a new way rests on his realization that his desire allows him no alternatives. The predecessors who study nature cannot answer his question about cause, and he says he was never able to discover the kind of cause he was looking for on his own. In a sense, Socrates turns to the λόγοι because he is unable to find any worthwhile alternative. If in each particular case the best he can do is to hypothesize the strongest speech, in the case of his attempt to prove the immortality of the soul, the strongest hypothesis he can muster is the theory of ideas.

Indeed, Socrates ultimately replies to Cebe’s argument with a certain version of the hypothesis of ideas: a thing according to itself can neither change nor admit its opposite (102d5-103a2). This enables Socrates to argue that since soul “always comes on the scene bringing life to bear on whatever she herself occupies,” it is impossible that soul should ever admit death, which is the contrary of life. Consequently soul is deathless or immortal (105c8-107a1, BKS). Socrates’ argument depends upon a specific formulation of the theory of ideas, and so he must get Cebes to accept this theory in order to prove the soul’s immortality. His autobiography is his means of persuading Cebes to accept his starting point.

Since my argument contends for its paradigmatic status, it is important to note that Socrates’ autobiography contains all the primary elements of a philosophical autobiography, while it also exemplifies the basic function of autobiography within a philosophical context. Three points in particular are especially worthy of note. Socrates’ autobiography presents, first of all, a conversion, and it has a conversion structure.
Socrates relates at least three reversals: his initial disappointment with the study of nature; his turn to Anaxagoras; and his turn to speeches and the theory of forms. Second, the autobiography is protreptic because it aims to turn hearers to philosophy as the best way of human life. Socrates’ adduces both his life and himself as proof of the worth of the principles he wants to present and advance, while he also shows that it is possible to live in accordance with these principles. To quote Lewis Carroll again, “if it was so, it might be.” Socrates’ autobiography thus attempts to meet Nietzsche’s demand that the true test of a philosophy is to see “whether one can live in accordance with it,” and this goes for philosophical principles too. Socrates wants to highlight that he has been able to live by the principle he presents, and this goes to show that the truths he expresses in his autobiography are not merely abstract arguments but have an integral connection to his own life and becoming. Here, as elsewhere, ultimate philosophical principles inform subsequent philosophical activity. Third and finally, Socrates’ autobiography shows how philosophical autobiography is essentially a means of presenting and giving an account of philosophical principles. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates uses his life story for the sake of presenting his own philosophical principles, which are arguably the ultimate principles of his philosophy. In the *Apology*, he presents these same principles in another way and pitched in a more popular idiom, but there too autobiography serves as the primary means of the presentation. These autobiographical accounts establish that Socrates is committed to the philosophical life, why he is committed to it, and how this commitment expresses itself in his activity and particular human life.

Although it is not the only reason or even the most profound one, Socrates indicates that his interest in political philosophy and the question of the best life for
human beings contributed significantly to his ultimate turn. This is consistent with the usual interpretation of Socrates that goes back to Aristotle, namely, the one that views Socrates as turning philosophy away from concern with the natural things and toward concern with the human ones. If Western philosophy as such is determined by the Socratic turn away from the predominantly naturalistic Presocratic philosophers and toward concern with the things of the polis, it is clear that, as Misch and Cornford suggest, Plato presents something like the autobiography of philosophy itself in this passage of the *Phaedo*. It seems clear, however, that Socrates’ conversion was motivated even more by the inability of natural studies to give an account of the true cause of beings. The Platonic-Socratic turn is, therefore, not only a turn toward the human things but to the divine ones, that is, insofar as we can know them through speeches and deeds. The deepest sense of the conversion philosophy undergoes in the persons of Socrates and Plato is away from natural studies and toward (what we call) metaphysics.

5. *Socrates’ autobiography in the context of the Phaedo as a whole.*— Having focused on Socrates’ autobiography at 95e7-102a1, it will now be worthwhile to zoom out and consider its place within the *Phaedo* as a whole. Significantly Socrates’ imminent death or, to be more precise, the anticipation of his death shared by Socrates and his interlocutors, elicits a conversation in which one of the central themes is *life*, both biological life and human life, as well as their interconnection. Although Socrates’ speech at 95e7-102a1 is clearly the central autobiographical narrative in the dialogue, the *Phaedo* is autobiographical in a broader sense as well. The dialogue raises the question of self from its first word, *αὐτός*, when Echecrates asks Phaedo whether he himself was present on the day of Socrates’ death or whether he instead heard about it from others. As
suggested above, this question encourages Phaedo himself to become something of an autobiographer, because he relates a story about his past life, while also suggesting how this experience changed him. Although the discussion of the immortality of the soul is the most salient feature of the dialogue, the Phaedo as a whole is also very much concerned with the question of how one is to live one’s human life.

The eponymous Phaedo relates his story to Echecrates and perhaps to some other unnamed hearers.\(^{84}\) Plato has Phaedo tell the interlocutors that he (Plato) was ill on the day of Socrates’ death (59b10), one of three times Plato mentions himself in his own dialogues (the others are Apology, 34a2 and 38b7). The self-reference is undoubtedly noteworthy, but since consideration of this would throw us right back into the historical dilemmas I want to bracket, I will not attempt to make much of this reference here.\(^{85}\)

The dialogue puts the question of human life (βίος) into play almost from the onset, by raising a question about how Socrates in particular has spent his life. Early in the dialogue Cebes asks Socrates why the latter has been composing poems while in

\(^{84}\) Burnet, in his notes on the text, observes that the presence of other hearers in addition to Echecrates is implied at 58d7 and 102a8. See John Burnet, Plato’s Phaedo, edited with an Introduction and Notes (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1911), Notes, p. 1.

\(^{85}\) See Burnet, ibid., p. xxix-xxx. Does Plato’s being ill necessarily mean that he was absent? That is how the statement is usually interpreted, but in that case he must have been very sick indeed, to have missed the last opportunity to talk with his friend in person. Is it possible that Plato was sick but nevertheless present? If, however, we content ourselves with the standard reading, Plato opens various interpretive possibilities respecting the dialogue and Socrates’ autobiography in particular. If Plato really was absent on that day, it is unthinkable that he would not have heard subsequently some report or reports of what transpired then. Despite Plato’s self-professed absence, therefore, it is certainly within the realm of possibility that the Phaedo has some basis in historical fact. It is also possible, however, and perhaps more likely, that by mentioning his illness, and thus suggesting his absence, Plato signals that the Phaedo is, at least in part, his own creative reconstruction of that day’s events. In that case, he signals that the dialogue should not be taken to present what the historical Socrates actually said and did on the day of his death, but rather what Plato believes he should have said and done. Whatever the extent of Plato’s creative contribution, it would undoubtedly have been informed by his superlative respect for the actual man Socrates, as well as his desire to make the literary character Socrates an exemplary figure of the philosopher.
prison, and Socrates answers by referring to a recurrent dream he had previously in life (ἐν τῷ παρελθόντι βίῳ, 60e4-6). Again and again, the dream had told him to make music and work at it, and Socrates says that he had always thought this dream message was encouraging him to do what he was already doing, namely, philosophizing. The assumption he had made was that philosophy itself is the greatest music. But now, he says, he has begun to harbor doubts about whether his assumption was correct, and consequently he has begun to make music in the more conventional sense. Perhaps this is one of the most humanly moving developments in the whole dialogue, since we see Socrates actually seeming to entertain doubts about how he has spent his life.

As I explained in the Introduction, life is equivocal, since it can mean both biological life (in our sense of “biology”) or ζωή (zôê), on the one hand, and specifically humanlife, or βίος (bios), on the other. The discussion of the Phaedo includes by turns consideration of both senses of life, which is fitting because βίος or humanlife, presupposes and indeed depends on ζωή as an enabling cause. Yet the central significant theme of the Phaedo is really βίος. For although βίος depends on ζωή, it is nevertheless not wholly subservient to it, as indeed Socrates’ current predicament clearly demonstrates. For, as I previously noted, Socrates’ βίος (or way of life) is somehow the cause of the impending termination of his biological life, and he insists that in no case would he change his way of life in order to preserve his biological one (compare Apol. 28a3-30c). To say it again, the Phaedo is about the fact that a human being has two interrelated but distinct lives, a βίος and a ζωή, and what Socrates argues is that of the two, the βίος is by far the most important and valuable.
There is, however, an even deeper sense in which Socrates opposes ὑποθέσεις and ζωή in the *Phaedo*, and this opposition applies in both his own case and in the case of all those philosophize “in the proper manner” (ὀρθῶς). He insists that the philosophical way of life aims to transcend the limitations inherent in mere animal or biological life. “The one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death” (64a). In response to this surprising claim, Cebes and Simmias both voice their doubts, because to them death quite naturally seems to be something bad. Socrates explicitly frames his rejoinder to their concerns in terms of a legal trial; at the beginning of a longish argument (63b-69e), he refers to the need for him to make an apology as if he were in court, and he says that he will speak to Simmias, Cebes, and the others as though to judges. Socrates then intends this fairly lengthy apology to complement the apology he made for himself at his trial before the Athenians, and at the end of his apology in the *Phaedo* he expresses his hope that by this defense (τῇ ἀπολογίᾳ) he has convinced his present interlocutors more than his previous defense had convinced the Athenian jury (69e). In the *Phaedo*, Socrates’ explicit goal is to defend the belief that those who spend their lives philosophizing have good reason to face death cheerfully:

"...μὴ τοὺς δικαισταὶς βούλομαι ἣδη τὸν λόγον ὑποδοῦναι, ὡς μοι φαίνεται εἰκότως ἀνήρ τῷ ὑπὸ ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ διατρίψας τὸν βίον θαρρεῖν μέλλων ἀποδεικνύσαι καὶ εὐελπίς εἶναι ἐκεί μέγιστα οἴσεσθαι ἄγαθά ἐπειδὰν τελευτήσῃ (63e8-64a2)."

I want to make my argument before you, my judges, as to why I think that a man who has truly spent his life in philosophy is probably right to be of good cheer in the face of death and to be very hopeful that after death he will attain the greatest blessings yonder.

86 Rousseau (1979, p. 193): “the aversion to dying is the strongest of all those aversions nature gives us.”
It is necessary to emphasize that Socrates’ ἀπολογία in the *Phaedo* has an autobiographical character without being a proper philosophical autobiography. What Socrates does here is to outline the way of life he considers proper to those who philosophize, and then at the conclusion of the argument he says that “in life” (ἐν τῷ βίῳ) he has “left nothing undone” to participate as far as possible in the philosophical life thus described (69d3-4). In other words, in his ἀπολογία he attempts to give a definition, however partial, of the philosophical life in general, and then he refers this definition to himself. Insofar as he is a philosopher, he has much hope that something good awaits him after death. Yet although Socrates describes here a way of life that he says has been his, he neither discusses specific events in his life, nor does he say anything about his own intellectual or ethical development. There is no life-story here, no narrative; and even with respect to the philosophical life as such, Socrates describes what it is rather than how it comes to be, which is the proper subject of philosophical autobiography. This other apology does, however, present certain principles, especially if the proper aim of philosophy is to prepare for dying and death.

6. *Socrates’ popular autobiography in the* Apology of Socrates.— Whereas he narrates his life-story in *Phaedo* to sympathetic and philosophically-minded friends, in the *Apology* Socrates addresses certain autobiographical stories to a mixed and partially hostile public. It is therefore unsurprising that the autobiographical stories of the two dialogues should differ so much in content and character, though in the *Apology* too, Socrates employs autobiography to give an account of the principles of his philosophical activity.
The *Apology* might claim to be a legitimate report of what Socrates actually said at his trial, especially since Plato himself tells us that he was present on this occasion (34a2, 38b7). But, as many scholars have noted, Plato’s account of Socrates’ speech differs from that of Xenophon, while there appear to have been multiple other versions of the same (historical) speech that have not come down to us. In addition, there is the rumor, noted by R. E. Allen, that the real Socrates said nothing in his own defense. As Allen notes, however, this rumor only originated rather late, in the Hellenistic period, and as Allen and Polansky both contend, the source of this story is probably Callicles’ claim in *Gorgias* that, if called to trial, Socrates would have nothing to say in his own defense. As before, it is both necessary and desirable to bracket these historical dilemmas for purposes of the present study. Our primary interest here will be how the Socrates of Plato’s dialogue uses autobiography within the context of the *Apology*. This consideration will provide a first test of the idea that Socrates’ philosophical autobiography in the *Phaedo* constitutes the basic paradigm of the genre, containing all its key elements, and so forth. The autobiographical passages of the *Apology* can be seen to confirm that philosophical autobiography, even garbed for public consumption, presents philosophical principles, gives a life-proof, describes some sort of conversion, and advances the claim that philosophy is the best way of life for human beings.

In considering the *Apology*, it is important to keep the juridical context in mind. As the autobiographical writings of Rousseau show very clearly (especially *Rousseau, 87* C.J. Rowe, in his *Plato*, points to the possibly exceptional character of the *Apology* among Plato’s dialogues: “Plato is not there just to record the thoughts and actions of Socrates. Nearly all the works are fictional, to the extent that the conversations they purport to record never in fact took place; possibly the only exception is the *Apology*…whose relative authenticity (Plato) may well intend to mark through the explicit mention of his presence at the event” (1). (Bristol Classical Press, 2nd edition, 2003). Cornford (1966, p. 35) believes the *Apology* is “no doubt faithful in spirit and substance to the speech actually made by Socrates in his own defence.”
Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues), accusation, real or imaginary, may invite autobiography. Defending oneself, in fact, necessarily involves giving an account of one’s words, deeds, or both, and the natural context of such accounts is a life-story. Trials, both in specifically juridical settings as well as in the realm of public opinion, call character into question, and autobiography can adduce a presentation of character in opposition to the vague and perhaps false notions of the philosopher and his activity prevailing within the community. Both Socrates’ autobiographical defense speech and Plato’s autobiographical letter aim to account for philosophical activity, as a way of life and discourse, by showing how this activity developed from lived experiences. Autobiography appeals to a basic structure of human understanding that grasps events in terms of cause and effect, and activities that may have appeared strange and questionable might find explanations in the autobiographical revelation of causes.

Such accounts we find in the Apology and Seventh Letter, where philosophy in the persons of Socrates and Plato, respectively, stands accused by the public. These texts offer autobiographies attempting to explain philosophical activity to the political community. If philosophy were irresponsible or indifferent to the political community, it might not attempt to justify itself, but philosophy is responsible. Yet philosophy also seems strange and perhaps questionable to the average member of the polis or political community, who takes his or her bearings from within the cultural mainstream, the traditional beliefs and wonted ways of some community. Today, as in Socrates’ time, philosophy appears to swim against this current, because it calls the usual beliefs and ways of living into question. As one of Socrates’ most infamous interlocutors, Callicles, observes, philosophy appears to turn humanlife (ὁ βίος...τῶν ἀνθρώπων) upside down.
(Gorgias, 481c). At the same time the philosopher comes to be within the political community, and there is really no such thing as philosophy outside some socio-political community, some polis. In Apology, and in the Seventh Letter discussed below, philosophical autobiography arises as a consequence of the tension and interrelation between philosophy and polis.

Autobiography creates a confidential mood by promising to reveal some private truth of the particular author. Autobiographers solicit a special trust from their hearers, even in juridical settings where judges are on guard to detect falsehoods. Although I am doubtful about certain aspects of his theory of autobiography, Philippe Lejeune’s *le pacte autobiographique* suggests something essential about the genre. The autobiographer makes, or attempts to make, a certain agreement with her addressees, since she promises to tell some truth about herself. In the Apology, Socrates repeatedly vouches for the truth of what he says and will say, from the outset telling the members of the jury that, “from me you will hear the whole truth (πᾶσαν τὴν ἀλήθειαν)” (17b8).

If we hold to the concept of autobiography as a retrospective life-story, the Apology is not autobiographical in its entirety. Socrates manages for long stretches of the dialogue to turn his defense into a Socratic conversation, just as in Symposium, he manages to avoid giving a speech by making an autobiographical Socratic dialogue with himself. Socratic conversations may be autobiographical, as the example of Symposium suggests, but the principal subjects of the elenchus of Meletus in the Apology are the education of the young and the question whether Socrates is truly an atheist. Since autobiography is distinct, and distinguishable, from other literary genres, it is different

---

88 See also 20d5-6, 22a2, 24a4.
from Socratic conversations that do not touch upon Socrates’ life history.\textsuperscript{89} If one makes everything autobiography, or if one simply identifies the subjective with the autobiographical, then one disfigures the concept of autobiography and risks destroying it altogether. As I argued in the Introduction, one should resist the temptation to make the one too quickly and hold fast to the distinction of autobiography from other modes of discourse or literary forms.

Let’s consider how the \textit{Apology} as a whole can be broken up: Socrates’ opening speech (17a1-18a6); his distinction between old and new accusers; account of the old accusation and Socrates’ initial response to this accusation (18a7-20c3); Socrates’ prologue and autobiography (20c4-24b2); Socrates’ defense against the new accusers through the elenchus of Meletus (24b3-28a2); Socrates’ comparison of himself with Achilles and the argument that doing what one knows to be wrong is worse than death, since we do not know whether death is good or bad (28b3-30c2); the defense of philosophical activity and the philosophic life, which bleeds into Socrates’ second, specifically political autobiography (30c3-34b5); Socrates’ refusal to appeal to pity and his argument explaining this refusal (34b6-35d9); Socrates’ response to the guilty verdict, his claim that what he deserves is free meals in the Prytaneum, and the argument that the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being (35e1-38b10); and his speeches to

\textsuperscript{89} Although in the present work I do not go much into the question of literary genre, I maintain that philosophical autobiography constitutes a distinctive genre alongside others, such as the novel, epic, tragedy and so on. Aristotle, e.g., recognizes several literary genera in the \textit{Poetics}. If one accepts Wellek and Warren’s determination of literature as fictional, autobiography would fall outside of “literature” properly speaking, at least if we assume that autobiography is nonfictional. Cf. Wellek and Warren, \textit{Theory of Literature}, Third Edition, (Harcourt Brace & Company, 1970; First Edition, 1946) p. 26. I at least am reluctant to limit the concept of literature in this way.
those who voted to condemn him to death (38c1-39d10) and to those who voted with him (39e1-42a5).\(^{90}\)

On this division of the dialogue Socrates offers two distinct but complementary autobiographical narratives in his defense. The first (at 20c4-24b2) aims to refute the charges of the old accusers by explaining the true reasons why Socrates believes he has been brought to trial. The second autobiographical narrative is broader in scope and speaks to Socrates’ relation to the Athenian political community as a whole. In this second autobiographical passage Socrates contends that he will focus on his past deeds, and not only on such things as he said in the past. The theme of words and deeds, the difference between the two, and their interrelation is also prominent in Plato’s *Seventh Letter*. The first autobiographical narrative (at 20c4-24b2) more clearly fits the paradigm of philosophical autobiography, because it describes a sort of conversion and presents principles upon which subsequent philosophical activity is based. The second autobiographical narrative is more static. Socrates presents himself as the god’s gift to the city and compares himself to a gadfly. He says he neglects his own affairs, has no money, and that he avoids political life because there is no place in politics for a person who

---

\(^{90}\) As a basis for comparison, C. D. C. Reeve, in *Socrates in the Apology: An Essay on Plato’s Apology of Socrates* (Hackett, 1989, p. 3), suggests the following division of the work: “the opening address (17a1-18a6), in which Socrates distinguishes the kind of speech he plans to make from the one made by the prosecution; the prothesis (18a7-19a7), in which he outlines the plan of the defense; the defense proper, which consists of the defense against the popular caricature (19a8-24b2) and the defense against the formal charges brought by Meletus (24b3-28a1); the digression (28a2-34b5), in which Socrates describes his divinely enjoined, philosophical mission to Athens; the epilogue (34b6-35d8), in which he returns to the rhetorical themes of the opening address; the counterpenalty (35e1-38b9), in which he proposes an alternative to the death penalty demanded by the prosecution; and, finally, the death penalty having been chosen by the jury, a closing address (38c1-42a5).” Reeve goes on to suggest that the dialogue also has a “broader tripartite structure,” but I do not find his arguments for this tripartition convincing. In *Socrates and Legal Obligation* (University of Minnesota Press, 1980, pp. 5-6), R. E. Allen notes how the parts of Socrates’ defense speech in Plato correspond to the parts of a traditional rhetorical speech, with an exordium, prothesis, refutation, digression, and peroration.
fights for the right. He adduces the controversy over the ten generals and the Leon of Salamis incident.

Socrates distinguishes between old and new accusers, and he claims that the old accusers are by far the more dangerous ones because many of the judges have listened to these accusers from childhood (ἐκ πατέρων). The old accusers charge Socrates with being a wise man (σοφός ἀνήρ), who investigates the natural things and who makes the weaker argument the stronger, and Socrates adds that men like that tend to be generally regarded as not believing in the gods. These are the charges leveled against Socrates famously by Aristophanes in his play, The Clouds, in which Aristophanes’ has Socrates denying the existence of Zeus and in which Socrates’ pupil Pheidippides is shown to beat his father Strepsiades.91 In his defense, Socrates alludes to Aristophanes once and then mentions him explicitly as representative of the old accusers (18d, 19c).

Socrates’ autobiography addresses itself to the charges of impiety and corrupting the young leveled against him by Aristophanes and the many, though nameless old accusers. Socrates’ presents his philosophical activity as consistent with, and actually stemming from, his reverence for the gods, since he presents this activity as according with a divine mission in the service of Apollo. Socrates introduces his autobiography by saying that some may think he is only joking but that all he will say will be the truth. The word “I” (ἐγώ) opens the autobiography:

For I, men of Athens, have gained the name of wisdom through nothing but this. What kind of wisdom? Human wisdom (ἀνθρώπινη σοφία), perhaps. It may be that I really possess this, while those whom I mentioned just now (Gorgias, Prodicus, Hippias, perhaps Evenus) are wise with a wisdom more than human; else I cannot explain it, for I certainly do

---

91 The symbolism of children beating their parents signifies a lack of respect for tradition and ancestors upon which the city is founded. Strauss makes this argument in Natural Right and History, but the key reference is to his curious book Socrates and Aristophanes (1966).
not possess it, and whoever says I do is lying and speaks to slander me. Do not create a disturbance, gentlemen, even if you think I am boasting, for the story I shall tell does not originate with me, but I will refer you to a trustworthy source. I shall call upon the god at Delphi as witness to the existence and nature of my wisdom, if it be such. You know Chaerephon. He was my friend from youth, and the friend of most of you, as he shared your exile and your return. You surely know the kind of man he was, how impulsive in any course of action. He went to Delphi at one time and ventured to ask the oracle—as I say, gentlemen, do not create a disturbance—he asked if any man was wiser than I, and the Pythian replied that no one was wiser (σοφότερον). Chaerephon is dead, but his brother will testify to you about this (20d6-21a9).92

Socrates’ autobiography works to undermine the charge of impiety, though it does not do so in an unambiguous way. Recounting how he was puzzled upon hearing the Pythian’s words, since he did not consider himself even a little bit wise, Socrates presents his philosophical activity as flowing from Chaerephon’s question to the Delphic oracle and her surprising answer. Socrates asserts that it would have been impossible for the god of Delphi, Apollo, to lie, so that the oracle’s statement that no one is wiser than Socrates must be true, and yet he claims not to understand it. Many scholars have recognized that Chaerephon’s question to the Pythian must have been prompted by Socrates’ previous demonstration of wisdom, and Socrates’ story surely suggests that he was already practicing a kind of wisdom prior to Chaerephon’s question.93 The character of the earlier activity that must have prompted this question remains, however, obscure, since Socrates only attends to the nature of his activity subsequent to the Pythian’s pronouncement.

Socrates thus explains the activity that has brought him such unpopularity in terms of a beginning and a principle that he derives from the oracle. His goal, as he characterizes it, is to understand what the Pythian means. He explains his activity in light

92 Grube translation in Cooper, except for the first sentence which is my translation.
93 See, for example, the (not altogether satisfactory) discussion in C. D. C. Reeve (1989, pp. 28-37) and Waterfield (2009, pp. 10-11). Others might check this, but Reeve’s references to Burnet’s discussion appear to be faulty. The correct reference is: Burnet, 1924, pp. 170-171.
of this goal. He maintains that his entire life has been devoted to questioning himself and others, but he adds that he has also done this out of a concern for human excellence and from a desire that both he and his fellows should become as excellent as human beings can be.

7. *The Seventh Letter of Plato.*— Plato’s *Seventh Letter* resembles the *Apology* in being an autobiographical defense of philosophy in a political context, in this case, relative to Plato’s involvement in the political life of Sicily, at that time a part of Greater Greece. Similar to Socrates’ presentation of his character to the Athenians by recounting deeds (ἐργα) and not only speeches (λόγοι), Plato insists on the importance of works or deeds in the *Seventh Letter*, which may be one reason why some professional scholars fear recognizing this letter as authentic (328c3-d2). Plato says he feared acquiring the reputation of someone who is all talk (λόγος μόνον, 328c6) and no action. Like the Socrates of the *Apology*, too, Plato stresses philosophy as a way of life, referring to “the account and the life (λόγον καὶ βίον)” he “always (ἀεί)” teaches (328a4-5) and throughout the letter repeatedly returning to the theme of how one should live. The *Seventh Letter* also bears comparison with *Phaedo*, since, in response to the travesty of philosophy enacted by Dionysius II, Plato endeavors to say what philosophy truly is.

In contrast to Socrates’ autobiography in the *Apology*, however, Plato gives an autobiographical account of the origin and evolution of his specifically political philosophy. Further, whereas Socrates portrays himself as qualifiedly apolitical in the *Apology*, Plato frankly admits his belief that philosophy might bring about the best, most just political regime (a regime governed by laws is second-best in relation to a regime ruled by a true philosopher or philosophers, 337d-e). Rowe (p. 28) captures something of
this difference between Socrates and Plato when he writes that “Socrates addressed people as individuals, talking to anybody who cared to listen. Plato’s ambitions are larger: not the piecemeal reform of individuals, but the reform of society as a whole.” Whereas the Socrates of the Apology appears to have held philosophy and politics apart, Plato presents himself as trying to marry the two. His and his friend Dion’s shared hope (ἐλπίς, 328a6) guided their attempt to blend politics and philosophy in the person of the tyrant Dionysius the Younger, and it also explains Plato’s two subsequent voyages to Sicily and indeed his whole Sicilian adventure.

The Seventh Letter is addressed to multiple recipients, the friends of Dion, and in this sense it is an open letter. One may wonder whether Plato in writing the Seventh had an even broader audience in mind. When early on he praises Dion’s beliefs about government, he sounds like an author addressing a wide audience, holding Dion up as a paradigm worthy of imitation. He says the account of how Dion’s beliefs came to be is worth hearing for young and old (324b5-6). The fact that the letter has come down to us, moreover, suggests that it may have been often reproduced, widely circulated, and highly valued within the ancient world. The Seventh Letter is autobiographical in its entirety, yet it may nevertheless be divided into parts for purposes of better comprehension: Plato’s opening address to the friends of Dion (323d/e-324b7); his story about his early political experiences and how they disillusioned him about politics (324b8-326b4); his account of his first trip to Sicily and the beginning of his friendship with Dion (326b5-327b6); his account of Dionysius II’s ascendency to the throne following his father’s death and Dion’s appeal to Plato to help him bring justice to the Syracusans by turning Dionysius to

---

94 The first known reference to the Seventh Letter in antiquity is found in Cicero’s Tusculan Disputations, Bk. 5. This has led some commentators, such as Edelstein, to doubt its authenticity, on the argument that this reference is so late (Cicero 106-43 B.C.).
philosophy (327b6-328b1); Plato’s account of how he considered Dion’s proposal and his decision to go to Sicily a second time; the account of Plato’s first visit to the court of Dionysius (329b7-330c3); Plato’s advice to the friends of Dion (330c3-337e); Plato’s account of his third trip to Sicily and second visit to the court of Dionysius II (337e-); the famous philosophical excursus (342a); Plato’s account of Dionysius’ conduct during his second visit (345a-350b); Plato’s return to the Greek mainland and his account of the aftermath of his “Sicilian wandering” (350b-352a).95

The autobiographical Seventh Letter presents an account of philosophical principles. More broadly, the Platonic autobiography explains the principles of Platonic discourse, Plato’s works and way of life, marking the parallel and converging developments of Plato’s philosophical and political ideas in terms of a life-story presented by himself.96

The Platonic autobiography proceeds by stages, starting from Plato’s recollections of his early political experiences. As Friedländer notes, Plato begins his autobiography by using some of the same words he ascribes to Socrates in Phaedo, writing “I being young (νέος ἐγώ…ὦν, compare Phaedo 96a5-7).” Plato begins his autobiography by describing his youthful wish to enter into politics and then proceeds to discuss how this wish was frustrated, as a consequence of his observations of the corruption of Athenian political life. Plato describes how his negative political experiences led him to the philosophical contemplation of politics in general and to the realization that “evils for humankind will

---

95 For a similar outline and division of the Seventh Letter into parts, see Post (1925, pp. 56-57).
not cease until philosophers rule in the polis or those who rule become genuine philosophers” (κακῶν οὖν οὐ λήξειν τὰ ἀνθρώπινα γένη, πρὶν ἄν ἦ τὸ τῶν φιλοσοφούντων ὅρθος γε καὶ ἀληθῶς γένος εἰς ἄρχας ἔλθῃ τὰς πολιτικὰς ἦ τὸ τῶν δυναστευόντων ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν ἐκ τινος μοίρας θείας ὀντως φιλοσοφήσῃ, 326a7-b4). Plato presents his subsequent political activity as an effort to bring about the coincidence of philosophy and political rule.

As a young man, Plato’s political disillusionment precipitated his full commitment to a philosophical way of life, though it would be hazardous to postulate a one-to-one correlation between Plato’s political disenchantment and the beginnings of philosophy. Contrary to what one might think, in the Seventh Letter Plato does not explain his turn to philosophy as a consequence of his disenchantment with politics. The beginning of Plato’s interest in philosophy lies elsewhere, beyond the scope of this particular autobiographical letter. At the same time, Plato clearly sees philosophy as the best hope for a just political order. Plato tells that he was already friends with Socrates at the time of the Thirty Tyrants’ ascendency (324d8-e1), so he had clearly been exposed to philosophy prior to his political disillusionment. Yet there can be no doubt that Plato’s disillusionment with political life intensified his commitment to philosophy. He says that the things he witnessed, first under the oligarchic government of the Thirty (or Fifty-One), and then under the restored democracy, considerably diminished the ardor of his desire to participate in political life, at least under actually existing conditions. His observation of the badness of successive political regimes in Athens brought about the frustration of this hope. This experience and the ambivalence toward politics it

---

97 A clear echo of Republic 473c11-e5, 501e.
98 One might also compare Aristotle’s account of Plato’s philosophical development at Metaphysics Bk. 1, Ch. 6, 987a29-b18.
engendered in Plato contributed, on his account, to the development of his political teaching. Philosophy and the polis are intimately related for Plato because philosophy is for him the highest development of human powers and the only human pursuit consistent with the human good. By insisting on the importance of politics for Plato, one need not then go on to argue that Plato is primarily a political philosopher. Plato is certainly also a political philosopher, however. Even if it is true that “Plato’s initial intentions were political,” it is also true that philosophy and politics are not the same thing, even if philosophy involves politics and in some sense depends on it. Of course Plato also thinks that in the best case philosophy may shape politics as well, for the good of the community as a whole and not just for the benefit of a single class.

In the Seventh Letter Plato describes the development of his political philosophy, and he explains how he understood the interworking of philosophy and politics in general. Plato presents his political disillusionment as being closely tied to the political fortunes of his older friend Socrates, so that Socrates functions as the standard by which Plato evaluated the Athenian political regimes of his youth. In a passage reminiscent of the closing words of the Phaedo (118a15-17), Plato tells his correspondents that he is not ashamed to call Socrates the “most just” (δικαιότατον) man then living (324e2). The revolution (μεταβολή) that brought the Thirty Tyrants to power took place in 404 BCE, when Plato was in his early twenties. As is well known, Plato had relatives and acquaintances among the Thirty who were also sometime companions of Socrates, namely, Charmides and Critias, and he tells us that he hoped the new regime would lead the polis “from an unjust to a just way of life” (ἐκ τινος ἀδίκου βίου ἐπὶ δίκαιον

τρόπον) (324d4-5). Things rapidly went bad under the tyranny of the Thirty, however, and Plato cites the new rulers’ poor treatment of Socrates as the main reason for his own change of opinion about what kind of men they were. As Socrates says in the *Apology* (323c3-e1), the Thirty attempted to implicate him in their crimes by ordering him to go with some others to arrest a man (Leon of Salamis) who had done nothing wrong, but whose wealth the new government wished to steal. After the fall of the Thirty and the restoration of democracy, Plato claims that his political hopes were reawakened. These hopes were again frustrated when the democracy put Socrates to death. On Plato’s account, a more synoptic consideration of political regimes convinced him of the truth of the position elaborated at *Republic* 473c11-e5 and thereafter, which he rehearses in the *Seventh Letter* (326a-b). Plato’s involvement in Syracusan politics shows that the arguments and ideas of the *Republic* guided Plato in his life as well.

In the philosophical excursus of the *Seventh Letter* (342a1-344d2) Plato explains his conception of philosophy, describing the way to the apprehension of truth, while also indicating the limitations that attach to our ability to know what actually is. Consideration of Dionysius’ character directly precipitates the excursus, since Plato’s second visit to the his court (his third visit overall) had been motivated by reports of Dionysius’ burgeoning interest in philosophy. Although the philosophical position outlined here appears in an autobiographical context, Plato does not relate how he arrived at his understanding of human knowledge in terms of his life story. Plato describes how he attempted to convert a political ruler to philosophy. Plato recounts how upon his arrival in Sicily he put Dionysius to the test to see whether this interest was genuine or merely the superficial
product of the tyrant’s vanity. Plato tells his correspondents that there is “a way…to test”
(τις τρόπος…πειραμάτων) the authenticity of a young person’s passion for philosophy:

To such persons one must point out what the subject is as a whole, and what its character, and how many preliminary subjects it entails and how much labor. For on hearing this, if the pupil be truly philosophic, in sympathy with the subject and worthy of it, because divinely gifted, he believes that he has been shown a marvelous pathway and that he must brace himself at once to follow it, and that life will not be worth living if he does otherwise. (340b-c).

Dionysius quickly proved his ineptitude for philosophy by his neglect of Plato’s company and by his suspicious, unreliable, and harmful conduct. Yet as Plato notes, Dionysius claimed to have understood Plato’s teaching and was even reputed to have written a book on it. This prompts Plato to engage in one of the most fascinating and important passages of the entire letter, the famous “digression,” in which he describes what the philosophical search for truth is really like and why it cannot be adequately captured by written texts. Here we see that, for Plato as for Nietzsche and others, philosophy is essentially a way of life as opposed to something that can be captured and pinned down in writings, however eloquent and consistent with the truth such works may be. Instead one must engage in a lifelong practice of dialogue with like-minded individuals and then, only gradually, may one come to see the truth in a sudden moment of intellectual perception.

8. The philosophical significance of Plato’s autobiographical writings.— Plato’s autobiographical writings present us with an intensely personal expression of certain ideas about what the philosophical life is supposed to be, as well as how it came to be for both Plato and Socrates. By presenting philosophy autobiographically, Plato communicates the importance of philosophy for human life, showing how philosophy is a

100 Compare Statesman 286a on the topic of how much labor the philosophic life requires.
discourse and way of life (λόγος καί βίος) that arises out of life itself. Plato’s autobiographical writings present an array of life-stories that attempt to account for ultimate philosophical principles by telling how Socrates and Plato came to hold certain principles as a result of their search for truth and the things they suffered and experienced along the way. They are narratives about how a certain kind of philosopher comes to be what he is. Although these philosophical autobiographies are complicated stories, and despite the fact that there are limits to what they explain, they nonetheless present us with memorable accounts of philosophical lives. They also succeed in giving an intelligible account of the source of ultimate philosophical principles, and Plato and Socrates go on to show how their subsequent philosophical activity was rooted in these same principles. Showing how they have lived the philosophical life and how it was best for them, they suggest that this course of human life may be best for others, too. Narrating how in their own lives they were able to discover philosophical principles and to live according to them, they show that it is possible for others to make such discoveries and to live accordingly. Plato’s autobiographical writings suggest that if it was, it might be yet again in the future.

The philosopher on Plato’s account immerses himself or herself in the contemplation of things, attempting to understand the things that are as they are. Such understanding requires, however, apprehension of the relations among all things, and the limitations imposed on human beings by time and space make truly comprehensive knowledge perhaps only a goal to be approximated but never fully attained.

It is unnecessary to appeal to the *Seventh Letter* in order to establish that Plato was interested in political life and that he conceived a political role for philosophy,
focusing on the reform of education as a prerequisite for political reform. Plato’s autobiographical writings have a political function. Working to turn prospective readers to philosophy, they aim to develop the kind of human beings that Plato sees as humanity’s best chance for a just political order. At the same time, Plato is hardly optimistic in the sense of thinking things will inevitably work out for the best, and the specific situations that determine the autobiographies of the Apology and the Phaedo, not to mention the Seventh Letter, underscore the great difficulties the philosopher faces in bringing about political reform. Socrates’ own eventual disappointment with the study of nature (or physics) arises in part because of the inability of the students of nature to address the concerns of the polis. Physics as pursued by the predecessors cannot give an adequate account of human actions, because the physicists’ reliance on material causes cannot explain Socrates’ decision to stay in prison instead of escaping (Phaedo 98d-99a). The autobiography of the Phaedo describes how this and other deficiencies in natural studies led Socrates (and Plato) to formulate the theory of ideas. This theory suits better the character of human nature and the human community that is based in speech and reason (λόγος), since ideas are presupposed in any speech as those things to which speech refers.

The Platonic autobiography, however, suggests that “speech alone” (λόγος µόνον) is insufficient for a philosophical way of life (Seventh 328c6). Works or deeds (ἔργα) are equally necessary. Speeches and deeds, moreover, must flow from, and in truth consist in, some at first mysterious third, signified in Plato by the good or the natural good.
Comprehension of the source of properly philosophic speech and action is approximated in Plato through dialectic and “much labor.”\textsuperscript{101}

Plato’s autobiography offers an account of the origin and development of Platonic dialectic in its intimate relation to ideas. The \textit{Symposium’s} autobiographical account of the theory of ideas complements the autobiographical narrative of the \textit{Phaedo}, while it also enhances comprehension of the origin and development of Platonic dialectic that begins and ends with ideas. In the autobiographical dialogue of the \textit{Symposium}, Plato explains how philosophy comes dialectically to grasp enriched ideas of the divine and human things, and elaborates upon how this dialectic tends to the discovery of the ideas themselves. Diotima demonstrates how eros of the beautiful explains the entire continuum of animal life in terms of the longing for both beauty and immortality. Immortality is a major theme of the \textit{Symposium}, as well as of the \textit{Apology} and \textit{Phaedo}, and this topic appears intimately related to philosophical discussions of self.\textsuperscript{102} Self is equivocal, however, though many commentators fail to recognize this truth, focusing instead on the question whether some ultimate, unequivocal self exists, for example, the body. Unequivocally self is just self itself, i.e., it refers to nothing but itself. Yet self itself is discovered to be equivocal through dialectical investigation, inasmuch as self must be defined or determined in its relation to everything else. In the \textit{Phaedrus}, Plato has Socrates ask: “Do you think that it is possible to reach a serious understanding of the nature of the soul without understanding the nature of the whole?” (\textit{Phaedrus} 270c) The consideration of everything reveals that self consists in its being many things, so that the

\textsuperscript{101} Cf. \textit{Statesman} 286a.
\textsuperscript{102} Sorabji notes the frequency of this connection in his new book, \textit{Self}. In addition to formulating a theory of self, Sorabji’s book provides a useful compendium of philosophical arguments, past and present, about what self is.
signifier self signifies equivocally. Self can be what one is intensively as well as expansively. Although discussion of self or soul, whether it is mortal or immortal, might appear irrelevant to Plato’s concerns in the Seventh Letter, this letter shares with the dialogues mentioned above profound concern with immortality properly conceived. Like self, immortality is equivocal. For, inasmuch as self or soul gains a share in immortality through sexual reproduction, fame, and most of all through the virtuous concern to foster excellence in the younger generation, Plato’s autobiographical writings prove that immortality is a primary philosophical concern. For in telling how he risked life and limb on the thin hope of bringing the tyrant Dionysius to philosophy, Plato shows how he, like the Socrates of the Apology, fears doing what is certainly evil (conniving with tyranny) more than his own death. He also demonstrates how the primary motivation of philosophy is not the negative one of avoiding evil but rather the positive one of bringing about specific good by turning others, as much as possible, toward philosophy.

103 Polansky (2007, pp. 3-4): “There seem…at least two ways to think about the self. There are the notion of the self as the entirety of the person, and of the self as what is most genuinely what one is. The entirety notion is an expansive self. It may extend to even greater wholes than the individual soul and body. The Greek saying that ‘the friend is another self’ suggests that the self may embrace one’s circle of friends. But we might then also identify with larger groups or wholes, such as family, polis, or cosmos, so that the self can be remarkably embracing.”

104 Apology 39 a-b; Seventh Letter 328c, 329a-b.
Isn’t human life on earth a trial without a break?
(nunquid non temptatio est vita humana super terram sineullo interstitio?)
—Augustine, Conf. 10.28.39\textsuperscript{105}

1. “The first great autobiography”— If the form of philosophical autobiography already becomes evident in Plato, Augustine’s Confessions nevertheless extends and enhances this form in so many ways that the work almost seems to constitute an entirely new genre. For whereas Plato’s autobiographical writings remain within a primarily intellectual and also political framework, in the Confessions Augustine reaches out to encompass the story of his whole life, intellectual and emotional, public and private, good and bad; further, whereas Plato’s autobiographical writings emphasize intellectual conversion and the cognitive becoming of his auto-protagonists, Augustine, though also concerned with intellectual transformation, introduces a notion of ethical conversion in his autobiography, a conversion that he presents in terms of both the cognitive and the emotional side of his being; whereas, finally, Plato’s autobiographical writings limit themselves to relatively discrete chronological periods in his own and Socrates’ lives, Augustine attempts to account for his philosophy in terms of his entire life, from his birth

\textsuperscript{105} All references to Augustine’s Confessions are by book, chapter, and section number, hence 10.28.39 refers to book 10, chapter 28, section 39. For the Latin text, I have used the James O’Donnell’s wonderful edition of the Confessions in three volumes (vol. I: Introduction and Text; vols. II and III: Commentary). This text was published by the Clarendon Press at Oxford, 1992, and republished by Oxford University Press as a paperback in 2012. It is also available online at http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/conf/. It would be difficult to overstate the value of O’Donnell’s achievement. His text and commentary are indispensable resources for contemporary Augustine scholars. I refer to it parenthetically within the main text by volume and page number. I have consulted numerous English translations of the Confessions, but taking a cue from my teacher Roland Ramirez, I have favored John K. Ryan’s translation (Image Books, 1960). (O’Donnell likes this translation.) All English quotations of the Confessions are from Ryan’s translation unless otherwise noted. The present translation, e.g., is not Ryan’s but my own. When I taught the Confessions during the 2012 fall semester at West Virginia University, we used Henry Chadwick’s translation (1991, 2008), which is also fine. For a full list of the translations I have consulted, please see my bibliography.
up to his conversion and beyond. One might multiply points of contrast with Plato’s autobiographical writings. For example, Augustine draws in the *Confessions* a more explicit connection between philosophical reflection and mundane but often traumatic human events, such as the death of a loved one (see especially *Conf.* 4.4-12 and below) than we find anywhere in Plato’s autobiographical writings. Augustine’s autobiography thus fosters a sense of how philosophical thinking can arise in response to such events as normally mark the course of human lives, and how, looking back through memory on our lives, and the events of our lives, we can find ample occasions for philosophizing and raising our minds to truth.

For all these reasons, and also due to the fact that Plato’s autobiographies are problematic, embedded in dialogues, and so forth, it is hardly surprising that Augustine’s *Confessions* is generally considered to be “the first great autobiography,” the “first great example of autobiography in the West.”

Yet although Augustine was certainly an innovator in this domain, it would be a mistake to exaggerate the differences between Plato’s autobiographical writings and Augustine’s famous text. For, despite the pronounced differences noted above, these works share the same basic form and function. In both cases we find a life-narrative with a conversion structure, and Plato and Augustine both use autobiography protreptically, in order to turn readers toward philosophy as the best kind of humanlife. (Augustine, of

---

course, considers Christianity to be the true philosophy.) Furthermore, just as Plato’s and Socrates’ self-narratives are exemplary, so “(Augustine’s) narrative of himself is archetypal for humankind,” as James O’Donnell has written in his fine biography of Augustine.\textsuperscript{107} Finally, for both Plato and Augustine philosophical autobiography is essentially a means of presenting and giving an account of philosophical principles, and just as Plato and Socrates use autobiography to present principles, Augustine writes the \textit{Confessions} to show how he arrived at the starting point of his philosophy, which for him is his belief in the truth of the Christian religion. For Augustine, Christianity is the proper starting point for philosophy, though of course he himself only arrived at this starting point after a long and tortuous search for wisdom and truth. Christianity as the principle, as the result of the search for truth that he presents in the \textit{Confessions}, constitutes the basis for all Augustine’s subsequent philosophical activity. As with Plato and Socrates, so in Augustine, too, the preeminent philosophical principle is presented not only as the product of a life, but also as a turning point or reversal in this same life, and thus as the beginning of a new way of life consistent with the principle.

To be clear, I am not claiming that Augustine merely took over this literary form from Plato; as a matter of historical fact, it is unlikely that Augustine ever read any of Plato’s autobiographical writings.\textsuperscript{108} It is rather much more likely that if Augustine had models in mind when composing his autobiography they would have been oral conversion stories within the Christian community, such as those described in Book 8 of the \textit{Confessions} (see \textit{Conf.} 8.2.3-5 and 8.6.14-15) and writings on the lives of the saints.


\textsuperscript{108} Augustine’s knowledge of Greek was, as he himself admits, shoddy at best, and Plato’s works were unavailable in Latin translation at that time. Through email correspondence, O’Donnell assured me that Augustine did not read Plato directly and for the aforementioned reason: his Greek was too weak and (the vast majority of) Plato was unavailable in Latin translation.
such as Athanasius’ Life of St. Anthony, which Augustine also mentions (Conf. 8.6.15).\textsuperscript{109} Undoubtedly the story of St. Paul’s sudden conversion on the road to Damascus (as related in the Acts of the Apostles 9) would have figured as the preeminent example of conversion for a Christian writing in the late fourth century, and there can be no doubt about Paul’s importance for Augustine’s thought. Both the metamorphosis of the convert, and the process leading up to that metamorphosis, were of great interest within the Christian community of Augustine’s time. Indeed the idea of conversion was at the forefront of the collective consciousness in Augustine’s time, and the practice of writing life-stories was already highly developed, although probably somewhat more so in the Greek-speaking culture. The Christian Gospels themselves are in some sense nothing other than biographies of Jesus. None of this is to suggest, however, that the Confessions is not a strikingly original work and a significant enhancement of the autobiographical form as a means of doing philosophy.\textsuperscript{110}

The similarity between Plato’s autobiographical writings and Augustine’s Confessions appears not to be the result of one author influencing another (although one cannot discount the possibility of influence altogether, however mediate and perhaps unconscious). Instead these works are similar because they reflect similar processes and similar humanlives. There is a similarity between great minds and philosophical lives. As a product of a certain kind of humanlife dedicated to the search for truth or wisdom,

\textsuperscript{109} On Paulinus of Nola and the rage for conversion stories amongst fourth-century Christians in general, see Peter Brown, Augustine of Hippo, pp. 151-156.

\textsuperscript{110} James Olney questions whether Augustine had any models at all; “it may be,” he thinks, “that when Augustine set about writing the Confessions, without any real model to follow (for I do not consider St. Paul convincing as model or compelling example), he intended something other than the book he in fact produced.” But this ignores the other possible models discussed above, and if Paul did not write an autobiography, it is equally true that Paul’s story illustrates spiritual conversion or metamorphosis in a most dramatic and memorable way. See James Olney, Memory & Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing (University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 29.
philosophical autobiography is an understandable phenomenon and, as it turns out, a durable historical form. Since no one is simply born what they are and become, a human life can always be related as a story of development, and there is a becoming peculiar to philosophers whose lives are dedicated to the search for truth. If we accept the well-attested opinion (discussed in the previous chapter) that both autobiography and biography only developed rather late in human history, first flowering with the Socratics, we cannot assert that this literary form and the way of thinking about life that it presents are simply natural. Based on the best evidence we have, biography, autobiography, and specifically philosophical autobiography emerged historically against the background of, and in contrast to, a worldview that regarded individuals as essentially static. The emergence of biography and autobiography as dynamic, developmental narrative genres, involving metamorphosis, and so on, is a more or less datable historical fact. Plato created specifically philosophical autobiography, and this means that if Plato invented philosophy, philosophical autobiography is coeval and co-existent with the start of philosophy. Philosophers like Plato and Augustine are interested in fostering in others the desire to search for truth and to pursue a good life, and philosophical autobiography is a good form for this purpose, especially in the case of resonant and forceful autobiographies like those of Plato and Augustine.

But to return to the Confessions itself, it is important to note, as O’Donnell observes, that calling the Confessions “the first great autobiography” is a very modern and far from unproblematic way of speaking. O’Donnell, who in 1992 published a new critical edition of the Confessions, with an introduction and extensive commentary, has argued in a more recent book that, “Augustine’s readers…have made the Confessions
into the first modern autobiography, and it is a classic of modern literature…as Augustine’s doctrinal eminence has faded with passing years, his prestige as self-narrator has grown stronger.”

By comparison, “Augustine’s early medieval audience seems to have paid this book relatively little attention, preferring his more prosaic biblical commentaries and theological treatises. The book began to come into its own in the twelfth century and after, but it’s equally possible to argue that moderns have made far more of it than any earlier age.” These observations support the claim that the idea and theory of autobiography (as opposed to the thing itself) is a modern invention. Although premodern thinkers sometimes wrote autobiographies, there was little or no theoretical awareness of autobiography prior to modern times (recall that the very word “autobiography” is a late-eighteenth or early-nineteenth century coinage). The Confessions has thus been recognized as a great autobiography in our own era, in the bourgeois-capitalist era, and it is only in this era that we have become conscious of the theory of autobiography, a development that coincides with the rise of writing and reading autobiographies since the nineteenth century.

By juxtaposing modern and pre-modern ways of thinking about autobiography, and by thus bringing the status of the Confessions as an autobiography into question, O’Donnell is driving at an even more significant point, which is that there are reasons we might doubt whether Augustine’s Confessions are an autobiography at all. This chapter is, as the reader will discover, haunted by these doubts. Since Augustine for the most part

112 Ibid.
113 As mentioned in the Introduction, a good historical account of the rise of interest in autobiography in the nineteenth century can be found in Peter Gay’s The Naked Heart: The Bourgeois Experience, Victoria to Freud, vol. 4 (W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), especially Ch. 2, “Exercises in Self-Definition,” pp. 103-149.
addresses his *Confessions* to god\textsuperscript{114}, the work might appear to be more of a prayer than an autobiography, and insofar as the book is an account of how Augustine sees god working and having worked through his (Augustine’s) life, god and not Augustine is, in some sense, the chief protagonist of the book. Nor does Augustine allow that he himself, that the man Augustine should serve as an exemplar for other human beings, since he believes humanity’s true goal is to model itself after god, to become as much like god as possible, in accordance with the word of sacred scripture that has god make human beings in god’s own image and likeness (*Conf.* 13.22.32).\textsuperscript{115} It is therefore in some sense true to say, as O’Donnell does, that, “The *Confessions* aren’t about Augustine, they’re about his god.”\textsuperscript{116} (Of course one might argue that for Plato, too, god, or the gods, are more appropriate models for human beings than is a philosopher even of Socrates’ stature.) At the same time, would anyone deny that Augustine himself, his authorial presence, is everywhere apparent in the *Confessions*? That even in the last three books of the *Confessions* that do not directly concern his life, Augustine himself is very much in the foreground? The story of his life, past and (in Book 10) present, is clearly central to what Augustine is trying to do in his unusual book.\textsuperscript{117}

Yet Garry Wills contends that Augustine’s *Confessions* “is often treated as if it were an autobiography, *but it is not*.”\textsuperscript{118} In addition to the *Confessions* being addressed to

\textsuperscript{114} I follow O’Donnell in putting “god” in lowercase, as a sign that it is far from obvious what Augustine takes god to be.

\textsuperscript{115} *Genesis* 1:26, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness (*et ait faciamus hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem nostram*).’” Septuagint: καὶ εἶπεν ὁ θεός Ποιήσομεν ἄνθρωπον κατ’ εἰκόνα ἡμετέραν καὶ καθ’ ὀμοίωσιν.


\textsuperscript{117} On Augustine’s problematic presence in the *Confessions*, see Lyell Asher, “The Dangerous Fruit of Augustine’s *Confessions*,” in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (published by Oxford University Press), vol. 66, no. 2 (Summer, 1998), pp. 227-255.

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., p. x, my emphasis.
god, about god, and aiming at god, the book has a peculiar structure that makes it look very different from what we might take autobiography to be. Only the first nine books contain a retrospective narrative, and Augustine continually interrupts this narrative to pray, to praise god or to ask god for help, to meditate on particular philosophical questions, and to detail philosophical arguments that arise in the course of his reflections on his life. Book 10 concerns Augustine’s present life and memory, while on the surface Books 11-13 have little to do with Augustine’s life, since they consist primarily of a speculative, metaphysically-oriented reading of the first chapter of Genesis. So both the role of god in the Confessions and the peculiar character of the last four books might make Augustine’s book seem an unlikely autobiography.

It turns out then that one can adduce many reasons why the Confessions are at best a problematic autobiography. These reasons, however, admit of another interpretation that takes them as consistent with understanding the Confessions as not only an autobiography but as an exemplary philosophical autobiography. It is difficult not to agree with James Olney, when he says that, “it is not possible to think about autobiography or life-writing as we have come to know it without thinking also—and first of all—about the Confessions.”119 The interpretation I offer will sustain the conventional wisdom that the Confessions are an autobiography, but it will also go beyond the common view to show how Augustine’s book is an exemplary philosophical autobiography. In order to do this, I will address the question of how the role of god in the Confessions is consonant with viewing the work as an autobiography, as well as how

the last four books, far from taking anything away, actually enhance the *Confessions*’ claim to be a philosophical autobiography.

Arguably the greatest appeal of Augustine’s *Confessions* has been, and is, its central story of *conversion*. As I pointed out in the Introduction, narratives with a conversion structure are attractive due to a fundamental characteristic of human nature, which is that human beings are not by nature what they ought to be. Conversion resembles *peripeteia* in the Aristotelian sense, and humans take pleasure in contemplating reversals. Indeed, as Jean Starobinski has observed, autobiography itself depends on conversion, because “one would hardly have sufficient motive to write an autobiography had not some radical change occurred in one’s life—conversion, entry into a new life, the operation of Grace.” Conversion is in some sense the *sine qua non* of autobiography. Again according to Starobinski, “it is the internal transformation of the individual—and the exemplary character of this transformation—that furnishes a subject for a narrative discourse in which ‘I’ is both subject and object.” Augustine presents himself as seeking truth and a way of living, and he also describes how he actually found (what he takes to be) the truth that he was seeking. The end of the story is, however, only an end in a sense; it is also a beginning, a basis for a new way of living, of thinking and acting.

---

120 Paraphrase of Hegel in *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson, in 3 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 5. Cf. Hegel’s reading of the Mosaic myth of the Fall in *The Encyclopedia Logic* §24, Addition 3. I cite Hegel, but I might have cited almost any major philosopher. There is near universal agreement on this subject, and this is also the reason philosophers agree on the importance of good training and education. Rousseau’s *Emile*, of course, adds an unusual twist to the standard way of thinking about education, since for Rousseau the proper goal of education is to preserve our original nature as far as possible within the confines of civil society. For Rousseau, we are good by nature and are only corrupted by society.


122 Ibid.
2. *Is Augustine a philosopher?*— This is an annoying but seemingly unavoidable question with respect to Augustine. By comparison, it would never occur to anyone to ask whether, say, Descartes or Kant is a philosopher. Is it really so obvious in these cases, or in any case? Of course Augustine is special for many reasons, and perhaps especially because one may reasonably suspect that his primary concern is furthering a particular church rather than philosophizing, that is, even if this particular church claims to be the universal one. Augustine’s biographers, at least in the English-speaking world, tend to agree that after writing the *Confessions* around 397 CE, Augustine’s thought became less open, more dogmatic and authoritarian, at least in certain respects. Augustine’s extensive involvement in writing polemics against competing belief-systems (especially “paganism”) and “heretics,” such as the Manichees, the Donatists, and the Pelagians, required him to take a hard line in many cases and to sacrifice a certain philosophical openness. But philosophers of all stripes tend to dig in their heels and defend those beliefs that they have come to hold, and I don’t think anyone would want to maintain that just because philosophers disagree, none of them are really philosophers. Philosophy is, after all, inseparable from a certain dogmatism (even the skeptics are to some extent dogmatically skeptical).

Contemporaries may also find troubling such remarks of Augustine’s as that for the love of god, “I should have given over even those philosophers who speak the truth” (*Conf.* 3.6.10). This sentence is, however, clearly a rhetorical flourish. Since Augustine believes that his god is the truth, there is certainly no question for him of sacrificing the one to the other. Still, even in his most open-minded writings, Augustine might look more like a theologian than a philosopher. But then, is the difference between theology
and philosophy very well understood today? “Theology” as Gilson (1960, p. 241) at one point characterizes it, “begins with the data of revelation and examines their content with the aid of reason, and in doing so it consciously agrees to place itself on a level different from that of the philosopher.” Clearly Augustine does take revelation as authoritative, but he also tries to go as far as he can with reason alone. The question about whether Augustine is a philosopher or not is vexing because in order to answer it fully one must be able to say what philosophy itself is, and that is not an easy thing to do.\textsuperscript{123} In the Introduction to this work I argued that philosophy is distinguished by seeking comprehensive knowledge in theoretical and practical domains with the ultimate goal of living a good life. Augustine is clearly interested in knowing god so far as this is possible, and he is also undeniably committed to the pursuit of the happy life.

As to the general disregard of Augustine by philosophers, I think it is unfortunate but also understandable. For, whereas contemporary philosophy is (at least publicly and for the most part) unconcerned with the question of god, this question is central within Augustine’s thought, and whereas a sort of mathematized logic is today one of the most highly prized subjects of study (at least within the predominant philosophy of our age and country), Augustine’s training as a liberally educated rhetorician makes him seem to have more in common with the humanities (\textit{Geisteswissenschaften}) than with philosophy.\textsuperscript{124} It also seems reasonable to question Augustine’s philosophical credentials on the basis of his failure to distinguish between philosophy and theology, and their correlates, reason

\textsuperscript{123} In his recent study of the \textit{Confessions}, Jean-Luc Marion seems to assume that we know what philosophy is, and on the basis of the peculiar conception of philosophy that he assumes, he contends that Augustine is not a philosopher. See Marion’s \textit{In the Self’s Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine}, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford University Press, 2012), especially pp. 4-7.

\textsuperscript{124} For an interesting comment on the atheism characteristic of philosophy in our time, see William Desmond, \textit{God and the Between} (Blackwell Publishing, 2008).
and faith, respectively. This distinction is, however, anachronistic when applied to Augustine’s thought, and as Augustine translator and commentator Edmund Hill remarks, “Augustine made no distinction between theology and philosophy such as is involved in the scholastic faith/reason distinction…He distinguished in fact between the true philosophy, which is orthodox Christianity, and…the doctrines of the Platonists and other pagan philosophers.”

For Augustine, moreover, “the quest for truth is at heart a single and not a multiple effort, and if it is not directed toward the discovery of the supreme truth which is God, then it is not really a quest for truth at all.” This is not to say, however, that Augustine recognizes no distinction between reason and faith, the limits of the former, and hence the necessity for the latter. He does recognize such a distinction and within the Confessions itself (cf. Conf. 6.5.8).

However all this may be, Augustine seems to have thought of himself as a philosopher and as remaining true to the inspiration to philosophize that he gained as a young man from reading Cicero’s (now lost) Hortensius (Conf. 3.4.7-8). For Augustine a philosopher is a lover and seeker of god. In The City of God, for example, Augustine suggests that “If God, by Whom all things were made, is wisdom, as the divine authority and truth have shown, then the true philosopher is a lover of God.” For Augustine god is not only identical with wisdom but with being, truth, and goodness (cf. Conf. 1.2.2,

---

126 Hill, ibid., my emphasis.
127 In De Trinitate, Augustine speaks of “an unseasonable and misguided love of reason” (Book 1, Ch. 1). Apropos Augustine, Pascal writes that, “La raison ne se soumetroit jamais, si elle ne jugeoit qu’il y a des occasions où elle se doit soumettre. Il est donc juste qu’elle se soumettre, quand elle juge qu’elle se doit soumettre.” Pascal’s Pensées, with trans. by H. F. Stewart (New York: Pantheon Books, 1950), pp. 356-357. According to this argument, it is reasonable for reason itself to surrender in certain circumstances.
1.5.5-6, 13.38.53), so god is the ultimate end of philosophy in every sense and that after which all philosophers and indeed all human beings are striving. From a historical point of view, however, Augustine’s god was not god “simple and plain,” but the trinitarian (Athanasian) god of the Caecilianist Christian sect in Roman Africa, and probably most philosophers working today would reject the idea that such a being is the concern of philosophy, much less its ultimate telos. Probably most contemporary philosophers would deny that Augustine’s god or any god has anything to do with what philosophers for the most part do, so Nietzsche’s “god is dead” seems an apt characterization of the scene in present-day philosophy.129

The Confessions themselves are a work of significant philosophical scope and depth, wherein Augustine introduces and grapples with a wide range of theoretical and practical problems, many of which are still widely recognized today as philosophical problems. Among them are the problems of human happiness, of god’s nature, and of evil, as well as the question of whether there is anything other than bodies in the universe, investigation of the nature of memory and of time, and consideration of the relation between form and matter. The three main philosophical problems of the Confessions are the problems of god’s nature, of evil, and of human happiness. For Augustine these problems and investigations are distinct and yet entirely interconnected, since they all refer to the question about god’s nature, which is what Augustine strives above all to understand. For Augustine knowledge of god and the happy life are connected: cum enim te, deum meum, quaero, vitam beatam quaero (“when I seek you, my god, I seek the

129 I would cite Rorty’s Introduction to his Consequences of Pragmatism (University of Minnesota Press) here. The main point is that many philosophers today reject the idea that there is such a thing as a substantive truth or good, i.e., something that has an essence and can therefore be defined. Truth and good are relative, contextual, etc. According to these philosophers, the search for truth itself, the good itself, and so forth is a fool’s errand.
happy life,” *Conf.* 10.20.29). This interconnection of concerns raises a question about the relationship between theoretical and practical philosophy in Augustine. In his study of Augustine’s Christian philosophy, Gilson contends that practical concerns predominate in Augustine, so human happiness, including his own happiness, constitutes Augustine’s primary concern. This view finds support in a much-quoted passage from *The City of God*, “nulla est homini philosophandi causa, nisi ut beatus sit,” “For a human being has no reason to philosophize other than in order to be happy” (*Civ.* 19.1, my translation). This passage and others like it surely suggest that Augustine is primarily a practical philosopher, as Gilson contends.

Actually the matter is not so simple, since Augustine clearly devotes a great deal of attention to what would be considered theoretical topics, in his or any age. Augustine did not neglect the study of nature, and in fact some of his earliest doubts about Manicheism were motivated by concerns he had about the Manichean teachings on natural philosophy (cf. *Conf.* 5.3.6, 5.7.12). As a philosophically-minded rhetorician, Augustine also devoted significant study to language, including significant reflections on this subject that appear in the *Confessions* itself. As Gilson also recognizes Augustine believes that happiness requires knowledge or truth, so that there is considerable overlap of theoretical and practical concerns in the *Confessions* (and indeed in all of Augustine’s writings).\(^{130}\) Even so, Gilson goes too far in asserting the primacy of the practical over the

---

\(^{130}\) Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, trans. L. E. M. Lynch (London: Victor Gollancz, 1961): “…in (Augustine’s) doctrine of wisdom, the object of philosophy, is always identified with happiness. He wants to find the kind of good whose possession will satisfy every desire and ensure peace. Such thorough-going Eudaemonism can be explained by the fact that Augustine always regarded philosophy as something quite different from the speculative pursuit of a knowledge of nature. He was concerned most of all with the problem of his own destiny. For him, the important thing was to strive for self-knowledge and to learn what must be
theoretical in Augustine, and I would rather say the concerns are equally important, or even that Augustine’s theoretical concern is primary in the way that it is for Aristotle, who sees the theoretical life as the superlative human good.

If philosophical economy of theory is a desideratum for philosophers, then there is a sense in which Augustine’s theory, his answer to philosophical questions, and his explanation of all phenomena, is the simplest and therefore the most economical of all, since for him “god” is the single and sufficient answer to all philosophical questions, as well as the explanation, or cause, of the entire phenomenal world, including the invisible world of souls and the inner world of thoughts and emotions. For Augustine, the answer to the ethical question is god; the answer to the epistemological question is god; the answer to the ontological question is god; and so forth (e.g., if something is beautiful, it is so because of god, because god made it, and because it indicates the creator). In Book 10 Augustine describes the happy life (beata vita) as a life of “joy in the truth (gaudium de veritate)” (Conf. 10.23.33). And for him every particular truth has reference to truth itself, which is for him identical with god (Conf. 10.24.35). Thus the goal of ethics (beatum, happiness) and the goal of epistemology (veritas, truth) are ultimately united and realized in god. God is thus the answer to all the questions of philosophy, with one partial exception, since god is not responsible for evil which comes into the world rather as a direct consequence of our, human misuse of god’s gift of free will (see, for example, Conf. 7.3.5).

The fact that the answer to all philosophical questions is simple for Augustine does not translate into a simple philosophy. On the contrary, Augustine sees it as a
problem how we human beings can know god at all, and he also realizes that it will be
difficult for us to live and to act on the basis of a knowledge that we do not fully possess.
Practical life, or the goal of living ethically, is, for Augustine, a struggle, and Augustine
claims that human life on earth is an unceasing trial, an uninterrupted struggle to live in
accordance with what is best, made all the more difficult by the fact that we do not even
know what the best is, at least not entirely. Of course faith, from our side, and grace, from
god, can intervene, since we can believe what we don’t understand and can act in
accordance with this faith. But, although he affirms the necessity of faith, Augustine is
not really satisfied with faith apart from knowledge. In fact Augustine’s pursuit of
knowledge is not only thoroughgoing, it is even critical in something like Kant’s sense of
the term. Of course Augustine and Kant reach very different conclusions, but it is
significant that both of them think that if we want to know anything at all, we need first
to examine our own cognitive powers, which are our means of knowing. Only when we
understand what these powers are, what they can do, and what limits they have, can we
know what it is possible for us to know. From this angle, one can see that Augustine’s
discussions of memory and time in books 10 and 11, respectively, carry out a kind of
critical philosophical investigation, because for Augustine memory and time are the
power and frame, respectively, within which alone human knowledge is possible.
Augustine’s discussion of memory follows upon an examination of the five senses by
which we perceive various things, and he devotes significant attention to the question of
the sources of our knowledge, distinguishing between what we learn through the senses

131 I see the exchange in Book 2, 16-19 of On Free Choice of the Will (De libero arbitrio
voluntatis) as particularly illustrative of Augustine’s desire not merely to believe but to
and what we learn in some other way. Augustine pursues self-knowledge in order to know what it is possible for humans to know, but also because self-knowledge contributes to knowledge of god, since, as Wills notes, “even with all man’s imperfections, the human person is the thing in all of earthly creation that most resembles God.” What is even more remarkable from my point of view is that, by examining memory and time in the Confessions, Augustine also includes reflections on the conditions of the possibility of autobiography within his autobiography. Thus both Augustine’s interests, outlined above, and his methods in the Confession seem to be convincing evidence that Augustine is a sort of philosopher.

3. The structure of the Confessions with an eye to the question of genre.— The Confessions is, in Garry Wills’ phrase, “a not very long work.” Yet even to its most talented and assiduous students, the book can appear “disturbingly uncategorizable,” and as presenting numerous interpretive difficulties. The Confessions is an extremely rich and complex book, characterized by an intensity of language that layers significance upon significance, Augustine managing to say much by saying little. The book is also full of profound (and not so profound) philosophical arguments; it is densely populated by biblical and other classical allusions, unusual expressions, and rhetorical flourishes; and

---

132 Garry Wills, Saint Augustine’s Memory (Viking, 2002), p. 22.
133 The claim that Augustine is not a kind of philosopher can really only arise for those who are either unfamiliar with philosophy or with Augustine’s works, from his early writings such as Contra Academicos (386) and De libero arbitrio (388/391) to De Trinitate (414), De doctrina christiana (begun 395-98, finished 426), and De civitate Dei (appearing beginning in 413 and completed in 425). As Ramirez writes in the aforementioned article (1982, p. 129), “no one familiar with (Augustine’s) works can deny the striking intellectuality that pervades them all.” As noted above, Jean-Luc Marion (2012) seems to dismiss Augustine’s claim to be a philosopher based on a too limited conception of philosophy.
135 Brown, p. 487.
its style is by turns poetical, lyrical, argumentative, and diegetical. As I have endeavored to write about the *Confessions*, I have repeatedly thought of something Augustine himself says in Book 12. Having turned to the study of *Genesis* in books 11-13, Augustine catches himself up having spent a good many words and a great deal of time interpreting only a few lines of scripture, and in astonishment he exclaims, “Behold, O Lord my God, I beseech you, how many things we have written concerning these few words, how many! What strength of ours, what tracts of time would suffice to treat all your books in this manner?” (*Conf.* 12.32.43) So, although Augustine himself would no doubt regard the analogy as profane, I cannot help but compare his experience of reading scripture with my own experience of trying to interpret the *Confessions*. Of course this is a problem for hermeneutics or the work of textual interpretation in general (e.g., 500-page books devoted to interpreting 100-page books are not uncommon). This hermeneutical problem seems, however, especially acute in the case of Augustine’s *Confessions*, because it is such a curiously-wrought work, brimming with ideas and images, and offering countless occasions for philosophical reflection.

The *Confessions* consists of thirteen books: in the first nine books Augustine presents a narrative of the first part of his life, from infancy to adulthood, his conversion to the Catholic Church, and a mystical vision that he shared with his mother, Monica, just prior to her death. Through this narrative Augustine elaborates the long course of experiences that he undertook and underwent in his search for truth, stating how he progressed and often regressed, both intellectually and ethically. Like Petrarch later on, Augustine describes how he spent a long time wandering amongst the foothills before finally accomplishing the ascent of his own peculiar Mont Ventoux. The intellectual and
the ethical conversion stories run through the first nine books of the *Confessions* like two threads, at times intertwining, at others going each its separate way, only to meet again later on. Only when he has achieved both ethical and intellectual conversion is Augustine’s story of his earlier life in some sense complete. Considered from an intellectual point of view, Augustine describes in the first nine books how, as a young man, he was inspired to pursue philosophy by reading Cicero’s (now lost) *Hortensius*; how he subsequently fell in with the Manichees and dabbled in astrology; how, eventually, due to his discovery of the untenability of many Manichean teachings he turned to the skeptical philosophy of the so-called New Academy; before then coming under the influence of Ambrose the Catholic bishop at Milan and discovering the Platonists, who helped him to conceive of an incorporeal, spiritual substance, thereby opening the way for his final embrace of the Christian religion as the bearer of the truth he had been seeking all along.136

From a practical point of view, Augustine in these same books traces his ethical development, beginning with the sins of his infancy and childhood and showing how as a youth and young man he succumbed to “the flesh’s urges, the eyes’ urges [to know], and worldly ambition (*concupiscentia carnis et concupiscentia oculorum et ambitione saeculi*)” (10.30.41), before finally freeing himself sufficiently (but not entirely) from these vices to embrace baptism and a life involving celibacy and dedication to god and

---

136 For the discussion of Cicero’s *Hortensius* and its influence on Augustine, see *Conf.* 3.4.7-8; for discussion of the Manichees, see 3.6-10; for Augustine’s flirtation with astrology, see 4.3.4-6; for his disenchantment with Manicheism, see 5.3-5.7; for the influence of the skeptical philosophy of the New Academy, see 5.10.19, 5.14.25, 6.11.18; Book 7, where Augustine discusses among other things his discovery of the Platonists and their doctrines, is probably the most important book of the whole *Confessions* for understanding Augustine’s intellectual conversion.
his particular church. O’Donnell’s brilliant elaboration of Horst Kusch’s discovery that the *Confessions* has a kind of triadic and chiastic structure with respect to Augustine’s conversion is very helpful for understanding the overall structure of the first nine books (see OD I.xxii and 2005, pp. 66-70). According to this interpretation, Augustine describes in the early books how he succumbed to these three temptations one by one. In Book 2, sexual desire enters, and Augustine gives in to the urges of the flesh; in Book 3, Augustine goes to Carthage and gives in to the urges of the curiosity for spectacles, shows, and “people with hidden secret knowledge about god;” finally, in Book 4 Augustine shows himself puffed up with pride and giving in to worldly ambition. Then, reversing the order in the Books 5-8, he shows how he freed himself first from worldly ambition, then from idle curiosity to know, and lastly from the desires for sexual gratification, a form of *concupiscentia carnis* that held special charm for Augustine (see 8.5.10-12 and 8.7.17).

In Book 10, Augustine speaks from the point of view of the present, about “what I am now, not what once I was (adhuc quis ego sim, non quis fuerim)” (Conf. 10.3.4, cf. 10.4.6). This is a very interesting book from my point of view. “The main function” of

---

137 This translation is a composite of my own making from Ryan’s translation, Wills’, and a translation by O’Donnell in his aforementioned monograph *Augustine*, p. 66. The Latin word “*concupiscentia*” plays an important role in Augustine’s *Confessions*, and it is not altogether easy to translate the term into English. Hence Ryan merely translates it as “concupiscence,” which Merriam-Webster defines as “strong desire, especially sexual desire.” Watts in the Loeb edition translates it as “lust,” hence he has “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes,” but I think it is good to reserve “lust” for translating “*libido,***” which is another important term in Augustine. Wills’ “urges” seems a pretty good translation, but it is important to remember that *concupiscentia* always denotes a strong and *improper* desire for something. When I asked him about the difference between *concupiscentia* and *libido* for Augustine, O’Donnell explained that *libido* is physical or bodily craving whereas *concupiscentia* is both an ethical category and broader, “covering a much wider range of hankerings than the physical.” Those for whom this dissertation is written will appreciate that I quote here I Jn 2:16: ὁτι πάν τὸ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ, ἡ ἐπιθυμία τῆς σαρκός, καὶ ἡ ἐπιθυμία τῶν ψυχικῶν, καὶ ἡ ἀλαζονεία τοῦ βίου, οὐκ ἐστίν ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος, ἀλλ’ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου ἐστίν.

Book 10, is, according to Wills, “to mediate between the narrative of Augustine’s life up
to his baptism (Books One through Nine) and the contemplation of the role of the Trinity
in that life (Books Eleven through Thirteen).”139 From the point of view of time, Books 1-9
concern Augustine’s life in the past, Book 10 concerns his life in the present, and
Books 11-13 concern his future life. Book 10 is remarkable for many reasons, perhaps
above all because in it Augustine shows himself still struggling to know himself and also
to reform himself. As Brown points out, Augustine’s emphasis in Book 10 on his
ongoing struggle against various temptations, as well as his continual laboring to gain
knowledge, seemed strange from the point of view of an audience that wanted a
successful conversion story without qualifications. Brown quotes Pelagius, for example,
who was “deeply annoyed” by Book 10, presumably because Pelagius believed that
human beings could achieve an untroubled conversion and blessedness, if only they
would make proper use of their free will.140 Augustine, however, seems to suggest that
the hard work of pursuing knowledge and a good life continues ever after conversion.

In the last three books of the Confessions, Augustine no longer narrates his life
but turns instead to a contemplation of sacred scripture, specifically to Genesis and the
Mosaic narrative of the creation of the world. As O’Donnell notes, these last three books
have probably been responsible for the greatest interpretive difficulties pertaining to the
Confessions. These books deal with traditional philosophical problems, such as time,
form and matter, and the source of the world, all of which Augustine approaches for their
relevance to the interpretation and understanding of Judeo-Christian revelation. Here and
elsewhere, Augustine makes an important contribution to the Christian medieval project

139 Wills 2002, p. 26, my emphasis.
10.”
of synthesizing ancient philosophy and Christianity, a project that, for various reasons, took many forms in the thousand plus years between Augustine’s *Confessions* and Descartes’ *Discourse on the Method* in 1637. By including this theological-philosophical meditation in his *Confessions*, Augustine models the transition from his search for principles in his earlier life to a new way of life based on these same principles and devoted to theoretical activity.

From the point of view of philosophical autobiography, a number of things are important to notice in light of this summary of the *Confessions*. The narrative Augustine gives of his life in the past occupies only the first nine books, and while these books are clearly autobiographical, the remaining four books, and especially the last three, make the *Confessions* seem at best a problematic autobiography. Even the first nine books do not present us with a simple, straightforward narrative of Augustine’s life, and O’Donnell is surely correct to observe that “the narrative is spotty and overembroidered with meditation and reflection,” and that this feature of the work “should be a sign, often missed, that narrative isn’t the whole purpose.”\(^{141}\) Augustine’s inclusion of meditation and reflection, however, is consistent with the form of philosophical autobiography, which aims not merely to recount a life but to do so for the sake of fostering philosophical reflection in others. Showing how the philosophical life is the best life, and presenting and accounting for principles in such a way that others can see how they emerged in the course of a life, in response to the exigencies of a life, Augustine at the same time shows in what sense such a principle can be radically first, that is, despite the fact that human beings only discover truth through time, and in a sense *because* of this

---

\(^{141}\) O’Donnell (2005, p. 65).
fact. If, however, philosophical autobiography is addressed to others for philosophical reasons, the *Confessions* appears troublesome once again, because, on the face of it, it is not addressed to other human beings but rather to the being Augustine calls “god.” Having raised this issue above, we ought now to investigate more closely whether this feature of the *Confessions* constitutes an insurmountable obstacle to our attempt to interpret the book as a philosophical autobiography.

4. *The question of god and whether the Confessions is addressed to human readers.*—Throughout the *Confessions* Augustine addresses himself to a being he calls *deus meus*, “my god.” The entire book begins with Augustine attempting to establish a rapport with this god, whoever or whatever it may be, and we also discover that Augustine is seeking something like perfect communion with this being. Whatever exactly such communion might be is open to question, but by the end of the *Confessions* all that is certain is that Augustine is still seeking it, however hopefully. By then Augustine has presented himself as having made progress through the course of his life toward the truth, but in some sense he still hasn’t found what he’s looking for. Augustine often describes what he seeks as “rest” or “peace,” with the idea of coming to rest in god, which implies that for him life without the desired relation to god is full of turmoil and confusion.\(^\text{142}\) Famously, Augustine confesses to god that, “our heart is restless until it rests in you (*inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te*)” (*Conf.* 1.1.1, cf. 1.5.5, 13.35.50, 13.38.53).

Augustine’s desire to achieve this rest by establishing a relation with god is therefore quite passionate, prompted by the distress he experiences in his life, but this desire is also an intellectual one, since for Augustine to be united with god is to know (*scire*) god.

\(^{142}\) JO II.13: “the restlessness arises from disorder.”
From the first chapter of the *Confessions*, it is clear that for Augustine the desired relation with god requires knowledge of god. He points out that if one doesn’t know god, one might make a mistake and talk to the wrong being (!). In fact, Augustine will go on to show in the *Confessions* that through a long stretch of his life what he thought was god was not god; at one point, for example, he states that “error was my god” (4.7.12). At the beginning of Book 1, Augustine’s situation actually looks rather bad. It is a problem for Augustine that, in calling on god, he is in some way calling upon something (or someone) that he doesn’t know. The situation is analogous to looking for a person you don’t know and have never seen in a crowded street: it suggests Meno’s paradox, which asks, how could one ever recognize someone or something one does not already know? (Even a blind date says, I’ll be sitting at the café, wearing a blue hat, and reading *Ulysses.*). For Augustine, faith and authority provide a starting point. A passage from Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” figures prominently in the first chapter of the *Confessions*, where Jesus says “seek, and you will find” (*Matthew* 7: 7-8), and Augustine takes this to be both an exhortation to inquiry and a promise that diligent searching will not go unrewarded. The last few sentences of the *Confessions* refer again to this passage from *Matthew* (13.38.53), signaling the importance Augustine attached to this idea.\(^{143}\)

Despite his faith, however, Augustine recognizes that there are many obstacles to establishing a rapport with god, to say nothing of achieving a perfect union with him or it, and it quickly becomes evident that he is greatly troubled by the problem of the incommensurability between himself and god. It is worth seeing that Augustine’s problem is in some sense a particular manifestation of a standard philosophical problem,\(^{143}\)

\(^{143}\) For more on the importance of this passage for Augustine, see the entry “Seek-Find” by Sheri Katz in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, general editor Allan D. Fitzgerald, O.S.A. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), pp. 760-761.
which is that of how to understand the relation between the limit and the unlimited, the finite and the infinite, the conditioned and the unconditioned, or the part and the whole. Determinate beings (or beings in the sense of Heidegger’s *Seinendes*) are distinct yet inseparable from the whole, from being as such, but what the being of these beings is, is not something that lets itself be easily grasped. Augustine believes, if he does not fully understand, that god is at once the creator of all beings, in some way present in all beings, and yet at the same time separate from all beings. There is not more god in a sparrow than there is in an elephant (*Conf*. 7.1.2). This is because god, as Augustine conceives it, is not a body, but is the source of all bodies; neither is god for him a soul, though soul is not a body either (*Conf*. 7.9.13). God is the source of bodies *and* souls, so many as there are, but god is also distinct from every body and every soul. Augustine attributes this, his ultimate understanding of the relation between god and everything else, to his reading of the Platonists:

> I read that the soul of man (hominis anima), although it gives testimony of the light, is not itself the light, but the Word (verbum), God himself, is the true light...that before all times and above all times your Only-begotten Son remains unchangeably coeternal with you; and that souls receive of his fullness, so that they may be blessed; and that they are renewed by participation in the wisdom remaining in herself, so as to be wise (*Conf*. 7.9.13-14).

Mixing what he learned from the Platonists with the language of Christianity, Augustine illustrates in this passage his belief that god, especially in the person of Jesus Christ or “the Word,” is both above the soul and a source of happiness and wisdom for it.\(^{144}\) Human beings are, furthermore, like all other beings dependent for their being on another being, the supreme being, god (see *Conf*. 1.2.2, 1.20.31, 7.10.16).

\(^{144}\) For RP: notice that, structurally, “the Word” is in the same position relative to souls as are the forms beyond the heavens in Plato’s *Phaedrus*.
The opening chapters of the *Confessions* set the tone for the entire work while also posing a philosophical problem whether or not finite human beings can think or conceive the unconditioned.\(^{145}\) This problem takes on a special urgency in Augustine’s work, because the ideas of limited and unlimited are personified in the *Confessions*, taking “god” as the unlimited, and Augustine himself as the limited, principle. The *Confessions* thus has the aspect of a dialogue attempting to establish a rapport or an agreement between separate and radically unequal parties (in some sense there could not be more unequal parties). Throughout the text Augustine refers to himself in the first person and addresses God in the second person, and thus the entire work seems to be conditioned by one of the two basic words identified by Martin Buber, by the “I-You” (*Ich-Du*) word, as opposed to the “I-It” (*Ich-Es*) one.\(^{146}\) But the relation to the “you” of god is a problematic one for Augustine, and the dialogue is also strange because one of the interlocutors, god, never speaks except indirectly (through sacred scripture, but also through Augustine himself and other human beings insofar as Augustine is able to satisfy himself that some of the things he and others say really come from god, as a form of *gratia*.)

Since the limited and the unlimited seem entirely incommensurate, Augustine wants to understand how he and his kind can be in relation to god. He thus implores god,

---


\(^{146}\) Cf. Buber: “*Wer Du spricht, hat kein Etwas, hat nichts. Aber er steht in der Beziehung,*” i.e., whoever says You, s/he doesn’t have or grasp a something by this saying; in fact s/he has nothing; but (by saying You), s/he stands in a relation (Buber, *Das dialogische Prinzip*, p. 8, my explication). For Augustine this means he doesn’t have or possess god, but by addressing god he puts himself in a relation to him or rather, it. The question then is how to understand this relation.
the unlimited, to show him how a relationship is possible and indeed *to make* such a relation possible:

Too narrow is the house of my soul (*domus animae meae*) for you to enter into it: let it be enlarged by you. It lies in ruins: build it up again. I confess and I know (*fateor et scio*) that it contains things that offend your eyes. Yet who will cleanse it? (1.5)

This metaphorical and pathetic passage exemplifies Augustine’s way of thinking about the problem of his relation to god, while it also shows that for him there is an ethical dimension to this problem, in addition to the logical (or, “ontological”) problem of the relation. For Augustine he and his fellow humans are sinful or faulty in relation to god, since the “house of the soul” contains things that offend god. Meanwhile, from a logical point of view, the finite human soul is not large enough to accommodate the unlimited, i.e., human cognitive powers are limited and so they seem to be incapable of grasping or thinking an absolute being of god’s sort. For Augustine, god is above and beyond our powers of understanding, but he also holds out hope that we can get *closer* to such understanding. This hope sustains the strenuous and ongoing intellectual endeavor that the *Confessions* portrays, just as it can be seen to characterize Augustine’s entire life and work as a Christian philosopher.

If we look at the problem of Augustine’s relation to god now from another angle, we come face to face with a consistent problem of interpreting the *Confessions*, namely, the question of whom Augustine addresses in this work. Since god is clearly the explicit addressee, how do human readers of the *Confessions* such as ourselves fit into the picture? Are human readers mere interlopers and eavesdroppers who have stumbled upon
a private, intimate, albeit somewhat one-sided conversation?\textsuperscript{147} Although different addressees need not be mutually exclusive, it can seem troubling that Augustine only addresses his fellow humans indirectly in the \textit{Confessions}. Yet despite the fact that Augustine addresses his \textit{Confessions} to god, he clearly writes the book for the sake of his fellow human beings. There are numerous reasons why this has to be the case, though interpreters sometimes run into confusion on this question. Wills, for example, writes that “The \textit{Confessions}, we must be kept aware, do not address us. They have an audience of One (or of Three-in-One), making them the longest literary prayer in our canon of great works”\textsuperscript{148} In some sense, of course, it is true that the \textit{Confessions} are a long literary prayer, but if this were simply true without qualification, numerous difficulties would follow. Why, for instance, would anyone write a book addressed to a being who is omniscient, and who therefore has nothing to learn from such a writing? And why reproduce and circulate, as Augustine did, a book that has nothing to say to human beings?\textsuperscript{149} As a mere matter of historical fact, Augustine put no small effort into publishing and preserving his writings, also taking them seriously enough to revisit them toward the end of his life in the \textit{Retractationes}. Furthermore, I tend to agree with O’Donnell that someone who was indifferent to human beings and wholly devoted to god, would be an “ideal self-effacing ascetic (who) would vanish into the faceless crowd

\textsuperscript{147} O’Donnell (1992, Introduction) observes that the “opening (of the \textit{Confessions}) can give rise to the disconcerting feeling of coming into a room and chancing upon a man speaking to someone who isn’t there. He gestures in our direction and mentions us from time to time, but he never addresses his readers” (pp. 8-9).
\textsuperscript{149} On the production, reproduction, and circulation of the \textit{Confessions} and Augustine’s other texts see the extremely informative entry “Manuscripts” by Kenneth B. Steinhauser in \textit{Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia} (1999), pp. 525-533. See also O’Donnell (2005, pp. 135-143).
of the city or disappear over the horizon of the desert, never to be heard from again” (88). Augustine was not the type to disappear in the desert, and we have not yet ceased to hear from him, nor will we, I think, anytime soon.¹⁵⁰

Wills’ statement contains a certain and undeniable truth, however. The Confessions are in fact addressed to a being Augustine calls by many names, such as “lord (domine)” and “my god (deus meus),” and furthermore Augustine never addresses his human readers directly using the second person pronoun. At one point Augustine addresses his own soul in the second person, but otherwise this inflection is reserved for god (cf. 4.11-4.12). Yet god, as Augustine conceives god, is a highly problematic audience, because, since god is omniscient, god always already knows everything Augustine (or anyone else) might confess. Since, moreover, god’s perfect knowledge is not limited by time, is eternal, god certainly does not require the kind of narrative that constitutes the Confessions. Narrative is sequential, diachronic, but god’s knowledge is eternal, all at once. Therefore Jean Starobinski correctly observes that it is really only human readers who require and therefore justify the discursive, narrative form of Augustine’s work: “the human reader…needs a narrative,” whereas god most emphatically does not.¹⁵¹ Autobiography takes place in time, and its subject is also something temporally extended, a life. But god sees and knows the entire life of each of us eternally, so autobiography, the diachronic relating of a diachronic event, is, from god’s point of view, wholly superfluous.

¹⁵⁰ Of the enduring influence of Augustine’s works, O’Donnell writes, “(Augustine) died almost sixteen hundred years ago and there has been no decade in all that time in which he has not been read, admired, controverted, and read again” (Augustine, 2005, cited in full above, p. 4). Jean-Luc Marion (2012, p. 1) speaks eloquently of Augustine’s “role as permanent and ever reactualized reference point in the history of thought.”
Augustine himself is fully aware of the implications of his beliefs about god for his writing of the *Confessions*. Book 5 opens with clear acknowledgment that god in no way needs a confession narrative:

Accept the sacrifice of my confessions (*sacrificium confessionum mearum*) from the hand that is my tongue, which you have formed and aroused to confess to your name (*confitetur nomini tuo*)...No man who makes confession to you teaches you what takes place within him, for a closed heart does not close out your eye, nor does man’s hardness turn back your hand (*quia oculum tuum non excludit cor clausum nec manum tuam repellit duritia hominum*)....Let my soul praise you, so that it may love you (*te laudet anima mea ut amet te*), and let it confess your mercies before you, so that it may praise you (*laudet te*) (5.1).

Augustine realizes that confession teaches god nothing, and he admits that he confesses, at least in part, for his own benefit. He wants to relate a story about god’s role in his life so that he can praise god, and he wants to praise god in order to love him. From the point of view of this passage, then, the ultimate goal of the *Confessions* is Augustine’s love of god, which is a rather ambiguous notion. It seems that Augustine is trying to enkindle his own *amor dei* through confessing.

In fact, Augustine writes the *Confessions* primarily for himself and for his fellow human beings, as another passage makes clear:

Lord, since eternity (*aeternitas*) is yours, are you ignorant of the things that I say to you, or do you see only at a certain time what is done in time (*in tempore*)? Why then do I set out in order before you this account (*narrationes*) of so many deeds? In truth, it is not that you may learn to know these matters from me, but that I may rouse up towards you my own affections (*affectum meum*), and *those of other men who read this*, so that all of us may say: “The Lord is great, and exceedingly to be praised.” I have already said this, and will say it again: for love of your love I perform this task (*amore amoris tui facio istuc*) (Conf. 11.1.1, my emphasis).

---

152 Cf. *Conf.* 10.2.
Augustine thus wants not only to enkindle his own love for god but also that of those who read his book. God is ultimately the principle of Augustine’s philosophy, and he is telling his life story primarily for the sake of interesting others in this principle.

In the course of the Confessions, the first time Augustine acknowledges human readers is in Book 2, where the pedagogic intention of the book comes into focus:

To whom do I tell these things? Not to you, my god, but before you I tell them to my own kind (generi meo), to humankind (generi humano), or to whatever small part of it may come upon these books of mine. Why do I tell these things? It is that I myself and whoever else reads them may realize from what great depths we must cry unto you (Conf. 2.3.5).

So, although it may not be entirely obvious, Augustine does after all address his Confessions to his fellow human beings. Insofar as it is addressed to them (and us), we can and should read the book not simply as a prayer, but also as an autobiography, the purpose of which is to exhort human beings to pursue a better life. Augustine must hope that his Confessions will help to make new converts to Christianity, while also sustaining and encouraging those already within the Christian fold. As a philosophical autobiography, Augustine attempts to turn readers toward god, to provide them with a paradigm of philosophical conversion, and to instruct them about practical and theoretical matters. And, although Augustine believes the proper paradigm for human beings is god, he nevertheless provides readers with an example of a certain kind of philosophic life, of how one may find truth through seeking it. This kind of humanlife is, in his own estimation, preferable to every alternative. For Augustine humans can only be like god and can certainly never become god, so the philosophic life as he conceives it is the best

---

153 Cf. Conf. 1.6.
life possible for us, given what we are, limited and embodied and driven by passions as we are.

Augustine worries, however, about how his fellow humans will read the *Confessions*, because, as we have seen, he is quite taken with the idea that humans are subject to *concupiscientia oculorum*, the improper desire to know. This desire, he laments, manifests itself as a prurient curiosity to learn about the ethical and intellectual failings of others:

> What have I to do with men, that they should hear my confessions, as if they were to heal all my diseases? A race eager to know about another man’s life (*curiosum genus ad cognoscendam vitam alienam*), but slothful to correct their own! Why do they seek to hear from me what I am, men who do not want to hear from you what they themselves are? (*Conf.* 10.3.3)

Augustine thinks that autobiographical honesty has an ethical purpose, that self-knowledge and ethical improvement constitute the real purpose of his *Confessions*; he expresses hope that those who read his work may come to understand better “from what great depths” humans must set out on their journey toward happiness. In the *Retractationes*, he writes, “The thirteen books of my confessions praise the just and good God for both the bad and the good that I did, and they draw a person’s mind and emotions towards him.”

So Augustine writes for god, to praise god, but also for his own benefit and for that of his fellow human beings. In Book 10, Chapter 4, Augustine clearly expresses the idea that he is writing for both audiences. Sometimes he also thinks of his human

---

audience as a specifically Christian audience, which is understandable in light of his position as a bishop at the time of composing the book:

Such is the benefit from my confessions (*hic est fructus confessionum mearum*)...that I may confess this not only before you in secret exultation with trembling and in secret sorrow with hope, but also in the ears of the believing sons of men (*in auribus credentium filiorum hominum*), partakers of my joy and sharers in my mortality, my fellow citizens and pilgrims with me, those who go before me and those who follow me. They are your servants, my brothers, whom you will to be your sons; my masters, whom you have commanded me to serve if I would live by you (*Conf.* 10.4.6).

This passage illustrates Augustine’s sense of responsibility toward the Christian community, but it also raises the question whether the book has anything to say to non-Christians. I think it stands to reason that Augustine would have hoped that his book might contribute to making new converts to Christianity, since in the narrative of the *Confessions*, Augustine suggests how other conversion stories played a significant role in his own conversion. Whether from Augustine’s point of view the *Confessions* has something to say to non-Christians is open to question: our concept of world literature was certainly not his, and there is a hard edge in Augustine to the extent that he believes Christianity is the one and only way to truth for human beings. This sectarian passion is not mine, at least, but I nevertheless find the *Confessions* an indispensible book, as well as a consummate example of what philosophical autobiography can be and do.

5. *The relation between philosophy and humanlife in the Confessions.*— Whereas the Platonic autobiographies do not much concern the relationship between personal or private life and philosophy, presenting philosophical development from an almost exclusively intellectual point of view, Augustine emphasizes the importance of his private life and personal relationships within the broader account of his own intellectual
and ethical development. The fact that the *Confessions* is also a prayerful speech allows Augustine to expose his inner life, his thoughts, emotions, and memories, in a truly novel way. Prayer and thought are similar, insofar as both can be spoken as silent internal dialogue. By writing down this dialogue, Augustine also, of course, publicizes it, and in so doing he invites readers to witness an expression of his inner life.

Like later philosophical autobiographers, such as Nietzsche, Mill, Rousseau, and (to a lesser extent) Vico, Augustine considers family, friends, and society to have played an important role in his becoming what he is. The first nine books of the *Confessions* are replete with discussions of family, friends, teachers, and acquaintances. Augustine discusses his son, Adeodatus, who died young, and the mother of this boy, unnamed in the *Confessions*, with whom Augustine lived for many years before a final and painful separation. Philosophers of course tend to regard such particulars as irrelevant, and although they do, from time to time, show interest in the family as such, the mother as such, the friend as such, and so forth, they rarely concern themselves with *this* particular family, *this* mother, *this* friend. This is perhaps consistent with the scientific character of philosophy, insofar as science is understood as pursuing knowledge of the general rules, forms, or laws that operate in our world. By contrast, particulars may have greater importance in fields like psychotherapy and pastoral ministry, where *this* particular family, *this* mother, and *this* friend are at issue, even if in these fields there is also no question of dispensing with the use of general (and also normative) concepts. Yet perhaps philosophy might be conceived as having an interest in such particulars as well? Plato at least clearly presents philosophy as something undertaken by individuals in particular situations, so philosophy might be said to have more interest in individuals than is usually
supposed, and perhaps philosophy is not to be exclusively the mathematics lesson that certain philosophers seem to think. Augustine, at any rate, clearly considers individuals, and the particular relationships that form between them, to be philosophically important.

As a matter of historical fact, references to, and concrete descriptions of, family and friends are not entirely unprecedented in ancient autobiographical literature prior to Augustine. As we’ve seen, Plato’s Socrates refers to his mother in the *Theaetetus* and claims that he inherited the art of midwifery from her (149a-151d6), and Socrates also discusses his friends and associates, for example, in *Apology*, where he acknowledges the special role that his friendship with Chairophon played in his life. In his *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius begins by mentioning family, friends, and others who influenced him by setting so many examples of virtue. Yet Augustine’s way of bringing family, friends, and others into his autobiography is innovative, both in the extent to which other people become important within his life-story and in the various ways Augustine allows others to become actors in this same story. What distinguishes Augustine’s treatment is not so much the significance he attaches to the role of others in his life and growth (Marcus, e.g., does that as well), but that he actually attempts to show how his development was influenced by his interactions with others, i.e., in stories about concrete historical situations and interactions. In other words, Augustine gives us a narrative, or rather multiple narratives, that attempt to show how others acted on and influenced him and, vice versa, how he acted on others. We don’t really find anything comparable prior to modern times, for example, in Rousseau’s *Confessions*.

---

Augustine’s emphasis on his relationships with other people contextualizes philosophy within the social or political dimension of the human condition, and it makes the *Confessions* an exemplary instance of Paul John Eakin’s concepts of “relational lives” and “relational selves.” Starting from the idea of personal or individual identity, Eakin argues for the thesis that “all identity is relational, and…the definition of autobiography, and its history as well, must be stretched to reflect the kinds of self-writing in which relational identity is characteristically displayed.”¹⁵⁶ Human beings are by nature living in some relation to both a political community as well as to various societies, including family, friends, coworkers, and so forth. Contrary to the hypothetical principles of some modern political philosophers, such as Hobbes and Rousseau, the political or social character of human beings is essential to the concept of what it is to be human.¹⁵⁷ Despite the universality and importance of such relationships, they are rarely accorded significant treatment in the canon of the history of philosophy, but Augustine makes these relationships explicit in his own reflection about his self-development.

Augustine’s account of his interactions with others and their influence on him is overwhelmingly positive, and for the most part, he presents others as playing a beneficial role in his life with regard to what he has come to view as his proper end. There are,

¹⁵⁷ I believe the starting point of modern political philosophy in radical individualism is understandable but basically misguided; it is also responsible for much of the mischief in our politics and economic life. Philosophical criticism should tactfully but ruthlessly expose this counter-intuitive and ultimately irrational hypothesis. Eakin very interestingly refers to C. B. Macpherson’s important and (it seems to me) neglected work that attempts a critical debunking of modern “possessive individualism.” See the aforementioned work, pp. 61-63. In the context of Eakin’s autobiography theory, the point is that individuals are not simply self-made, but rather, they come to be who they through social interactions and the prevalent social discourses at any given time in history. Even geniuses, reformers, and those who say or do something original, do so against the background of a certain lifeworld and tradition, i.e., a historically-situated mental and material universe.
however, exceptions. He blames the unruly crowd he frequented as a young man for his involvement in the famous episode of the pear tree, and warns that friendship can be dangerous and a seduction of the mind (Conf. 2.8.16-2.9.17). He censures his parents for the worldly ambition behind their desire that he become highly educated, an instance of the *ambitione saeculi* mentioned above. At the same time, although he now views their motives as misguided, he also sees that his education allowed him to pursue a goal his parents did not anticipate, namely, a life dedicated to philosophy and ministry (Conf. 2.3.8). For Augustine the true and proper purpose of education is the acquisition, contemplation, and expression of truth, which for him is god especially as manifested in sacred scripture. He credits his mother at least with anticipating to some extent the better use he will have made of his education. As many commentators have noticed, Augustine’s father, Patricius, doesn’t come off very well in Augustine’s treatment of him. In Augustine’s story, Monica is a far more intriguing and memorable figure than his father, and she certainly plays a much more prominent role in Augustine’s life story than Patricius does. Indeed, with the exception of Augustine himself, Monica plays a more important role in the *Confessions* than any other human figure, and as the narrative of the *Confessions* unfolds, one becomes increasingly aware of the importance Monica had for Augustine and of her powerful influence over her son’s intellectual and ethical development. Although it is undeniable Monica was ambitious and concerned for her son’s worldly success, Augustine presents her as having been even more anxious that he should become a good man and a Christian (the two terms being more or less synonymous for her and, ultimately, for him as well).
But how exactly did Monica influence Augustine’s development? It bears saying that their relationship wasn’t, and could not have been, much of an intellectual one, as Monica had little education and a more or less simple faith, whereas Augustine was both intellectually gifted and had become, through his studies, a well-read intellectual, a sophisticated reasoner, an eloquent advocate, and, by the standards of his hometown, Thagaste, a broad-minded man of the world. Despite these disparities between mother and son, Monica nevertheless seems to have had her advantages; she was tenacious and unswerving in her faith, and she set an example for Augustine by her piety, however untutored. Monica really appears quite formidable in Augustine’s telling; she displays a Socratic indifference for what will become of her body after her death (Conf. 9.11.27), and she is as calm as the Jesus of the Gospels during a storm at sea (Conf. 6.1.1). When Augustine became a Manichee, Monica was the one person who offered serious resistance. Augustine himself does not underestimate Monica’s contribution to his own conversion. This goes to show what should perhaps be obvious, that not all influences in the life of a philosopher are purely intellectual.

Augustine writes very beautifully and movingly about friendship, and his friends play a great role in his life-story, especially Alypius, Nebridius, and an unnamed friend whose early death Augustine discusses at length. I want to focus on Augustine’s discussion of this unnamed friend who died, because it illustrates how Augustine connects philosophy and life in his autobiography. Thinking back on the death of his friend as he writes the Confessions, this memory elicits a series of philosophical reflections that illumine one of Augustine’s central teachings about the proper attitude toward human goods such as friendship. Such goods can only be properly appreciated if
we know them for what they are, which for Augustine means above all that we should not mistake such goods for the true good, which is god. God is also the source of all these lesser goods, and the main difference between goods such as friendship and god’s goodness is that the former are conditioned by time and are hence ephemeral, whereas god is eternal. In his reflection on the death of his friend, he suggests how he set himself up for misery by loving a mortal good as though it were immortal. Augustine thus enables us to see how philosophical reflection arises in response to such mundane events as characterize normal humanlife, where philosophy appears neither as detached and apathetic inquiry, nor as merely professional activity, but rather as a human endeavor to come to an understanding about humanlife, with all of its vicissitudes and frailties.

6. Augustine’s conversions, intellectual and ethical.— In Augustine’s day, as in our own, there were many competing schools and sects, both philosophical and religious, that formulated theoretical doctrines about what is, as well as practical teachings about how human beings should live. Theoretical and practical philosophy are different but not unrelated, and the theoretical and practical doctrines of the various schools and sects tended to be, as they still are, mutually reinforcing. One’s theoretical beliefs about how things are tend to determine one’s practical beliefs about the best way to live, but problematically the opposite relation may obtain as well, since practical beliefs may and perhaps often do influence theoretical ones. It is now, as it was then, difficult to know how far our desire for the world to be a certain way determines the way in which we see or speculate about how the world actually is. However this may be, there is a close connection between theory and practice, and Augustine’s life-story involves a compelling presentation of how theoretical and practical concerns can converge.
Following the opening chapters of the *Confessions* devoted to establishing a rapport with god, Augustine begins the narrative of his life in chapter 6 of Book 1. He calls his infancy “this age I hesitate to join to this life of mine which I have lived in this world,” because he cannot remember it (1.7). This stage of one’s own life is problematic because of our normal childhood amnesia. Our life begins before our human life begins, since human life in some sense only begins with the emergence of memory. What we can know of the time of our life before memory comes from the sources Augustine identifies, namely, from the testimony of others such as parents and from our own observation of other infants. Based on these sources, Augustine views infants as already active, striving to express their wills that he famously says are not unqualifiedly good. Augustine believes that infants are not innocents that become corrupted only later; rather, “it is not the infant’s will that is harmless, but the weakness of infant limbs” (1.7). It is thus the case that, for Augustine, the human quest for happiness is not about preserving or recovering some original goodness as in Rousseau. It is rather a question of overcoming, with God’s help, the original deficiency in our nature. Augustine’s position thus repeats to some extent the general consensus among ancient philosophers, namely, that human beings can only achieve perfection over time, through education, and perhaps requiring an element of luck or divine intervention. Augustine presents his own life as a tortuous quest to achieve whatever perfection is possible for human beings, and his conception of infants as far from innocent already sets the stage for the tremendous obstacles Augustine thinks we have to overcome to attain even a semblance of goodness.
7. Augustine’s intellectual conversion.— It is well known that Augustine claims his passion for philosophy was awakened by his reading of Cicero’s (now lost) *Hortensius*, an encounter that Augustine describes in the fourth chapter of Book 3:

This book changed my affections. It turned my prayers to you, lord, and caused me to have different purposes and desires. All my vain hopes forthwith became worthless to me, and with incredible ardor of heart I desired undying wisdom (*immortalitatem sapientiae concupisceram*). I began to rise up…by (Cicero’s) argument I was stirred up and enkindled and set aflame to love, and pursue, and attain and catch hold of, and strongly embrace not this or that sect, but wisdom itself, whatsoever it might be (*quod non illam aut illam sectam, sed ipsam quaecumque esset sapientiam*) (Conf. 3.4.7-8).

Importantly Augustine presents his search for truth as disinterested, as indifferent to where or in what school or religion it is to be found; he sought, he says, only “wisdom itself.” At the same time, Augustine proceeds to admit that even then he had a predilection for Catholicism, and the only thing that bothered him about Cicero’s exhortation to philosophy was that Christ’s name (*nomen Christi*) was not in it. Monica, as we have seen, introduced Augustine to Catholicism at an early age, and to a very great extent this was decisive for his entire development. One thing Augustine *never* really questioned was his belief in the importance of Jesus Christ, which is one reason the Manicheans attracted him, since they were continually talking about Jesus, as well as the other members of the trinity, the holy spirit and god (Conf. 3.6.10). Obviously one can and ought to question how such unquestioned presuppositions can be reconciled with Augustine’s claim to have fallen in love with the disinterested pursuit of wisdom, but to his credit Augustine examines his presuppositions in the *Confessions* and in subsequent works, for example, in *De Trinitate*. (Books 11-13 of the *Confessions* themselves already
initiate an investigation into the nature of the divine trinity.\textsuperscript{158} What concerns us at present are the main reasons why Augustine did not accept Catholicism straightaway upon becoming enflamed with the passion for wisdom.

In his early reading of them, it is not surprising that such a trained rhetorician and humanist as Augustine found the sacred scriptures of the Christians vulgar, simple-minded, and “unworthy of comparison with the nobility of Cicero’s writings” (3.5.9) But the reasons for his then falling in with the Manicheans are less clear. Obviously he was attracted by the Manichean talk about god, Jesus, and the holy spirit, but clearly this does not explain why he preferred the Manichees to the Christians who also spoke of such things. We have therefore to seek an explanation elsewhere, and what we discover is that for Augustine Manicheism was attractive primarily for two, interrelated reasons, namely, because of the way that it understood substance and explained the existence of evil. Evil is arguably more of a religious concept than a philosophical one, but certainly what Augustine calls evil bears a strong resemblance to what practical philosophy speaks of as vice, as well as to wickedness which is generally speaking a less extensive category than viciousness (in Aristotle, e.g., all wickedness is vicious, but not all vices are wicked). Yet despite the clear practical connotations of evil, Augustine regards evil as not only a practical problem but considers it a theoretical one as well. It was the Manichees’ claim to give what we might call an ontological explanation of evil that really attracted Augustine.

The theoretical problem of evil is easy to formulate but very difficult to solve, especially within the strictures of a theory that views god as unqualifiedly good and

\textsuperscript{158} JO III. 250-252.
powerful. If god is both good and powerful without qualification, and if god is also the source of the world and everything in it, then why is there evil in the world that god creates? Clearly god cannot be the source of evil, because god is entirely good. So the question inevitably arises, whence evil? The Manicheans offer an ingenious solution to this problem, claiming that, although god is unqualifiedly good, god is not omnipotent. Rather, god exists alongside an equiprimordial evil power, and this countervailing power explains the fact of evil in the world. A peculiarity of this teaching, at least as Augustine explains it, is that everything there is for Manicheism is a body, i.e., this doctrine is a thoroughgoing materialism. Hence both evil and good are substances in the sense of bodies, with the evil body being understood as a kind of earthy matter and the good one as a kind of fine light. The evil body is always and everywhere waging war on the good one, and the Manichee, in order to be as good as possible, attempts to turn away from the earthy body and tries to live instead in accordance with the more spiritual but still bodily light. The extreme emphasis on asceticism in Manichean practical doctrine finds its justification in the Manichean theoretical worldview, and Augustine, despite his deeply sensual nature and early devotion to fleshy pleasures, initially found much to admire in both the theoretical and the practical teachings of the Manichees.

It might seem surprising that Augustine was at first persuaded to a materialistic philosophy, but as Brown notes, “with the exception of the Platonists, most thinkers in the ancient world, the most religious included, were ‘materialists’ in the strict sense. For them, the divine was also an ‘element,’ though infinitely more ‘fine,’ more ‘noble’ and
less ‘mutable.’” Augustine himself confesses that for a long time he was completely unable to conceive of an incorporeal substance (this is a recurring theme in the early books of the *Confessions*). It is interesting how, in this respect, Augustine’s subsequent intellectual development mirrors Socrates’ account in the *Phaedo*. In both cases, the main change is from a natural, materialist orientation toward a belief in incorporeal entities such as soul, ideas, and god. As in Socrates’ case, Augustine seems to have abandoned materialism due to his gradual discovery of the inadequacy of exclusively materialistic accounts to explain what is, to save the phenomena. It is important to take seriously Augustine’s claim that the major obstacle to his embrace of god was his long-enduring incapacity to conceive an incorporeal substance, and it is hard to disagree with Brown (2000, p. 76), when he writes that Augustine’s story “is one of the most dramatic and massive evocations ever written of the evolution of a metaphysician.”

In Book 7, Augustine describes his decisive encounter with “certain books of the Platonists” (7.9.13). As O’Donnell observes in his commentary, this is the middle of the *Confessions*, “with six books before and after” (OD II: 413); he also notes that “the present passage (7.9.13) has been the focus of every debate in the (twentieth) century over the meaning of Augustine’s intellectual autobiography.” Obviously Augustine’s encounter with the *platonicorum libri* looms large in the story he tells in the *Confessions* about his intellectual conversion, and he clearly credits the Platonists with helping him to conceive an immaterial substance. But no less obviously, Augustine expresses profound reservations about the teachings of the Platonists. His comment about what their writings lack is illuminating:

---

Their pages do not have this face of piety (vultum pietatis huius), the tears of confession (lacrimas confessionis), your sacrifice (sacrificium tuum), a troubled spirit (spiritum contributatum), a contrite and humbled heart (cor contritum et humilatum), the salvation of your people (populi salutem), the city that is like a bride ( sponsam civitatem), the pledge of the spirit (arram spiritus sancti), the cup of our redemption (poculum pretii nostri) (Conf. 7.21.27).

The Platonists have two main faults, namely, they have a false conception of human nature and they lack a belief in the truth of the Christian religion. It is possible to see the difference between the Christian conception of human nature and that of the ancient Greek philosophers clearly delineated in this passage, for Augustine starkly contrasts the tears, troubled spirit, and humility of the Christian with the pride and tranquility of the Greek sage. Writing the Confessions in 397 or later, and already a Catholic bishop, Augustine also emphasizes certain aspects of the Christian religion that the Platonists lack, and in this context he especially stresses the importance of the incarnation, god’s sacrifice, and the role of Jesus Christ and the sacrament of the eucharist as a mediator between human beings and god. Book 7 contains the most prolonged discussion of the son of god within the first ten books of the Confessions, so in praising the Platonists Augustine is also careful to advance what he believes differentiates Christianity from their teachings.

It is not, however, my intent to disentangle the complex argument of Book 7 here, the intricate comparison and contrast Augustine makes between Christianity and Platonism at this crucial juncture of the Confessions. What I want to emphasize is how Book 7 functions structurally within Augustine’s autobiographical narrative. His discovery of the platonicorum libri functions as an important event and turning point in the story Augustine tells about his life. This episode reflects a pattern that we readers find
again and again in philosophical autobiography. Augustine recognizes the inadequacy of the skeptical position he has adopted, and perhaps it is even more accurate to say that he feels this position to be inadequate. The reason is that he has a desire for truth, and skepticism does not satisfy this desire. Meanwhile, he tells us, he had been becoming more open to the possibility that the Christian religion contained the truth he was seeking. He credits Ambrose’s preaching with having an important influence on him in this regard. Obstacles, however, remained, at this point in the form of metaphysical doubts relating to the existence of incorporeal substance and the problem of evil. The Platonists helped Augustine to get beyond these obstacles, by teaching him how to think about incorporeal substances and the strange dependence of the evil upon the good.

8. *Tolle lege, tolle lege: Augustine’s ultimate conversion.*— Even after the Platonists quelled his doubts about an “incorruptible substance” and helped him to understand the non-being of evil, Augustine tells us he was still wavering and unsure what to do. In light of this continuing perplexity, O’Donnell observes that “Book 7 teaches, in the end, that intellectual enlightenment, contrary to all Augustine’s youthful expectations, is not sufficient” (OD 2: 415). At the beginning of Book 8, Augustine writes that “all (his) doubts had been removed…but in my temporal life (temporali vita) all things were uncertain, and my heart had to be cleansed of the old leaven” (8.1.1). According to O’Donnell, Pierre Courcelle attempted “to minimize the moral dilemma and keep the focus on the intellectual level,” whereas O’Donnell himself emphasizes the import of the ethical problem, citing how Augustine “chose to see the issue as whether to espouse a continent life” (OD III.7). Clearly the intellectual conversion is important but not the whole story. As I stressed above, one aspect that makes Augustine’s *Confessions* unique
is the extent to which he insists upon the importance of his emotional life in the story he tells of his philosophical becoming. If by the beginning of Book 8 he presents himself as intellectually prepared to accept Christianity as the truth he had been seeking, there is still something in him that resists. It is also the case, however, that Augustine cannot attribute his conversion simply or even primarily to himself, since he wants to give God the credit. Augustine may be on the verge of reaching a decision, but he will only be able to do so with God’s help.

The conversion story Augustine wants to tell involves his whole life, from his infancy up to the moment of his conversion and on into the future, and the whole story matters with respect to the central moment. Augustine works out a broader and in many ways more psychologically sophisticated autobiography than any that had come before. One might say that, just as Socrates drew philosophy down from the heavens and toward concern with the human things, Augustine drew philosophical autobiography away from the noble but also somewhat hagiographic image of Plato’s perfect sage and toward a conception of the philosopher as a complex and flawed human being among others.\(^{160}\)

The qualifying observation is, however, justified that prior to Augustine, philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle worked out psychologically sophisticated accounts of human nature, its complexity, and our tendency to become unhappy through ethical and

\(^{160}\) With respect to Greek and Roman *biography* Misch observes that “the portrayal of the individual was neglected in favour of some general aspect of his character, as is proved incontestably by the works of Greek and Roman biographers that have come down to us. The ordinary biographer did not proceed inductively from observation of the particular to the discovery of the typical, which does not then lose the features of the individual; he took as his starting-point the typical forms of life, the philosophical, the political, moral, and so on, and then the individual whom he was to depict remained a mere example” (1951, vol. 1, p. 63). Further: “Ancient autobiography did not develop on lines of its own, but remained for the most part dependent on current literary forms,…, and from the outset its highest aim was to depict an ideal standard of culture or a definite type of character, cast into the form of a self-portrait” (1951, vol. 1, pp. 63-64).
intellectual failures. What distinguishes Augustine’s *Confessions*, however, is that he elaborates this human complexity and frailty in terms of himself, in terms of his own life and becoming.

Near the beginning of Book 8, Augustine confesses that at this point in his life, he was “still tightly bound by the love of women” (*Conf*. 8.1.2).

Many, perhaps twelve, of my years had flown by since that nineteenth year when by reading Cicero’s *Hortensius* I was aroused to a zeal for wisdom. Yet still I delayed to despise earthly happiness, and thus devote myself to that search. For the bare search for wisdom, even when it is not actually found, was preferable to finding treasures and earthly kingdoms and to bodily pleasures (*corporis voluptatibus*) swirling about me at my beck. But I, a most wretched youth, most wretched from the very start of my youth, had even sought chastity from you, and had said, “Give me chastity and continence, but not yet!” (“*da mihi castitatem et continentiam, sed noli modo.*”) For I feared that you would hear me quickly, and that quickly you would heal me of that disease of lust (*morbo concupiscentiae*), which I wished to have satisfied rather than extinguished (*Conf*. 8.7.17).

Augustine had delayed making a decision to renounce one kind of life in favor of another. He realizes that “the bare search for wisdom” is better than the kind of worldly life he had been living, yet some obstacle remained in him. In Chapters 8 through 12 of Book 8, Augustine describes a scene, now famous, in which his conversion took place. As Pierre Hadot has noted (1995, pp. 51-52), Pierre Courcelle started a controversy within Augustine studies when, in his 1950 book on the *Confessions*, he suggested that many details of Augustine’s story—the garden, the fig tree, the child’s voice—might have “purely symbolic value,” thus intimating that the story Augustine tells of his conversion might not be literally true. That this observation should have caused such an uproar may strike us today as rather quizzical, and yet it does point to the way that the distinction between fiction and autobiography is often undecidable, as Derrida suggests (2000, p.
16). This problem may be deeply troubling. And yet perhaps one should not be too literal-minded. (There is some truth, after all, to the idea that the letter can sometimes kill, whereas *spiritus est qui vivificat.*) Besides, for all of the allegorical overtones of Augustine’s story, the struggle that he describes within himself seems authentic. The will, which is central to his account here, can pull a person apart in different directions, even to the point of making a decision impossible. For Augustine, it is only the miracle of god’s grace that allows him to decide. When he heard the child calling out in the distance to “Pick up and read, pick up and read,” he says he took it as “a divine command” and immediately went over to where he had left his copy of Paul, took up the book (*Romans*), and read: “Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts” (*Rom. 13: 13-14*, Chadwick trans.). Augustine describes his response to this passage:

> I neither wished nor needed to read further. At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled (*Conf. 8.12.29*, Chadwick trans.)

A central theme of Paul’s *Letter to the Romans* is that it is possible to know the right thing and not to do it. A philosopher might add that it is also possible to believe one knows what is right and nevertheless to fail to act in accordance with this belief. This is exactly the position Augustine claims he was in at this time in his life. However troubling it may seem to some of us, Augustine believes that it was god’s grace that entered into his life and allowed him to do what he believed he ought to do. His new life began, he claims, at that moment.

The true, fundamental interrelationships in any novel or drama can be disclosed only at the end. Because of the very nature of their construction and effect, only the conclusion provides full clarification of the beginning.—Georg Lukács\(^{161}\)

“And we pass from this lower fruit of action to the delights of contemplation…” (Conf. 13.18.22)

Somewhat at odds with the aforementioned scholarly views, I think that the last four books of the *Confessions* contribute to making the work an exemplary philosophical autobiography. One of the central arguments of the present work is that philosophical autobiography is protreptic, meaning that the goal of such works is to lead prospective philosophers into actually doing philosophy. Philosophical autobiographies present paradigms not only of how their authors searched for truth and arrived at principles, but also of what a life of philosophizing can be. Socrates, for example, discusses not only his search for truth and discovery of principles but also how he took these principles up and made them the basis of his philosophical activity. This activity in turn came to characterize his life. Later in history, we find the same basic pattern in such philosophical autobiographies as Descartes’ *Discourse on the Method* and Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo*, where a search for truth leads to the discovery of principles that then constitute the basis for future philosophical activity. In *Confessions* Books 10-13, Augustine enacts, *literally performs*, the transition from a life of seeking truth to a life of trying to understand the truth that has been found.

Thus the *Confessions* instead of merely describing the transition from a pre-philosophical to a philosophical way of life actually perform this transition in book 10 and especially in books 11-13. Augustine’s conception of the philosophical life is, of

course, peculiar, but that should neither blind us to the theoretical, speculative character of the activity depicted in these later books, nor should it obscure the fact that minus the emphasis on sacred scripture Augustine’s meditations concern topics that are still recognized as philosophical, especially memory, time, form and matter, and so forth. Noting the importance that sacred scripture came to have for Augustine, Brown writes that, “a mind that had once hoped to train itself for the vision of God by means of the Liberal Arts, would now come to rest on the solid, intractable mass of the Christian Bible. For this reason, the last three books of his Confessions are in many ways the most strictly autobiographical part of the whole book.”162

Augustine thus models for his readers the transition from conversion to a life of theoria, which for him involves the attempt to understand sacred scripture. The principles that it has been one of the central purposes of the Confessions to introduce form the basis or starting point for this speculative activity. Augustine sees himself, at least in the context of the last three books, as passing “from the lower fruit of action to the delights of contemplation” (13.18.22).

Augustine’s Confessions are remarkable because, while patterning a paradigm of the philosophical life, they still reflect the complexity of real humanlife; because, while engaging in philosophical argumentation and meditation, they also attempt to put philosophy in a full human context and in relation to a whole life; and finally because, while providing a model of philosophical conversion, they also teach the hard truth that even for the philosopher, humanlife is difficult and a trial. Whatever critics may say, or however much one may question Augustine’s motives or even the truthfulness of his

autobiography, the *Confessions* is certainly neither self-hagiography nor an altogether unrealistic idealization of a human being.
Chapter 4
New Sciences in Early Modern Philosophical Autobiography

Regarding the opinions to which I had hitherto given credence, I thought that I could not do better than undertake to get rid of them, all at once, in order to replace them afterwards with better ones, or with the same ones once I had squared them with the standards of reason. I firmly believed that in this way I would succeed in conducting my life (ma vie) much better than if I built only upon old foundations (vieux fondements) and relied only upon principles (principes) that I had accepted in my youth without ever examining whether they were true. —Descartes

A science deriving from old principles (principi) would not be a “new science.” —Vico

1. Metaphysics in early modern philosophical autobiography. — Individually complex and in comparison to one another quite topically diverse, Descartes’ and Vico’s autobiographies nevertheless resemble each other in their explicit use of the language of metaphysics and their claims to present specifically metaphysical principles in terms of a life-story. Formally, too, and with respect to their function, their autobiographies

---

163 Unless otherwise noted, all English translations of Descartes come from The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, 3 vols., ed. and trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, (Cambridge University Press, 1984-1991). (Volume 3 is translated with Anthony Kenny.) Stoothoff is the translator of the Discourse, which appears in volume 1 (1985). I have also consulted Ian Maclean’s (2006) translation in the Oxford World’s Classics series. For the original text, contemporary scholars typically refer to the edition of Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, Oeuvres de Descartes (11 vols., Paris: Vrin, 1974-86). Despite this, I have used Étienne Gilson’s text of the Discours, (Paris: Vrin, 1st edition 1925/5th edition 1976), which is itself based on Adam and Tannery. One reason for my doing this is that Gilson’s text seems to be more widely available in American libraries; another is that unlike Adam and Tannery, Gilson employs modernized font and spelling, which those with limited French will appreciate. All references to Descartes’ writings in French besides the Discourse are to Adam and Tannery, to volume and page number. Future references to Descartes’ writings appear parenthetically within the main body of the text, citing page numbers in both CSM (=Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch) and G (=Gilson) or AT (=Adam and Tannery) or, in the case of the letters translated into English, CSMK (K = Anthony Kenny). The passage quoted above can be found on p. 117 of CSM and pp. 13-14 of Gilson, hence, (CSM 117/G 13-14). Note: references to volume 2 of CSM, far less frequent, are specially indicated by CSM2.

correspond to the Platonic paradigm of philosophical autobiography and certainly to a
greater extent than has usually (or ever) been noticed. We shall have occasion to
demonstrate this formal correspondence in due time, but I want to focus first of all on the
metaphysical content of these autobiographies. This is a good way to gain access to these
works, while it also promises to reinforce our understanding of how philosophers use
autobiography in general.

Looking back on the previous chapters, we can see that the philosophical
autobiographies considered there concern two basic sorts of philosophical principles,
namely, theoretical and practical ones. Now, if we concentrate for the moment on
theoretical principles, asking if their form can be further specified, it should be fairly
clear that the principles at issue in Plato’s and Augustine’s autobiographical writings are
metaphysical ones. Yet, if disagreement about what something is proves that we lack
knowledge of that thing, then metaphysics is generally not too well known. The word
“metaphysics” is a coin of dubious extraction, emerging as it did sometime after the death
of Aristotle and traceable only to certain more or less obscure figures in the history of
philosophy and scholarship.\textsuperscript{165} In the countries of western Europe, the word only came

\textsuperscript{165} Traditionally the term’s origin is ascribed to the first-century BCE editor of Aristotle’s works, Andronicus of Rhodes. \textit{μετά (meta)} means \textit{after} in Greek, and according to a common story, Andronicus simply intended this \textit{meta} to designate the books that came after Aristotle’s \textit{Physics} in his edition of Aristotle. These books thus became known as the \textit{Metaphysics}. A TLG search indicates the obscurity of the term’s origin. Probably the best known and most important author to use the term early on is Simplicius of Cilicia, for example, in his commentary on the \textit{De caelo} (vol. 7, p. 503, line 34). Simplicius also refers to \textit{τὰ μετὰ τὰ φυσικά}, that is, to the books after the books on physics. One strong indication that the word never achieved common currency in the ancient world is that the Stoics contemplated what we mean by metaphysics under the title of \textit{physics}. According to Diogenes Laertius: \textit{τριμερὴ φασίν ἐἶναι τὸν κατὰ φιλοσοφίαν λόγον·
éiναι γὰρ αὑτοῦ τὸ μὲν τι φυσικόν, τὸ δὲ ἥθικόν, τὸ δὲ λογικόν. That is, the Stoics recognized three main parts of philosophy: physical, ethical, and logical studies. See Diogenes Laertius, the life of Zeno of Citium, in \textit{Lives of Eminent Philosophers}, vol. II, trans. R. D. Hicks (Loeb Classical Library, 1925), pp. 148-149.
into common use in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, among the highly educated, as a result of the translation movement that arose together with the reawakened desire for learning that took hold of Europe in the first centuries of the last millennium.\textsuperscript{166} It is generally well known that Aristotle himself never referred to what he was seeking in his famous treatise by the name “metaphysics” but called it instead by turns the study of “being as being,” “first philosophy,” and “the science of god” (see \textit{Metaphys.} E, 1026a18-32). Yet the metaphysical idea, to employ this phrase, certainly antedates the word, particularly insofar as this idea points to first principles and is therefore closely associated with the kind of investigation that Plato locates at the pinnacle of the so-called divided-line (see \textit{Rep.} 510b-511c).\textsuperscript{167} As opposed to the first things that appear to us individual human beings during our lifetimes, such as colors, sounds, and feelings, metaphysics is concerned with the ultimate principles, or principle, of beings (see \textit{Metaphys.} 1029b1-13). Now, despite the permutations of the idea of metaphysics throughout the history of philosophy, there is still something to be said for the idea Aristotle developed in his treatise that sees the primary concerns of metaphysics as the account of being as being and the science of god. For Aristotle, the studies of being and god are interrelated since both have to do with the ultimate causes, or principles, of the multitude of organic and inorganic beings that we encounter in the world including, of course, ourselves. At the same time, because the domain of metaphysics has been

\textsuperscript{\textit{166} The term “metaphysics” appears regularly in the writings of Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas. I thank Professor Thérèse Bonin for confirming the use of the term in these authors and for teaching me about the importance of the translation movement with respect to the introduction of terms such as “metaphysics” into the European philosophical vocabulary. On this movement, see also David Knowles, \textit{The Evolution of Medieval Thought}, Second Edition, eds. D. N. Luscombe and C. N. L. Brooke (London: Longman Group, 1988), especially pp. 167-174.}

\textsuperscript{\textit{167} Michael J. Loux, in his \textit{Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction}, Third edition (Routledge, 2006, p. 15) speaks of metaphysics as the investigation of primitive, or underived, categories and their relation to derived ones. Primitive categories are first principles.}
variously configured and reconfigured since Aristotle wrote, and also due to the fact that we continue to rethink metaphysics today, it is necessary to take a historical view of metaphysics and to recognize how the meaning of metaphysics has changed over time. The philosophers whose autobiographies are considered in the present chapter made significant contributions to the historical process of determining what metaphysics is.

Philosophical autobiography is concerned with ultimate philosophical principles, since it is the story of a philosopher’s human life that necessarily involves his search for principles as well as the presentation of the results of this search. In Plato’s *Phaedo*, Socrates tells an autobiographical story about his search for a metaphysical principle in some sense beyond being and, in any case, beyond the material reality that Socrates claims to be the exclusive subject matter of the study of nature that he pursued as a young man. Socrates’ turn to the study of speech or argument (λόγος) and his hypothesis of the forms stem from his inability to find any better starting-point for his philosophical activity. Likewise Augustine, in his *Confessions*, recounts his search for, and partial discovery of, what he calls god, which as the sole source and sustainer of beings cannot fail to be recognized as a metaphysical principle. For these philosophers, ultimate philosophical principles are metaphysical, and their philosophical autobiographies are therefore works especially devoted to the kind of principles that belong to first philosophy. The metaphysical character of philosophical first principles is also explicit in the two philosophical autobiographies written in the early modern period, those of Vico and Descartes, and the comparative study of these works will provide further evidence for interpreting philosophical autobiography as a genre determined by metaphysical affinities. This study will also contribute to our understanding of how the task of
metaphysics has been variously reconceived at certain junctures in the history of philosophy.

The use of the term “metaphysics” had become well-established within the learned communities of Europe by the seventeenth century, when its meaning underwent a significant metamorphosis, primarily at the hands of René Descartes. For, whereas Aristotle’s study focuses primarily on being as being and god, Descartes expanded the subject matter of metaphysics to include the topics of soul or mind, the relation between mind and body, and the questions of the immortality of the soul and free will. In the Discourse, Descartes also initiates what, following Jean-Luc Marion, we might call “a protology of the ego,” that is, a metaphysical account that makes the I (ego or je) the first principle and first substance within philosophy. Within the autobiographical context of the Discourse, the thinking-I appears as the first and most real being in the order of ideas that constitutes Descartes’ philosophy, providing the foundation of Descartes’ entire philosophical system. Since, moreover, Descartes is explicit in the Discourse (and elsewhere) about the need for philosophy to ground all the other sciences, the first principle that he articulates is meant to serve as the foundation of the entire mental

---

168 Kant, for example, works with a concept and division of metaphysics handed down from Descartes, who both maintained the traditional emphasis on god within metaphysics while also introducing the soul and free will into the metaphysical domain. This framework came down to Kant further modified through the intermediaries of Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) and Christian Wolff (1679-1754). Hegel discusses the metaphysics that dominated German philosophy prior to Kant in his Encyclopedia Logic, sections 26-39.

169 Loux (2006, pp. 10-11) does well to take these modern modification of metaphysics into account in his survey of the topic. He also notes how, in contemporary philosophy, metaphysics has again divested itself of the subject matter attributed to it by modern philosophers such as Descartes. Thus the topics of god, mind, and free will are taken up in new fields of study under the headings of philosophy of religion, philosophy of mind, and theory of action, respectively.

170 Jean-Luc Marion, Cartesian Questions: Method and Metaphysics (University of Chicago, 1999), pp. 35-36.
universe, or at least those parts of it that Descartes believes are susceptible of philosophical treatment.

In contrast to Descartes’ system and to the metaphysical principle upon which it rests, Giambattista Vico worked out an altogether different system rooted in a social-historical metaphysics, what in his autobiographical Life he calls a “metaphysics of the human race (una metafisica del genere umano)” (FB 167/N 62). Vico’s metaphysics has been far less influential within the history of philosophy than that of Descartes, and it cannot but appear largely foreign to both traditional and contemporary conceptions of metaphysics. For Vico, the ultimate character of being is not, as with Descartes, rooted in individual self-certainty, but rather in the social and historical nature of humankind that reflects divine providence. Like other modern philosophers, Vico views the entire world as being divided between the domain of nature and the domain of freedom understood as the human, historical world. For Vico, knowers only know what they make, and since god alone is the maker of nature, nature is only really known by god. With history things are different. Divine providence and human action combine to make the historical, human world, and therefore we humans, as co-creators of history, are in a position to know it in a way that we can never know nature. Yet despite the divergence between their teachings, Vico and Descartes nevertheless agree in putting human beings at the center of their respective metaphysical doctrines, either individually, as in Descartes, or collectively, as in Vico.
As with Plato and Augustine, so with Vico and Descartes, we find autobiography at the origin of something new in philosophy. In all these cases, autobiography functions as a means of presenting ultimate philosophical principles that constitute the starting-points of certain unprecedented and epochal philosophical itineraries. This fact provides further evidence for our thesis, that there is an integral connection between philosophical autobiography, philosophical principles, and philosophical paradigm shifts (some people call them “revolutions”), such as those initiated by Plato and Socrates, Augustine, Descartes, and Vico. The reason for this is that major changes in (the history of) philosophy depend almost entirely on the adoption of new philosophical principles, and philosophical autobiography is specially suited to presenting such principles. Since principles determine the character of subsequent philosophical activity, a true paradigm shift in philosophy is unthinkable without the introduction of at least one new principle. As Vico says, a new science can hardly be based on old principles, and at the very least, old principles have to be given new applications in order for philosophical innovation to occur. Consideration of Vico and Descartes’ autobiographies further confirms the thesis that philosophers write autobiographies in order to present philosophical principles, while it also shows the importance of starting points for what follows, demonstrating how different starting points lead to very different philosophical systems.

2. Epistemological underpinnings of an opposition, with respect to the question of philosophical method.— At the root of the differences between Vico and Descartes’ philosophies we discover a disagreement about what human beings can and cannot know. Vico and Descartes posit opposite knowables and unknowables: for Descartes, certain

---

171 In fact, this claim always holds for philosophical autobiography, though it needs to be qualified to avoid being trivial. Every unique articulation of philosophy, after all, presents us with something new, and there is thus a sense in which philosophy is always being “revolutionized.”
metaphysical principles, such as the thinking-I and god are knowable, while he also believes that we can significantly increase our knowledge of the natural world; on the other hand, he seems to dismiss the possibility of knowledge of the social-historical realm of humanlife. To put it somewhat bluntly, this is because for Descartes the knowable and the certain are coterminous, and he believes that there is nothing certain in human affairs and human history. Thus, in the words of Karl Löwith (1949, p. 118), “Historical sciences are, for Descartes, no sciences at all.” Descartes thus maintains that we can only have certain knowledge of metaphysical principles and mathematical propositions, though he also believes that we can apply our mathematical knowledge to the study of nature for the purpose of manipulating natural beings to human ends. (Whether or not Descartes believes that mathematics gives us knowledge of nature in itself remains, for me, an open question.) Even Descartes’ ethical teaching, such as it is, is qualified by him as “provisional,” alongside some vague promises that the application of his principles will eventually lead to the establishment of a perfect moral science.172

Vico, by contrast, maintains exactly the opposite position with respect to nature, arguing that it is a veritable thing-in-itself, known only to god, its maker. Excluded in principle from knowledge of the inner workings of nature, Vico believes that we humans know only what we make, namely, the socio-historical world of customs, laws, institutions, and languages. God, too, is ultimately unknowable for Vico, since there is no sense in which human beings can be conceived as making the true god, as opposed to the

172 See, however, the paper by Ron Polansky and Joe Cimakasky, which questions the common belief that Descartes’ provisional morality is really provisional. According to Polansky and Cimakasky, Part Three of the Discourse presents us with Descartes’ “final ethical position universally applicable.” This paper is entitled “Descartes’ Provisional Morality” and can be found in the Pacific Philosophical Quarterly, Sept. 2012, 93, pp. 353-372.
many false gods that we have made historically. Thus both natural sciences and positive theologies such as Descartes’ are, for Vico, no sciences at all.

Although Vico and Descartes surely employ autobiography to introduce metaphysical principles, their autobiographies also range across broader philosophical territory, encompassing practical philosophy, physics, and especially the question of philosophical method. The question about method asks how to establish a procedure that will aid us in reliably discovering truth, and both Descartes and Vico believe they have made important discoveries in this area. Descartes’ emphasis on method is, of course, pronounced. Method appears in the title of his autobiography, and he presents his method as the answer to the many doubts that plagued him before he discovered it. Yet there is a certain ambiguity here. As Jean-Luc Marion has shown, there is a serious question about the relationship between method and metaphysics in Descartes. One reason Descartes presents metaphysical principles in the Discourse is to show how these principles illustrate his method, and from this point of view his metaphysical principles might be seen to derive from his method. Descartes wants to show how his method can be applied to every domain of human knowledge, notably, morality, metaphysics, and physics, including especially the study of medicine. There is also, however, a sense in which Descartes’ method might be seen to derive from his metaphysics, since in Part Four he relates how it was in the domain of metaphysics that he discovered the criterion of clarity and distinctness that serves as the first rule of the method, presented in Part Two. Whether or not Descartes’ metaphysics is the source of his method (and there are reasons to resist this conclusion, for example, the possibility that the clarity and distinctness of mathematical propositions is the source), for him metaphysics is identical with
philosophy, and philosophy grounds all of the other branches of knowledge, as he claims in Part Two.\textsuperscript{173}

Less explicit than in Descartes’ case, Vico’s emphasis on method in his Life (and elsewhere) is nonetheless significant. Vico speaks expressly of “a new critical method (\textit{una nuova arte critica})” (FB 167/N 61), which no less than the method of Descartes, though in a very different way, promises to provide human beings with the power to comprehend the truth in every domain of human endeavor. What is this critical method? Max Fisch memorably calls it the “genetic method,” while James Goetsch describes it as a logic of descent that seeks to understand things, especially “civil things,” in terms of their origins.\textsuperscript{174} Vico’s method is essentially historical and a forerunner of the historical, genealogical, etiological, and archeological approaches adopted by many modern and contemporary philosophers in their attempts to explain what things are in terms of how they came to be. For Vico knowledge of anything is always knowledge of its causes. This method depends upon massive erudition, imagination, and the ability to reason carefully.

Although Descartes serves as a standard foil for Vico (and Vico scholars), there is a sense in which any attempt to compare these philosophers is deeply problematic. Vico and Descartes were motivated by largely disparate goals and interested in very different subject matters; as a consequence they adopted divergent methodological approaches. In the tension between Vico’s and Descartes’ philosophical systems, it is also possible to discern an early figuration of one of the basic oppositions (or, as Žižek puts it, modes of

\textsuperscript{173} For Descartes’ belief that philosophy or metaphysics grounds all the other branches of learning, see the Preface to the French edition of the \textit{Principles of Philosophy}, CSM 186-87/AT 9: 14-15.

parallax) within modern philosophy itself, namely, that between the “two cultures” of the human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften) and the natural sciences (Naturwissenschaften). Descartes directs philosophy toward nature, Vico toward spirit or mind as it expresses itself historically. Across a persistent divide, Descartes’ and Vico’s autobiographical writings bear on the inquiry within modernity about what philosophy is and is supposed to be. Based on two very different lives, approaches to philosophy, and sets of philosophical principles, Vico and Descartes present us with alternate philosophical visions. Descartes’ philosophy opposes the authority of tradition and emphasizes the self-reliance of the individual who uses her reason as a principal source of human wisdom. Vico, by contrast, emphasizes the social, civic, and historical character of human life and grants tradition a prominent role within human wisdom. In the “Idea of the Work” that serves as a preface to the 1744 New Science, Vico asserts that human nature “has this principal property: that of being social (d’essere socievoli)” (§2/N 367). The Discourse on the Method introduces Descartes’ essays on light, meteors, and geometry, indicating the way in which Descartes’ entire philosophical project points in the direction of nature.175 Vico’s Life, by contrast, confronts us with a philosophy that concerns itself primarily with humanity’s social, civil, and historical being. The difference in subject matter has multiple corollaries, from different ideas about method to divergent teachings about practical philosophy and education. In both cases, however, autobiography figures centrally in the presentation of philosophy.

175 Paul J. Olscamp has provided a useful service to scholarship by reminding Descartes’ English-speaking readers of the importance of viewing the Discourse in relation to the essays it originally introduced. In general, because we today focus almost exclusively on Descartes’ Meditations, our view of Descartes is rather skewed toward the metaphysical side of his thought.
3. Modern philosophy begins with an autobiography.— If modern philosophy begins, as is often thought, with Descartes, then it also begins with an autobiography. For, whether by conscious design or historical accident, Descartes’ first published statement of his philosophy is a philosophical autobiography, in which he discusses his search for truth, his educational formation, his dissatisfaction with existing modes of knowledge, his discovery of new philosophical principles and, of course, his famous method. The *Discours de la méthode pour bien conduire sa raison et chercher la vérité dans les sciences*, published anonymously in 1637, is in many ways a model philosophical

---

176 One should, I think, take this claim with a grain of salt, but Descartes was clearly the first to provide a comprehensive literary expression of many of the basic propositions and attitudes of modern philosophy. For some critical discussion of the belief that Descartes initiates modern philosophy, see Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes: An Intellectual Autobiography* (Oxford, 1995), Introduction, especially p. 3. With certain qualifications, Gaukroger basically accepts the common view that Descartes founds modern philosophy. See also the Preface to Gaukroger’s more recent book, *Descartes’ System of Natural Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2002), where he writes that “Descartes and Bacon are two of the founders of early modern thought, in many respects the founders of early modern thought.” Bertrand Russell also endorses the view of Descartes as the founder of modern philosophy in his 1945 *A History of Western Philosophy* (see pp. 557-568). In his *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie* (vol. 20 of the Moldenhauer/Michel edition) Hegel, although he attributes important contributions to Bacon and Jacob Boehme (1575-1624), argues that Descartes was the true initiator of modern philosophy: “René Descartes ist in der Tat der wahrhafte Anfänger der modernen Philosophie, insofern sie das Denken zum Prinzip macht” (p. 123). Also (memorably): “Hier, können wir sagen, sind wir zu Hause,” (p. 120) i.e., here we (moderns) are at home. See pp. 120-157.

177 As Ian Maclean (2006, p. xxiii), for example, notes: “the *Discourse* and the essays which accompany it are a substitute for something else, which would have been more comprehensive, more coherent, and more ‘scientific’ in character.” Descartes had originally intended to publish *The World* (Le Monde) as his first work, but withheld it after learning of the condemnation of Galileo by the Inquisition at Rome on June 22, 1633, a development that Descartes discusses in many letters and, obliquely, in the *Discourse* itself. See Part Five and especially the beginning of Part Six (CSM 141-142). For an illuminating discussion of Descartes’ projected treatise and its cultural context, see Stephen Gaukroger’s Introduction to his translation of *The World* (Cambridge, 1998). FYI: Descartes at some point intended *Le Monde* to be a three-part work, but he only completed the first two parts: the *Traité de la lumiere* and *L’homme* (found in vol 11 of AT). He seems to have intended the third part to deal with the soul. Alongside Gaukroger’s edition, Thomas Steele Hall’s translation and commentary on *L’homme* is highly informative (published in the Harvard Monographs in the History of Science series, 1972).
autobiography. Beyond question, the *Discourse on the method* has been one of the most important and influential texts in the history of modern philosophy, and it is undoubtedly central to the interpretation of Descartes. According to the great nineteenth-century Descartes scholar, Francisque Bouillier, the *Discourse* contains “the entire philosophy of Descartes…in abbreviated form (*en abrégé*).” A comprehensive treatment of the *Discourse* must, therefore, take many factors into account, not least of all its autobiographical form, which is of course our primary concern here. Since, moreover, the autobiographical character of the book has been relatively neglected, the following treatment addresses a gap in the usual story that philosophers tell about Descartes. This approach may unsettle somewhat the conventional opinion about Descartes, but in any case, one has reason to hope that it will contribute to a clearer understanding of what he is up to in the *Discourse* and in his philosophy in general.

The philosophical comprehensiveness of the *Discourse* is rather remarkable, especially given the brevity of the text: in the little summary of the work with which the *Discourse* opens, Descartes promises to show “the principal rules” of his method, the

---

178 Stoothoff translates the title as *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One’s Reason and Seeking the Truth in the Sciences*. Stephen Menn (2003, p. 143) notes that the title is slightly ambiguous: “It should mean ‘discourse on the method for rightly conducting one’s reason and searching for truth in the sciences.’ But it might just mean ‘discourse on the method for rightly conducting his reason,’ the author’s: as Descartes says, ‘my aim is not to teach here the method which everyone must follow for rightly conducting his reason, but only to show how I have tried to conduct my own’ (AT VI, 4).”

179 The *Discourse* and the *Essays* that it introduced were by all accounts tremendously influential and had an almost immediate, and very powerful, effect on the western European intellectual scene. As Hugh Kearny writes in *Science and Change 1500-1700* (McGraw Hill, 1971), “For a century at least (1640-1740), Cartesianism was a powerful influence upon western European science” (p. 160).


morality he has derived from this method, “the foundations (fondements) of his metaphysics,” and the application of his method to various questions in physics, including such specialized topics as “the movement of the heart” and other “difficulties pertaining to medicine” (CSM 111/G 1). From the very onset of the work, therefore, Descartes prepares readers to expect that his method will apply widely, covering the concerns of both practical and theoretical philosophy. Whereas Parts Three, Four, and Five of the *Discourse* attempt to show various applications of Descartes’ method, and Part Six looks to the future, in Parts One and Two Descartes portrays his search for this method and the gradual process of his conversion to the primary principle of his philosophy. He articulates this principle, of course, in Part Four.

Yet only in Part Six does Descartes seriously address the question why he is publishing the *Discourse* and the *Essays* it serves to introduce. Like Nietzsche, as we shall see, Descartes claims that he is publishing his researches out of a sense of duty to his fellows. He writes and plans to publish, he says, for the general good of all human beings (*le bien général de tous les hommes*, 61: 27-28), especially because he believes that the “general notions touching on physics” he has acquired might have an even wider application than he has so far been able to give them. Famously he claims that these principles might ultimately allow human beings to become “like masters and possessors of nature” (*comme maîtres et possesseurs de la nature*, 62: 7-8), fundamentally altering the very fabric of human life through an immense increase of human power. Strongly rooted in a mechanistic physics and the application of mathematics to the study of nature,
and aiming at the transformation of nature, this is the so-called Cartesian project that Descartes communicates first of all in the form of an autobiography.\footnote{The predominantly mechanistic and materialistic bent of Descartes’ philosophy is probably insufficiently appreciated by most contemporary philosophers, but there has probably never been a better time, within the English-speaking world at least, to study Descartes’ natural philosophy. This is primarily thanks to Stephen Gaukroger’s translations and monographs. In light of Gaukroger’s work, Stephen Menn’s (2003, p. 141 and see below) contention that Descartes’ natural philosophy is simply a “wreck” is unhelpful. Nor is it even true, as Menn suggests, that all of Descartes’ contributions to natural science and mathematics have been altogether overturned or surpassed. In many cases Descartes’ principal doctrines stand up well, even though the details of those doctrines have been falsified, for example, his teaching in the Dioptrique that, contrary to Aristotle, the senses do not give us an accurate picture of the way the world actually is. This doctrine prefigures the common knowledge of our own era, even though Descartes’ account of how sense-perception actually works has been proven false in many ways, for example, by contemporary chemistry and physics. For a more balanced account of Descartes’ contributions to natural science and mathematics, see S. V. Keeling, Descartes (Oxford, 1968), esp. pp. 22-29. See also Gaukroger’s contribution to The Cambridge Companion to Descartes (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 91-114.}

4. *Is the Discourse on the method really a philosophical autobiography?* — Descartes’ title in no way indicates that the work is to have an autobiographical character, and there is little in his oeuvre outside the Discourse itself that suggests he devoted significant thought to autobiography. There is, however, one tantalizing exception that should be noted. In a 1628 letter from Guez de Balzac (1597-1654) to Descartes, Balzac reminds his correspondent of a work Descartes may have promised to write, referring to it as “De l’histoire de vostre esprit,” or about the history of your mind (AT 1: 570). Balzac goes on to say that Descartes’ friends are eagerly awaiting the book. Now, whatever became of this projected history, the only such account that we have from Descartes’ pen is the Discourse, which appeared about a decade after Balzac’s letter. Descartes ultimately refrained from calling this book his “life,” “confessions,” “history,” or anything else of the sort, and this is notable because we know he gave some thought to the title. In a much-quoted letter to Marin Mersenne (1588-1648), Descartes claims that the *Discourse on the Method* is called discourse because he doesn’t claim to teach (enseigner) the
method there but only to talk about it (parler) (CSMK 53/AT 1: 349). From a slightly earlier letter, also to Mersenne, we also know that Descartes initially gave some consideration to another title:

The Plan of a Universal Science (le projet d’une Science universelle) which is capable or raising our Nature to its Highest Degree of Perfection, together with the Optics, the Meteorology, and the Geometry, in which the Author, in order to give proof of his universal Science, explains the most abstruse Topics he could choose, and does so in such a way that even persons who have never studied can understand them (CSMK p. 51/AT 339).

Clearly Descartes had something very different from an autobiography in mind in designing the work that became the Discourse, and the absence of any indication in the title that the work is autobiographical is a first sign that Descartes’ philosophical autobiography is of a peculiar sort.

That the Discourse is nonetheless autobiographical and a kind of history of the progress of Descartes’ mind, there can be no doubt. Descartes clearly presents a story about his life that is developmental and progressive, and the work bears all the primary features of philosophical autobiography mentioned above. Specifically, and despite Descartes’ coy protestations to the contrary, the Discourse is meant to be exemplary and to serve a pedagogic function (see, for example, CSM 142). In Parts One and Two, Descartes tells a story of his search for truth, and there is a conversion story, an inward turn that precipitates Descartes’ discovery of the first principle of his philosophy. Above all, the Discourse expresses and gives an account of an ultimate philosophical principle in terms of a life-story. The thoroughly personal character of the Discourse is, moreover, marked by Descartes’ use of the first person pronoun throughout the text. The remarkably personal tenor of the entire work gives a palpable sense of the author’s character.
Obviously Descartes himself is crafting and hence controlling the way that he presents himself, but it is certainly possible for readers to come away from the *Discourse* with a sense of Descartes as a serious and careful person. The work ends with a personal declaration, in which Descartes announces his intention “to devote the rest of my life” to the study of nature, especially for the sake of improving medicine (CSM 151). Like other philosophers (Plato’s Socrates, Augustine, Vico, and so on), Descartes emphasizes that leisure is necessary for him to accomplish his goals, and because he believes that humanity as a whole will benefit from his work, he feels justified in asking others to do what they can to give him the leisure he requires.

All the same, the *Discourse* is a special philosophical autobiography that calls for interpretation in terms of its unique features. It clearly differs significantly from philosophical autobiographies that pursue an account of philosophy in terms of a comprehensive account of a human life, such as Augustine’s *Confessions*, Mill’s *Autobiography*, Rousseau’s *Confessions*, and others. Descartes hardly speaks about his emotional development or his private life, and he passes over in silence the role of other persons in his philosophical development. Specific individuals other than Descartes do not figure at all in the life-story he tells, and one will look in vain for any discussion of Descartes’ close intellectual relationships with persons such as Isaac Beeckman, Marin Mersenne, and others, to say nothing of his family and other personal relationships (about which we know very little). Descartes talks abstractly about other people, the “learned men” with whom he studied, his “fellow students,” and so forth, but no individuals besides himself play any part in his story. Verene calls the *Discourse* an “abstract autobiography” (1991, p. 60), and certainly Descartes abstracts his account of his life.
from particular relationships with particular people who may have influenced him (historically speaking, it’s clear that certain individuals, such as Beeckman, did influence him). Even his account of his education is presented rather abstractly and in broad terms, a fact which Leibniz found cause to complain of in a 1714 letter to Louis Bourguet, quoted below. Based on the information Descartes gives readers about his education, it would be impossible to reconstruct, much less retrace, the specific steps he took to arrive at his philosophical position. Although Vico, like Descartes, concentrates on his intellectual development, Vico’s Life is markedly less abstract and appreciably more specific, involving a great deal of attention to the particular intellectual influences he received from both persons he encountered and authors he merely read. Vico also tells us something about his personal life and relationships, mentioning his parents, friends, and so forth. This is not to say that the Discourse is a completely depersonalized autobiography, because Descartes does speak about his manner of living, his financial independence, the role of travel in his life, and so on. Yet one can hardly fail to notice that much of Descartes’ life remains offstage in his autobiography.

On the other hand, the Discourse is very similar to the autobiography of the Phaedo, and like Socrates’ autobiography, Descartes’ text highlights the search for truth and the importance of starting-points within philosophy.\(^\text{183}\) Descartes was clearly alive to the importance of philosophical principles, and in the Discourse (and elsewhere), he repeatedly emphasizes how much philosophy depends on good foundations, while also insisting that philosophy itself is to serve as the foundation of all the other sciences (CSM 121-122). As Bernard Williams suggests, the foundation is “Descartes’ favourite

\(^{183}\) The difference between intellectual autobiography and general autobiography is exemplified in twentieth-century philosophical autobiography by Bertrand Russell’s My Philosophical Development and his three-volume Autobiography, respectively.
metaphor,” and in Part Two of the *Discourse* Descartes elaborates on the meaning that this metaphor has for him. Descartes interest in the foundations (*fondements*) of philosophy leads to the principle of his own philosophy that he articulates in Part Four, a principle encapsulated in that most famous of philosophical formulas, *je pense, donc je suis* (I think, therefore I am, CSM 127/G 32). Descartes immediately calls this principle *le premier principe de la philosophie que je cherchais* (the first principle of the philosophy I had been seeking). It is important to note, however, that Descartes does in fact reserve the expression of this principle for Part Four, which is to say that he doesn’t begin with his first principle but rather builds up to it. Significantly, autobiography precedes the expression of the principle.

In light of the position of autobiography at the beginning of Descartes’ philosophical enterprise, a question arises about how integral autobiography actually is to Descartes’ philosophy. With respect to the *Discourse* we should ask with Verene: “Is the life-narrative of the philosopher part of his philosophy itself, a form of its verification?” (p. ix) Since there are clearly two possible answers to this question, there are also two possible interpretations of the role of autobiography in Descartes’ philosophy.

5. *The interpretation of Descartes as the philosopher of depersonalization par excellence.*— At first it might seem obvious that autobiography contributes nothing important to Descartes’ philosophy. Many philosophers and scholars, especially in recent times, have viewed Descartes as the anti-autobiographical philosopher par excellence, as

---

185 Jean-Luc Marion notes that Descartes’ choice of wording can be read in two ways: “(it) can be taken to mean a philosophical principle that is being sought…but it can also be taken to mean a philosophy that is itself being sought. In this sense, in his search for a first principle, Descartes is in search of philosophy.” Or one might say, I think, a philosophy, with real emphasis on the indefinite article. From *Cartesian Questions: Method and Metaphysics* (Chicago, 1999), p. 26.
paradigmatically embodying philosophy’s aversion to the autobiographical discussed in the introduction. On this interpretation, Descartes uses autobiography only in order to dispense with it, as a rhetorical means to achieve effects that contributes nothing to his philosophy as such. If “je pense, donc je suis” is the foundation of Cartesian edifice, then autobiography is at most a way of clearing the ground for this foundation. Like other philosophers who write autobiographies, Descartes employs autobiography in order to present ultimate philosophical principles, setting the stage for an account of his subsequent philosophical activity. Especially in Descartes’ case, philosophy seems to move away from its initial autobiographical articulation toward an impersonal and ahistorical philosophy, based on an equally ahistorical and impersonal conception of self. “Give little thought to Socrates,” Plato has him say, “and much more for the truth” (Phaedo 91c1-2). Yet it isn’t after all so clear that we are justified in viewing these autobiographies as entirely extrinsic or superfluous to the philosophies they serve to introduce. Socrates, after all, asserts his own insignificance in relation to truth in the same dialogue that he narrates a story about his life.

If we are justified in speaking of Cartesian disdain for the autobiographical dimension of human life, this looks to be a corollary of Descartes’ much broader repudiation of history as a source of knowledge and wisdom. In his thought-provoking book, J. M. Bernstein provides a compelling argument for reading the Discourse itself in this way, as a movement toward the depersonalization of both philosophy and the philosopher:

The self that comes to self-recognition in the cogito is not… the self whose narrative we have been following; indeed, it is not the kind of self for whom self-knowledge and the questions of identity could ever be at issue for any empirical predicates, predicates which would give empirical
specificity to this self...The universality of the *cogito* is guaranteed by its ubiquity and anonymity; but as ubiquitous and anonymous it fails to name the self, “my” self.\(^{186}\)

On this reading of the *cogito*, a universally realized Cartesian philosophy would seem to result in the belief that philosophical autobiography contributes nothing important to philosophy. If the “I” or “je,” is nothing but a self, certain of its own being and possessing, as Descartes suggests in the *Meditations*, certain cognitive capacities, then there is no philosophically significant difference between one self and another. The life stories of individuals would therefore be completely irrelevant, not even contributing to self-knowledge, since the Cartesian conception of self demands no “empirical predicates” beyond the assertion that the thinking self is and can do certain things, such as sensing, imagining, willing, and understanding (CSM vol. 2, pp. 19, 24). With the Cartesian “I” as principle, and armed with the criterion of clarity and distinctness that this principle exemplifies, Descartes seems able to dismiss the social and historical human world as so much unknowable rigmarole. Since, furthermore, the primary focus of Descartes’ philosophy is arguably nature (that is, after he’s got his metaphysical position squared away), philosophical autobiographies hardly contribute anything of importance to our understanding of the natural world. The project of making humans “masters and possessors of nature” would appear to have no use for autobiography, philosophical or otherwise.

So does Descartes’ own autobiography serve as a form of verification of the philosophical worldview he articulates in the *Discourse*? It would seem that even if autobiography is nothing more for him than a rhetorical means to achieve effects,

Descartes chose not to dispense with this means. Descartes’ use of autobiography may be partially, or even wholly, explained by his stated intention to give the Discourse a popular form; this is also why he wrote the Discourse and the Essays in French, i.e., so that they would be accessible to a wider audience. Autobiography is an appealing literary form, and Descartes was not insensitive, as we shall see, to the charm of autobiography as a species of fable or history.

6. The interpretation of Descartes as a philosopher of human life. — On the other interpretation, autobiography does in fact provide Descartes with a certain verification of his philosophy, and it is this interpretation that, if valid, should unsettle the standard conviction that Descartes’ philosophy is wholly depersonalized and ahistorical. If we take the autobiographical character of the Discourse seriously, it points to a very different foundation from the one Descartes ultimately advances, since it turns out that the “I think” is itself founded in the human life of René Descartes. This foundation is less simple, certain, and stable than the one Descartes ultimately advances, but it is also arguably truer. On this reading, what the Discourse actually shows us is that the self’s realization of the certainty of its being as a thinking being turns out to have a history, however vaguely and abstractly this history may appear in Descartes’ telling.

One might be tempted to point to the Meditations at this juncture as showing that Descartes is able to present his philosophy and philosophical principles disencumbered of autobiographical elements. To some extent, this is a valid point, but it also fails to recognize both the autobiographical cast of the Meditations itself, as well as the extent to which the Meditations might be seen to presuppose the narrative of the Discourse. Bernstein has argued that the “pre-systematic crisis of reason” presented in the Discourse...
is “a necessary condition for Descartes’ systematic doubt” in the *Meditations*. Bernstein further observes that:

The very first sentence of the *Meditations* harks back to the pre-philosophical crisis of reason recorded in the *Discourse*. The *Discourse*, then, is both temporally and logically prior to the *Meditations* for it provides, in pre-philosophical terms, the grounds and reasons necessary for reason to engage in the systematic questioning of the grounds of reasoning which alone, in Descartes’ view, can terminate the crisis of reason (p. 159).

For Bernstein, the *Discourse* is pre-philosophical, but if in fact this pre-philosophical narrative is required to establish Descartes’ properly philosophical project, then at the very least its status appears more problematic. In fact, philosophy never comes to be, nor does one become a philosopher, without a pre-philosophical crisis. Philosophical autobiography bears out pointedly the truth of this claim, since it shows that philosophy begins with a principle and that a principle is the result of a search, often tortuous and in any case protracted. Since the principle is first, it is, as we have often remarked, indemonstrable in the sense of a proof that establishes one thing on the basis of prior ones. In this case, there is a sense in which nothing can be prior. It is the function of life-stories within philosophy to offer some account of ultimate principles where strictly logical, demonstrative accounts are inapplicable. Now of course Descartes might say that the first principle of his philosophy is self-evident and therefore needs no such support. But assuming this to be true, why has he couched the presentation of the principle in an autobiography? Isn’t it because, even if his principle is self-evident, Descartes still has to explain why a new principle is necessary in the first place? And isn’t this exactly what Socrates tries to show in his autobiography in the *Phaedo*, namely, that the things he did
and suffered in the course of his search for truth made him realize that a new starting-point was required?

There is also a case to be made that humanlife is a more important concept for Descartes than has hitherto usually been recognized. Staying with the *Meditations* for the moment, it is worthwhile to notice that Descartes appeals to humanlife as a criterion within philosophy, especially at the very end of the work, when he identifies our memories of the events of our lives as the ultimate touchstone that allows us to distinguish dreams from reality. In the *Meditations*, of course, the apparent reality of dreams, and our consequent inability at times to distinguish dreaming from waking states, is one important ground for the radical doubt that Descartes advances in the First Meditation. In the Sixth Meditation, at the close of the work, Descartes points to humanlife in order to show how it is in fact possible to distinguish dreaming from waking states:

…the exaggerated doubts of the last few days should be dismissed as laughable. This applies especially to the principal reason for doubt, namely my inability to distinguish between being asleep and being awake. For I now notice that there is a vast difference between the two, in that *dreams are never linked by memory with all the other actions of life as waking experiences are* (in eo quòd nunquam insomnia cum reliquis omnibus actionibus vitae a memoriâ conjugantur, ut ea quae vigilanti occurrent)...when I distinctly see where things come from and where and when they come to me, and *when I can connect my perceptions of them with the whole of the rest of my life without a break* (ullâ interruptione cum totâ reliquâ vitâ connecto), then I am quite certain that when I encounter these things I am not asleep but awake. And I ought not to have even the slightest doubt of their reality if, after calling upon all the senses as well as my memory and my intellect in order to check them, I receive no conflicting reports from any of these sources (CSM2, pp. 61-62/ AT 7: 89-90, my emphasis).

Thus even in the *Meditations*, life (*vita*) and the memory of the actions of a single humanlife fulfills a significant function within Descartes’ philosophy.
If, however, human life figures more prominently in Descartes’ thought than is usually recognized, and if autobiography does provide a form of verification within his philosophy, it is nonetheless true that Descartes’ philosophy as a whole concentrates primarily on the natural world, with a special emphasis on how we can manipulate nature for the sake of technologies that will “facilitate our enjoyment of the fruits of the earth and all the goods we find there,” while also improving healthcare, since health is “undoubtedly the chief good and the foundation of all the other goods in this life” (CSM 143).

There is, then, a sort of puzzle about how to regard the role of autobiography and of human life in the Cartesian philosophy, and in order to solve this puzzle it is necessary to attend to what Descartes himself has to say about the form of the Discourse. Like Augustine, Descartes offers an account and criticism of autobiography within his own autobiography, though of course he doesn’t any more than Augustine speak of autobiography by its name. Just as Augustine’s remarks pertain to what he calls confession, Descartes’ discussion concerns what he calls histories and fables. Since, however, autobiography is either a species of fable or, what is more likely, of history, Descartes’ remarks concern autobiography and provide something like a poetics of autobiography avant la lettre. How, then, does Descartes himself understand autobiography, its powers and its limits? I now pursue this question.

7. Descartes’ poetics of autobiography.— In Part One of the Discourse, Descartes describes his goal, which is, “to reveal…what paths (chemins) I have followed, and to represent my life in it as if in a picture (représenter ma vie comme en un tableau), so that everyone may judge it for himself” (CSM 112/G 3-4). But in addition to the simile of the
picture (tableau), Descartes proceeds to invite two other ways of characterizing his text, namely “as a history (une histoire) or, if you prefer, a fable (une fable)” (CSM 112). In the account of his studies that he subsequently gives, which comprises the bulk of Part One, he devotes special attention to histories and fables, concentrating on the question of what they can contribute to education and human knowledge, while also highlighting their limitations in this regard. His critical remarks about the strengths and weaknesses of histories and fables constitute a kind of poetics of autobiography within his own autobiography, and it is important to grasp that Descartes highlights both the weaknesses and the strengths of these kinds of narratives. In general, Descartes argues that fables and histories must be read warily, and he therefore cautions readers about his own means of presenting his philosophy. If the presently beloved adjective “critical” means anything, it means at least that an intelligent, educated person should be aware of the limitations of the various ways and means by which we pursue knowledge. From this point of view, it is entirely appropriate for a philosopher such as Descartes to foster questioning in readers about his way of presenting material. Critical examination of autobiography need not detract from its effectiveness as a means of presenting philosophy, and in fact it is only through criticism of the autobiographical form that we can truly appreciate what it can and cannot do.

Even allowing for the recurrent ironical notes Descartes strikes in the Discourse, it’s clear that he is far from being insensible to the attractiveness of fables and histories. According to him, “the charm (la gentillesse) of fables awakens the mind (esprit), while the memorable deeds told in histories uplift it and help to shape one’s judgment if they are read with discretion (avec discrétion)” (CSM 113/EG 5). Fables and histories thus go
to work on the mind (*esprit*), and fables are particularly charming (or, more literally, *kind* to readers). As Derrida has written apropos the *Discourse*: “the fable bears truth, exhibits it or displays it in an attractive fashion. It makes the truth desirable.” Descartes certainly recognizes the appealing character of fables and their capacity to direct human beings toward truth, even if he remains doubtful about the truth of such stories. Such stories are not, according to him, strictly speaking true, that is, even though they may indicate the truth helpfully. Histories are similar to fables in Descartes’ estimation, because they uplift the mind and help to improve the judgment of readers who read “*avec discrétion*.” Descartes certainly aims to charm readers in order to instruct them; he seeks to earn readers’ trust, to be kind (*gentil*), and so to make the truth he has to teach more attractive and convincing. If one reads the autobiographical story of the *Discourse* with discretion, one may reasonably hope to improve one’s judgment in both practical and theoretical matters.

What, however, does it mean to read with discretion? According to Descartes, reading with discretion requires an appreciation of the limitations of stories such as histories and fables. These critical remarks act as a counterweight to the preceding laudatory ones:

> Fables make us imagine (*imaginer*) many events as possible when they are not. And even the most accurate histories, while not altering or exaggerating the importance of matters to make them more worthy of being read, at any rate almost always omit the baser and less notable events; as a result, the other events appear in a false light, and those who regulate their conduct by examples (*exemples*) drawn from these works are liable to fall into the excesses of the knights-errant in our tales of chivalry, and conceive plans beyond their powers (*et à concevoir des desseins qui passent leurs forces*) (CSM 114/G 6-7).

---

As with so many passages in the *Discourse*, the succinctness of Descartes’ expression calls for exegesis. Descartes offers the *Discourse* itself as a history or fable, so the above comments on these narrative modes must make us wonder whether the *Discourse* itself presents things that only appear possible while being impossible in fact. It is difficult to read this passage and not to think of the eponymous hero of Cervantes’ novel (Part One published in 1605, Part Two in 1615). By the time he came to write the *Discourse* in the mid-1630s, Descartes had probably heard of *Don Quixote* and had possibly read it. But however this may be, there is an analogy. For, as the tales of knights-errant enkindle Don Quixote’s imagination and prompt his fantastic quest, so fables and histories in general can excite the imagination and make us believe in impossible fantasies. Does Descartes really want to suggest that the *Discourse* itself, whether in certain respects or as a whole, presents things that only appear possible? The mere suggestion that this could be the case is troubling, but then perhaps this is precisely the effect Descartes wants to bring about. Notwithstanding his lifelong protestations of willingness to submit to certain authorities, above all the Catholic Church, Descartes generally repudiated the practice of basing beliefs on authority, his own or anyone else’s. He seems to have thought that human beings should only assent to beliefs that they could “square with reason,” each one for herself. Descartes not only wants to present compelling arguments for his philosophical positions, he also wants to cast doubts about his entire way of presenting his philosophy, and the reason for this is that he wants readers to think for themselves (to use a sadly hackneyed expression). Descartes develops an autocritique of the *Discourse* within the

---

188 Both Parts One and Two of *Don Quixote* were available in a French translation by 1618. (Part One was apparently available in translation as early as 1612.)
Discourse itself because he wants to foster critical thinking (alas, another hackneyed phrase).

But this is not all. According to Descartes, histories can uplift the mind and improve judgment, but they cannot provide an adequate guide to the conduct of life. The same could be said for autobiographies insofar as autobiography is a kind of history. Why not, however? Descartes intimates that humanlife as the totality of sufferings and doings of a person far exceeds the capacity of autobiography to represent it, and it necessarily follows that the events such narratives relate must appear in a “false light.” Omitting, as they must, (at least most of) the baser and less notable events within a humanlife, autobiographies cannot help but give us a distorted picture of real life. And this is in the best case scenario, that is, in the case of “the most accurate histories” and autobiographies. Less scrupulous authors will exaggerate and idealize their subjects, nor is it so easy to distinguish the accurate accounts from the idealized ones. In any case, history and autobiography require the author to be selective, and Descartes contends that the very necessity of this selectivity guarantees that such narrative modes can never capture the whole truth. Descartes’ comments about histories point to the artificiality of autobiography and other such stories; for him, humanlife surpasses biography and autobiography. Descartes thus points to the insufficiency of his own text where it might claim to provide a guide for humanlife, but then he also claims that the inadequacy of histories, autobiographies, and other such stories can be mitigated if readers keep their inherent limitations in mind. This is precisely what it means to read such works with discretion. We should be careful about making judgments that affect our lives on the basis of the stories we find in such works.
Descartes also notes a further danger inherent in reading the histories and fables of the ancients, which is that one can lose touch with one’s own age and lifetime by becoming too involved in such studies. With this warning, Descartes anticipates an important aspect of Nietzsche’s critique of history in the second of the *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* (Nietzsche knew something about this due to his training as a philologist.) Descartes warns that, “one who is too curious about the practices of past ages usually remains quite ignorant about those of the present,” and like the traveler who spends too much time abroad, the antiquarian risks becoming a stranger to his own country” (CSM 114/G 6). This warning is aimed, not surprisingly, at the learned. Descartes nevertheless has a serious point and manages to tell us something about his approach to studies in the process, which is, that learning should be in the service of humanlife and not an escape from it. This is an idea that appears already in Francis Bacon and again and again in modern times, but neither is it entirely foreign to earlier philosophers who also, it turns out, had some regard for the living.

Descartes represents his life selectively, and it’s clear that he makes no attempt to tell the story of his life as a whole. As I explained in the introduction, and as Descartes, too, suggests, there is an important difference between an individual humanlife and the autobiography that makes this life its theme, a difference that is ultimately rooted in the nature of time. In the case of Descartes’ *Discourse*, however, the difference between life and autobiography is quite pronounced, which is no doubt one of the reasons why the autobiographical character of the work has been so little appreciated. Vico’s *Life*, as we shall see, is open to the same judgment, since Vico also focuses almost exclusively on his intellectual history, leaving the other sides of his life for the most part out of the story.
But in Vico’s case, this “for the most part” is important, because Vico does mention his parents, his own family, his friends, and so forth, as well as noting certain aspects of their character. Vico also attends to the stages of his intellectual development with much greater specificity than Descartes, who speaks in generalities about his education. Descartes’ broad approach, however, doesn’t prevent him from providing often poignant remarks about the strengths and weaknesses of the various studies he undertook. If nothing else, his account of his studies is all the more memorable for being simplified.

8. Descartes’ autobiographical presentation of his philosophy.— Although the whole Discourse is autobiographical, the most conventionally autobiographical passages are to be found in Part One, where Descartes focuses on his education, giving an account of his studies at school and then his travels in the world. His decisive turn to the study of himself comes at the end of this part, and the personal history that Descartes relates clearly serves to justify the inward turn.

Descartes becomes an autobiographer in order to show how his method and the principles of his philosophy developed out of his lived experiences. Like Socrates in the Phaedo, he explains that he arrived at his position first of all through recognizing the shortcomings of the various approaches to truth on offer from his childhood. Similar to Socrates’ philosophical practice based on his second sailing, Descartes’ philosophy initiates a radical new beginning that depends on a thoroughgoing repudiation of his predecessors’ approaches to wisdom. According to Descartes, the recognized course of study in the arts and sciences, as well as his own, extracurricular investigations into “the books that fell into my hands concerning the subjects that are considered the most abstruse and unusual,” led him to the belief that all of these studies were riddled with
Recalling the anguish he felt upon the completion of his formal education, Descartes writes, “I found myself beset by so many doubts and errors that I came to think I had gained nothing from my attempts to become educated but increasing recognition of my ignorance (sinon que j’avais découvert de plus en plus mon ignorance)” (CSM 113/G 4). Echoing Socrates, he says that he came to believe that “there was no knowledge in the world such as I had previously been led to hope for.” His subsequent account of his attempts to reach certainty involve his observations of the strengths and deficiencies of the various studies he undertook, both at school and by reading in “le grand livre du monde” (the great book of the world). By surveying what he takes to be the limitations of all extant forms of knowledge, including the practical knowledge of worldly people, Descartes aims to make his own philosophy more understandable and convincing.

Descartes speaks much of roads, ways, and paths in the Discourse, and although Williams is probably correct that the foundation is Descartes’ favorite metaphor, the road, way, or path comes in a close second. In the first paragraph of Part One, Descartes emphasizes how important it is for a person to follow le droit chemin (the right path), cautioning that it is better to go slowly (lentement) along the right path than it is to “hurry

---

189 Descartes attended the Jesuit Collège de la Flèche from 1607 to 1615, where the curriculum reflected that set out in the Jesuit Ratio Studiorum of 1599. (The full title is: Ratio atque Institutio Studiorum Societatis Iesu.) The school was fairly forward-looking. Bernard Williams (1978, p. 15) notes that a poem was recited there on June 6, 1611 celebrating Galileo’s discovery of the moons of Jupiter. See also Maclean 2006, pp. ix-x.

190 It is worth noting that, metaphorically, life and method bear a certain resemblance to one another. Both can be contemplated in terms of the trope of ways, paths, or roads. Even today we sometimes speak of life as a journey and of ways of life. The word “method,” of course, contains the Greek word ὅδος (hodos) for way, road, or path.
and stray from it" (CSM 111/G 2). The diversity of human opinions, furthermore, has little or nothing to do with the fact that some human beings possess reason to a greater degree than others; on the contrary, Descartes maintains that this diversity has only to do with the “different paths (diverses voies)” that we follow in our thoughts. In other words, we attend to different things and hence follow different trains of thought. According to Descartes the human world is “largely composed of two types of minds (le monde n’est quasi composé que de deux sortes d’esprits),” and for neither of these two is it advisable to leave “the common path (chemin commun)” (CSM 118/G 15). The difference between these two sorts is that the one, thinking himself more clever than he actually is, impetuously leaves the common path, whereas the other is content to go along it, following the customary authorities and opinions. Descartes claims he would have counted himself among those who follow the common path, except for the diversity of opinions he encountered. (This might raise the question why all those other contented ones are oblivious to this diversity, but Descartes simply assumes that most people follow the wonted ways contentedly.) Implicit in his discourse is the hope that his autobiography

---

191 Maclean (2006) notes that Descartes probably takes this trope from Seneca in *De Vita Beata*. The opening of Seneca’s text reads: “To live happily, my brother Gallio, is the desire of all men, but their minds are blinded to a clear vision of just what it is that makes life happy; and so far from its being easy to attain the happy life, *the more eagerly a man strives to reach it, the farther he recedes from it if he has made a mistake in the road* (si via lapsus est); for when it leads in the opposite direction, his very speed will increase the distance that separates him” (John W. Basore translation, Loeb Classical Library, 1932), pp. 98-99, my emphasis. Later, Descartes recommended Seneca’s text to Elizabeth of Bohemia. Maclean’s observation provides further confirmation of the influence of Stoic thought on Descartes, as well as evidence of Descartes’ classical education. See AT 5. 89-92 (letter of November 20, 1647).

192 Yet in the sphere of morals or ethics, he is mostly content to go along the common route. As Collingwood observes, “…in matters of morality (Descartes’) rule was to accept the laws and institutions of the country in which he lived, and to govern his conduct according to the best opinions which he found commonly received around him: thus admitting that the individual could not construct these things for himself a priori but must recognize them as historical facts pertaining to the society in which he lives.” See Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, p. 66.
will prove harmless to those who go along the common path and a help to those who, for whatever reason, stray from it.

Earlier, in Part One, as he turns to consider himself, Descartes continues with the metaphor of the path:

I consider myself very fortunate (beaucoup d’heure) to have happened upon certain paths (certains chemins) in my youth which led me to considerations and maxims from which I formed a method (j’ai formé une méthode) whereby, it seems to me, I can increase my knowledge (ma connaissance) gradually and raise it little by little to the highest point allowed by the mediocrity of my mind (la médiocrité de mon esprit) and the short duration of my life (ma vie) (CSM 112/G 3).

Descartes expresses the idea that the paths he has traveled in his life go some way toward explaining his philosophical practice, and it follows that his autobiography should make a significant contribution to our understanding of why he embraces the philosophy he has come to hold. The history of the vicissitudes of his life prior to his discovery of the method will in some way justify Descartes’ new way of life guided by it. Now all philosophical autobiographies demonstrate that the order of philosophy differs from the order of life, and an important implication of this is that the two orders have different starting points in time. For Descartes, life according to the method comes not at the beginning of life but in media vita, and as the result of a process.

Descartes recognizes that the divergence between the two orders has important consequences for our understanding of what it is to be human, and above all that it is necessary for us to become what we are. In an interesting turn in the text, he expresses regret about the limitations imposed on human beings by the natural order of life, wishing that we had been fully rational from birth and had never been subjected to our own appetites or to the guidance of any authority:
We were all children before being men and had to be governed for some time by our appetites and our teachers (par nos appétits et nos précepteurs), which were often opposed to each other and neither of which, perhaps, always gave us the best advice; hence I thought it virtually impossible that our judgments should be as unclouded and firm as they would have been if we had had the full use of our reason from the moment of our birth (si nous avions eu l’usage entier de notre raison dès le point de notre naissance), and if we had always been guided by it alone (CSM 117/G 13).

However desirous of the impossible, this passage nonetheless suggests an entire philosophy of education and mind. It also provides a stark contrast with Vico’s philosophy of mind and education, as these appear in the Life and elsewhere. Vico insists that children are capable of obtaining some of the principal building blocks of human wisdom from an early age, but Descartes confesses, wittingly or not, to a certain extremism of reason here. Although the reasons for Descartes’ dislike of the limitations of childhood are understandable, he goes very far toward relegating the entire period prior to the age of reason to the status of an unfortunate gap. For Descartes, our adult judgment is, to quote Gaukroger (1995, p. 106, slightly altered), necessarily clouded by the limitations of our childhood and youth, and it is in order “to circumvent this problem,” as Gaukroger says, “that we must get rid of our opinions and start again from foundations.”

The first stage on the way to Descartes’ formation of the method is by happenstance: he is fortunate to have found himself on certain paths. In other words, he was born at a certain time and place, into a certain family, and so forth. Descartes thus recognizes that accident, fate, or providence play an important role in the lives of particular persons, especially at the beginning of life, which idea is captured very
memorably in Heidegger’s concept of Geworfenheit (thrownness). Descartes’ early life led him to the formation of a method that will allow him to increase his knowledge, and if readers can be brought to accept this method, they will share in the benefits of Descartes’ good fortune. They will get on “the right path” quickly and make more progress than Descartes who had to wrestle with alternatives before developing his own philosophy. Unlike some, of course, Descartes seems to have discovered his method at a fairly young age, though he claims he waited nine years before applying it to questions in metaphysics at least (CSM 125-126).

Starting from these lucky beginnings, the paths Descartes followed led him to “considerations and maxims” from which he was able to form his method (CSM 112/G 3). This method applies to his future life in that it will allow him to increase his knowledge “to the highest point” possible given the limitations of his own abilities and his mortality. Descartes’ emphasis on the shortness of life is striking; he suggests the Hippocratic maxim: art takes a long time, and life is short. Yet Descartes also recognizes that our projects may continue after we are gone. It emerges clearly that Descartes hopes for and anticipates the continued application of his method after his death.

At the same time, he believes he is already in possession of knowledge about the most important things, and in an amazingly bold passage from Part Five he claims that:

\[193\] Although I cannot go into this topic here, the role of chance, fate, or providence in humanlife to which Descartes alludes constitutes a difficult problem for philosophy, for example, in political philosophy and ethics where the concept of “moral luck” continues to be debated. It is clear to me, at any rate, that one can have neither an adequate political philosophy nor a comprehensive science of human nature without taking this factor into account, especially insofar as it relates to the question of human freedom. Anne Hartle (1986, p. 137) seems to think that “(Descartes’) method…is due to what can only be understood as a series of accidents,” and certainly Descartes himself gives us reason to interpret him in this way.
I have found a way to satisfy myself within a short time about all the principal difficulties usually discussed in philosophy. What is more, I have noticed certain laws which God has so established in nature, and of which he has implanted such notions in our minds (en nos âmes), that after adequate reflection we cannot doubt that they are exactly observed in everything which exists or occurs in the world (en tout ce qui est ou qui se fait dans le monde) (CSM 131/G 41).

Descartes believes that he has already discovered an absolutely certain metaphysics and has therefore resolved all the main puzzles within philosophy. Thus progress using the method after his death will ostensibly confront fewer obstacles than those Descartes himself has already surmounted by the time of writing the Discourse. If his philosophy is final, then future generations can concentrate on technical mastery of nature without worrying about philosophical principles.

The primary factor in Descartes’ account of his discovery of a new philosophy is, as he says, his experience of disagreements. As the nineteenth-century historian Henry Hallam wrote apropos Descartes, “the discrepancy of opinions among the generality of mankind…rendered it probable (to him) that no one had yet found out the road to real science.” Descartes explains that his philosophy arose in response to his experience of disagreements among the learned as well as worldly persons. The disagreements among different persons about truth is a powerful motive that also plays a large part in Plato’s Socratic philosophy, in Augustine’s Confessions, and in philosophy in general. As Plato’s Socrates often remarks, disagreement suggests that the truth about a given topic is not known. For his part, Descartes contends that “(philosophy) has been cultivated for many centuries by the most excellent minds and yet there is still no point in it which is

---

195 See especially Alcibiades I 110d-111d.
not disputed and hence doubtful” (CSM 115/G 8). Unlike the Academic skeptics of antiquity, however, and like Socrates, Augustine, and others, Descartes does not rest content with the belief that the diversity of opinions shows the impossibility of ever obtaining knowledge of the truth.

Descartes’ story of his life begins with the statement that, since childhood, he had been “nourished upon letters (lettres).” He says that, “because I was persuaded that by their means one could acquire a clear and certain knowledge of all that is useful in life, I was extremely eager to learn them” (CSM 113-14/EG 4). By “letters” (lettres) Descartes means the study of languages, primarily Latin, but also “great books” and the literature of the learned disciplines in general. He proceeds to discuss what he learned of the various fields that he studied through the course of his education. He explicitly mentions fables, history, rhetoric, poetry, mathematics, morals, theology, philosophy, law, and medicine; and he alludes to “superstitious” disciplines cultivated outside of school, namely, the “false sciences” of astrology and alchemy (CSM 115/AT 6: 9). For various reasons, however, Descartes found all of these studies altogether disappointing, and as we saw, Descartes says that upon completing his formal education he found himself plagued by errors, doubts, and ignorance. This outcome was especially frustrating for him, he says, because he had reasons to expect a much happier result, having studied at “one of the most famous schools in Europe,” at which he proved himself no less competent a

---

196 This idea is already prominent in the Rules for the Direction of the Mind. See, for example, Rules Two and Three in CSM, pp. 11 and 13, respectively.
197 It is worth noting that, unlike today in the English-speaking world, the study of languages was in Descartes’ time a necessary propaedeutic to other, higher studies, especially but not only “for the understanding of the works of the ancients.” Descartes himself became an accomplished Latinist, as many of his works and letters attest.
198 It is important to recognize the strong currency that both astrology and alchemy yet had in the early seventeenth century. One might think of Tycho Brahe’s (1546-1601) “consuming obsession with astrology” in this connection (Kearney 1971, p. 130).
pupil than his peers. There, at la Flèche, he could reasonably expect to find “learned men if they existed anywhere on earth,” but the implication is that he did not. Nor does he believe that the fault was on his side, since, comparing himself with his fellow students, he claims he had no reason to think that he was in any way inferior to them. Far from it. For not only did Descartes learn everything the others did, but he even went outside the curriculum to study “subjects that are considered most abstruse and unusual.” He says, moreover, that he realized how his masters judged him, and he says, “I saw that they did not regard me as inferior to my fellow students, even though several among them were already destined to take the place of our teachers.” He remarks, finally, that he found his sad state of mind at that time especially perplexing in light of the surfeit of “good minds” in his age. For all these reasons, his dissatisfaction with the progress of his education appeared painfully unaccountable and led him to the conclusion that “there was no teaching (doctrine) in the world such as I had previously been led to hope for” (CSM 113/G 5, translation altered by me, reading “teaching” for “doctrine”).

Descartes further explains the doubts and errors that plagued him by cataloging the strengths and deficiencies of each of the arts and sciences listed above. Having already considered Descartes’ account of the strengths and weaknesses of fables and histories, it will be useful to examine his judgments about some of the other subjects of study that he mentions. Although he claims to admire poetry and rhetoric, Descartes identifies them as natural gifts and not the products of study. In fact he actually dismisses rhetoric as superfluous, subordinating it entirely to reason, since for him the most reasonable discourses are also the most persuasive. Descartes regards theology as similar to poetry, as based on special gifts and concerned with revealed truths “beyond our
understanding (*au-dessus de notre intelligence*) (CSM 114/7-8). Perhaps unsurprisingly, he reserves his most laudatory remarks for mathematics, and his most damning ones for philosophy and the philosophical writers on morality. Later, in Part Two, Descartes explicitly singles out algebra, geometry, and logic as subjects that contributed something to his method, but even here he goes on to explain how he had to simplify and recombine certain principles and elements from these studies in order to arrive at his method.

His remarks about philosophy show how powerfully the experience of disagreement among philosophers affected Descartes’ intellectual development:

> Seeing that (philosophy) has been cultivated for many centuries by the most excellent minds and yet there is still no point in it which is not disputed and hence doubtful, I was not so presumptuous as to hope to achieve any more in it than others had done. And, considering how many diverse opinions learned men may maintain on a single question—even though it is impossible for more than one to be true—I held as almost (*presque*)[^1] false everything that was merely probable (CSM 114-15/EG 8).

According to Descartes, whenever there is pronounced disagreement among alternatives, all beliefs look like mere opinions and hence doubtful. Philosophy thus appeared to him as a mere “means of speaking plausibly about any subject,” good only for “winning the admiration of the less learned.” As opposed to the merely probable conjectures of the philosophers of his time, Descartes seeks solid knowledge; “my whole aim,” he says, “was to reach certainty – to cast aside the loose earth and sand so as to come upon rock or clay” (CSM 125). In fact Descartes opposition to traditional philosophy is tinged with invective, as can be clearly observed in the antagonism to his own principles that he imagines will come from that quarter:

[^1]: I have substituted “almost” for CSM’s translation of *presque* as “well-nigh.” I’d say that “nigh” is nowhere near to “near” for most modern ears.
These philosophers, I may say, have an interest in my refraining from publishing the principles of the philosophy I use (les principes de la philosophie dont je me sers). For my principles are so very simple and evident that in publishing them I should, as it were, be opening windows and admitting daylight into that cellar where they have gone down to fight. But even the best minds have no reason to wish to know my principles. For if they want to be able to speak about everything and acquire the reputation of being learned, they will achieve this more readily by resting content with plausibility (la vraisemblance), which can be found without difficulty in all kinds of subjects, than by seeking the truth (la vérité) (CSM 147/G 71).

In fine, the best he can say for his formal education is that “it is good to have examined all these subjects, even those full of superstition and falsehood, in order to know their true value and guard against being deceived by them” (CSM 113/EG 5). In other words, Descartes’ estimation of the worth of his education is primarily negative.

Now Descartes goes on to describe how he discovered even more discrepancies of opinion when he left his formal education behind and took up his studies in what he calls “le grand livre du monde” (i.e., the great book of the world) (CSM 115/EG 9). Because of the uncertainty he found in the arts and sciences, Descartes claims that as soon as he was old enough, he left the learned world behind in order to get what we call real world experience (CSM 115/EG 9). He explains how he pursued his search for knowledge by traveling and associating with all kinds of people, and he admits that he expected worldly people to have better judgment than he had found among the scholars he encountered:

...visiting courts and armies, mixing with people of diverse temperaments and ranks, gathering various experiences (experiences), testing myself in the situations fortune offered me, and at all times reflecting upon whatever came my way so as to derive some profit from it. For it seemed to me that much more truth could be found in the reasonings (raisonnements) which a man makes concerning matters that concern him than in those which some scholar makes in his study about speculative matters. For the consequences of the former will soon punish the man if he judges wrongly, whereas the latter have no practical consequences and no
importance for the scholar except that perhaps the further they are from common sense (sens commun) the more pride he will take in them, since he will have had to use so much more skill and ingenuity in trying to render them plausible. And it was always my most earnest desire to learn to distinguish the true from the false in order to see clearly into my own actions and proceed with confidence in this life (marcher avec assurance en cette vie) (CSM 115/G 9-10).

This passage illustrates the distinction between theory and practice that Descartes reiterates at several junctures throughout the Discourse and in his other writings. Drawing a stark contrast between scholars and worldly persons, he argues that the latter seem to have more at stake in making judgments, since their judgments actually affect their lives and fortunes. Alas, to his dismay he discovered that normal people turn out to be no better than scholars where knowledge is concerned. Regarding “the customs of other men” he noticed on his travels, Descartes says, “I observed in them almost as much diversity as I had found previously among the opinions of the philosophers” (CSM 115/EG 10). Descartes shows once again how finding diversity of opinions and disagreements among persons motivated him to seek certain truth elsewhere. As Žižek has suggested, it is also possible to describe “the grounding experience of (Descartes’) position of universal doubt” as a “multicultural” experience, and it’s true that Descartes goes on to discuss the diversity of beliefs and customs and how these “persuade us” rather than giving us “certain knowledge” (CSM 119).

It wasn’t only this multicultural experience that turned Descartes in a new direction, however, and his experiences of disagreements within philosophy itself as well as among those he observed in everyday life were equally decisive.

---

200 Žižek, The Parallax View (MIT, 2006), p. 8. Žižek puts “multicultural” in quotes, probably because this word, like so many others today (such as “critical,” “rigorous,” and so forth in the university), tend to be used unthinkingly (which is also to say, uncritically). One should expose such platitudes, as Socrates, for example, did, in order to find the kernel of truth they contain.
To adopt Žižek’s way of speaking about this, it does seem that Descartes proved unable, or unwilling, to identify with any of the schools of thought or socio-cultural identities on offer in his milieu, kind of like someone today who for whatever reason cannot identify himself as a phenomenologist, an analytic philosopher, a Catholic, a nationalist, or whatever. Yet, whereas Aristotle and others might say that each of these groups grasps a part of the truth, Descartes’ tends to take the disagreements between them as proof that they are all wrong. At the same time, Descartes remained a devoted Catholic throughout his life, at least so as far as we can tell from his writings, and in the Discourse itself he avows that the “truths of the faith…have always been foremost among my beliefs” (CSM 125).

Descartes concludes Part One by describing the major turning point (περιπέτεια) in his intellectual development. His education and travels, he claims, led him to his resolve “to undertake studies within myself too and to use all the powers of my mind in choosing the paths (le chemins) I should follow” (CSM 116/EG 10). This resolution leads him by another path to the discovery of his method and the first principles of his philosophy. The inward turn is decisive for Descartes’ discovery.

At the beginning of Part Two, Descartes places himself in Germany, where he was serving in the army of Maximilian of Bavaria around the beginning of the Thirty Years War. The onset of winter detained him there, he explains, and he found himself alone in quarters without “conversation to divert me and fortunately having no cares or passions to trouble me” (CSM 116).201 In the famous stove-heated room, Descartes says

---

201 There is probably a difference between what Descartes recounts in the Discourse and what actually happened in the famous stove-heated room. This was the occasion of the notorious three dreams, which Descartes mentions elsewhere though not in the Discourse. For an account of the dreams and this entire episode in Descartes’ life, see Gaukroger pp. 105-111. Gaukroger notes
he took the freedom of the occasion to converse with himself about his own thoughts. The chain of thoughts that Descartes then proceeds to recount in Parts Two and Three stems directly from his decision to turn inward in the hope that there, if anywhere, he might find the truth that had eluded him in his studies at school and in the book of the world. The first consideration that he makes is “that there is not usually so much perfection in works composed of several parts and produced by various different craftsmen as in the works of one man (un seul)” (CSM 116/G 11). He submits that the truth of this consideration is borne out by the better ordering and greater perfection of those buildings, cities, and laws that have been made by one person alone: a single architect, city planner, or “wise law-giver.” The solitary craftsperson makes a more perfect product than those that are put together by many people. Likewise, “the constitution of the true religion, whose articles have been made by God alone…(is) incomparably better ordered than all the others” (CSM 117). From this example, Descartes draws an analogy to the world of learning, arguing that the “sciences contained in books…are compounded and amassed little by little from the opinions of many different persons,” and so they do not approach truth so nearly as “the simple reasoning which a man of good sense (un homme de bon sens) naturally makes concerning whatever he comes across” (CSM 117/EG 12-13).

Although few of Descartes’ contemporaries showed much interest in the autobiographical dimension of the Discourse, I have focused on this dimension, in order to show how it confirms the theses of the present study. By attending to the autobiographical form of the Discourse, it has also been possible to elaborate a new way that Freud, asked to interpret the three dreams, parried the request and said little. The account of the three dreams comes from Baillet’s Vie de Monsieur Descartes (1691), reprinted in AT 10.
of reading Descartes, as a philosopher who grounds his philosophy, however ambiguously, in humanlife. Because he articulates his philosophy, and the coming-to-be of this philosophy, autobiographically, Descartes offers us a way of reading his famous first principle as less abstract and impersonal. The self’s certainty of its own being turns out to have a history. Thus Descartes’ first principle, and the subsequent principles based upon it, develop out of a humanlife and lifeworld, and he himself chooses to express them in terms of a life-story. These principles are metaphysical (or, if one prefers, ontological), and as such they are meant to be applicable not only for Descartes but for beings as a whole. This insight into being is a human insight, an insight for those Descartes famously calls thinking things. Descartes believes that his principles lead to a new kind of philosophy and hence a new way for human beings to view the world. Here, as elsewhere, the conversion described in philosophical autobiography is to principles that lead to a new kind of activity based on these same principles.

Descartes depreciates almost the entirety of the established curriculum in Part One, but there is a sense in which the humanities (Geisteswissenschaften, human sciences) fare worst of all. For, despite the criticisms of traditional philosophy and morality with which he begins, Descartes ultimately restores these disciplines by putting them on a new basis. Granted he presents his moral teaching as provisional, but some have argued that this “provisional morality” is in fact Descartes’ ultimate ethical teaching, and in any case Descartes certainly believes that he has found suitable ethical maxims that will take him safely through his life, that is, whether or not he ever discovers “the highest and most perfect moral system” that he mentions in his letter to the Abbé
Picot (CSM 186/AT vol. 9, p. 14 of the Principes). Where philosophy is concerned, Descartes identifies philosophy with metaphysics and believes his first principle and the further principles he derives from it establish philosophy on a hitherto unprecedented basis characterized above all by certainty. Having established metaphysics, Descartes goes on to outline his philosophy of the physical world, and he concludes by contemplating the redemption and improvement of medicine, which he understands as a unique department of physics wherein greater knowledge promises to make the greatest contributions to human happiness. Thus Descartes restores philosophy, morals, and medicine, or perhaps it is better to say that, in his view, he completes metaphysics and morals while also initiating a program whereby humanity can incrementally increase its knowledge of, and power over, the natural world. In Descartes’ philosophy, however, there is no such redemption for history, rhetoric, poetry, jurisprudence, and so on. They are left behind, finding no clear place in the Cartesian world. Certainly theology is recovered to the extent that Descartes develops proofs for the existence of god both here in Part Three and in the Meditations, and perhaps fables and histories have some role in the Cartesian universe provided they are read with discretion. As Descartes’ develops his argument, however, the reader gradually comes to see that the paradigm shift in philosophy he undertakes means to reorient philosophy to concern with the natural world, understood as a mechanical and material order that is susceptible of explanation and manipulation through the combination of mathematical and experimental methods.

---

202 See note 172 above for those arguing that the provisional morality of Part Three is actually Descartes’ fully realized ethical position.

203 Paul J. Olscamp is no doubt correct about the importance of experimentation for Descartes and also in his claim that this dimension of Descartes’ philosophical practice has been vastly underrated. See his Introduction to his translation of the Discourse, Optics, Geometry, and Meteorology (Hackett, 2001).
subject matter of the *Essays*, to which the *Discourse* serves as a preface, demonstrates this orientation quite perspicuously, but it is already evident in Parts Five and Six of the *Discourse* itself. Philosophy is to be primarily philosophy of nature.

9. *The anti-Cartesian manifesto.*— Descartes was not the only important philosopher in the early modern period to write an autobiography. Less than a century later (and about forty years prior to Rousseau’s writing of the *Confessions*), Giambattista Vico wrote an autobiography in which he explicitly repudiated the model of philosophical autobiography found in Descartes’ *Discourse*. In his *Vita di Giambattista Vico scritta da se medesimo*, published in 1728, Vico asserts that, “We shall not here feign what René Descartes craftily feigned as to the method of his studies simply in order to exalt his own philosophy and mathematics and degrade all the other studies included in divine and human erudition (*la divina ed umana erudizione*)” (113/N5). As Donald Phillip Verene notes, “the only model that Vico explicitly claims to have before him in writing his life is Descartes’ *Discourse*, and he regards this not as an example to be followed but as a text to write against.”204 The contrast with Descartes is pronounced and continuous throughout the *Life*. Vico sees how Descartes uses autobiography to discredit various arts and sciences that Vico himself considers indispensible sources of human wisdom, and in the *Life*, Vico attempts to defend what he calls “divine and human” erudition against Descartes’ attempted reduction of the legitimate domain of philosophy to mathematics and *his* philosophy alone (*solamente*).

Although Descartes’ philosophy elicited a number of powerful criticisms during his lifetime, as well as in the century following his death in 1650, there is a definite sense

---

in which Vico’s critique of Descartes (and Cartesianism) is the most thoroughgoing and poignant of all. While other critics conceded the importance of the naturalistic and epistemological concerns that Descartes emphasized and also generally accepted Descartes’ characterization of the subject matter of metaphysics, Vico argued that Descartes’ philosophy fails to take the most important philosophical subject matter into account. Vico saw, correctly, that the Cartesian emphasis on mathematics and physics comes at the expense of the human sciences, especially history and jurisprudence, and on Vico’s view of things this entire emphasis is grossly misguided because it is based on a false apprehension of what humans can and cannot know. According to Vico, Descartes fails to recognize that the only knowledge available to us is the knowledge of ourselves as historical beings, as beings that literally make history. With its emphasis on nature, Descartes’ philosophy is too focused on the external world that according to Vico we can never truly know.

But although the main point of his disagreement with Descartes concerns the proper subject matter of philosophy, whether history or nature, Vico also advances his criticism of Descartes on a number of different fronts. He rejects, for instance, Descartes’ conception of human cognitive powers and their relation to one another, contending that Descartes’ method relies exclusively on deductive reasoning from clear and distinct propositions while neglecting other, for Vico equally important, cognitive powers. Descartes’ faulty conception of the human mind results, furthermore, in a perverse and

---

205 For a useful summary of the major lines of criticism pertaining to Descartes’ philosophy up to Vico’s time, see L. M. Palmer, Introduction to her translation of *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians* (Cornell, 1988), especially pp. 4-7. This is a translation of Vico’s important work, *De Antiquissima Italorum Sapientia*, originally published in 1710. With respect to Descartes’ metaphysics, meanwhile, some of the earliest and also central lines of criticism are to be found, of course, in the Objections appended to the *Meditations on First Philosophy*. 

197
debased philosophy of education, which to Vico’s dismay gained great currency in Naples during his lifetime. In opposition to Descartes’ repudiation of the traditional fields of study, Vico holds up Plato as a model of his own educational ideal, since Plato “was the equivalent of an entire university of studies of our day, all harmonized in one system” (FB 199). He believes that Cartesian education, by contrast, promotes an unnaturally restricted human intellect, advancing the studies of math and physics at the expense of other essential studies and cultivating reason at the expense of cognitive powers such as memory, imagination, and intellectual perception. For Vico, in fact, Cartesian reason is really a denatured reason, since Vico believes that reason can only reach its full potential through the cooperation of other cognitive powers, particularly memory, imagination, and ingegno, which I translate as intellectual perception. In contrast to Descartes who depreciates the studies of language, history, eloquence, law, and poetry, Vico formulates a conception of these studies that regards them as indispensable sources of knowledge for human beings.

Finally, Vico challenges the coherence of the entire Cartesian philosophical edifice, raising what remains today a perplexing question about Descartes’ dualism, especially as this pertains to the question of the relationship between Descartes’ metaphysics and physics. “In respect of the unity of its parts,” Vico says, “the philosophy of Descartes is not at all a consistent system” (FB 130/N 23).

Vico thus opposes Descartes on many fronts: on the question of the proper subject matter of philosophy; on the nature of human cognitive powers and the view of education that stems from this; and on the coherence of his metaphysical and physical doctrines. He

---

206 In an endnote, Fisch remarks on the difficulty of translating ingegno (Latin, ingenium). See endnote 141 to p. 123 of Fisch and Bergin’s translation. (The endnote itself appears on p. 216.) Vico seems to have in mind something like νοῦς (nous) in Aristotle’s sense of the term.
even takes exception to Descartes’ ethical doctrine, claiming that Descartes’ metaphysics do not “yield any moral philosophy suited to the Christian religion” (FB 130/N N 23). For all these reasons, Giorgio de Santillana’s comment appears apt that “Vico is the anti-Cartesian manifesto.”

Because of their fundamental disagreement about the very subject matter of philosophy, the comparison of Vico and Descartes is not without its difficulties, and on some level the two philosophies have so little in common that one may reasonably wonder how they can both be entitled to the name of philosophy. This disparity of interests is reflected in their respective autobiographies, so that, despite their similar form, one cannot fail to be struck by their great difference with respect to content. Formally, both are concerned to present philosophical principles in terms of a life-story, but the actual principles involved differ greatly, as does their conception of philosophical method. Yet despite the great differences between the two philosophies, comparisons between the two seem inevitable, at least from Vico’s point of view. Even a casual glance at the Vico scholarship reveals that comparisons between Vico and Descartes are a commonplace of the field, and those who write and think about Vico regularly attempt to define Vico’s thought against that of Descartes. In this, the scholars follow Vico’s lead, for Vico himself repeatedly invites the contrast with Descartes, especially in his Life. At the same time, the disagreement between Vico and Descartes has paradigmatic value, exemplifying as it does an ongoing inquiry into the nature of philosophy itself.

10. The central topic of Vico’s Life.— It is important, in light of the foregoing remarks, not to lose sight of the fact that Vico’s critique of Descartes and Cartesianism is not the

---

primary objective of his *Life*. Descartes serves as a useful foil for Vico, and certainly Vico’s disagreement with Descartes is serious and significant. Yet Vico’s main concern in the *Life* is decidedly positive, his primary goal being to account for the principles of his own philosophy. Hence the *Life* deals essentially with the stages Vico traversed in order to create the new science of history, which has long been recognized as his great contribution to the progress of ideas in modern times. Vico describes this new science as “a rational civil theology of divine providence,” “a history of human ideas,” and a “philosophy of authority” (NS sections 342, 347, and 350). His *Life* is primarily devoted to showing how the central ideas of this new science emerged in the course of his life and as a result of his studies and interactions with other intellectuals.

Thus Vico’s *Life* has many claims on our attention and not only because of the informative comparison with the *Discourse*. Although Vico is (unjustly) neglected by the majority of contemporary philosophers, especially in the English-speaking world, his importance has been recognized by some of the foremost scholars of the past two centuries. A comprehensive study of philosophical autobiography could hardly ignore Vico’s *Life*. Vico is a significant philosopher in his own right, and his *Life* is an exemplary instance of philosophical autobiography. His importance as a thinker rests

---

208 Both R. G. Collingwood and Isaiah Berlin acknowledge Vico’s importance for the philosophy of history and political thought in general. Leon Pompa and Verene are perhaps the preeminent Vico experts working in the English-speaking world today. Tom Rockmore is a proponent of Vico studies. The reception history of Vico is interesting. He was an important author for the great French historian Jules Michelet, who discovered Vico sometime in the early 1820s. Vico has also figured somewhat prominently in post-Heideggerian German thought. Gadamer discusses Vico’s ideas in *Truth and Method*, and Karl Löwith devotes a chapter to Vico in his *Meaning in History*. Leo Strauss, like Gadamer and Löwith a bridge between German and 20th-century American thought, indicates the importance of Vico in the Preface to the Seventh Impression of *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, 1971).

primarily on his contributions to the philosophy of history, especially as Vico develops this topic in the third (and final) *New Science* of 1744, the same year that he died. One of the main differences between modern and premodern philosophy is the peculiar historical sense shared by many modern philosophers, and Vico is generally considered to be the founder of the modern philosophy of history.

It is necessary to note that Vico scholars have tended to make rather exaggerated claims for the importance of Vico’s *Life* as an exemplary instance of philosophical autobiography. In his excellent study, Verene advances two propositions that epitomize the kind of exaggeration I have in mind. I argue that one should reject both of these claims for reasons that should be apparent in light of the preceding studies. Verene’s first contention is that “Vico offers the first philosophical autobiography done in modern terms” (p. 73). When one looks more closely to determine what this means, it becomes apparent that Verene is reaffirming Fisch’s claim that Vico is the first philosopher to apply the so-called “genetic method” in the composition of an autobiography (FB, Preface, p. v). For example, he argues that “In Vico’s view to understand something is to discover its origin and to recreate its genesis, bringing forth the causes of its development. Only when we can remake the thing in thought in accordance with how it was itself made can we have a true doctrine of it” (Verene 71). Now, however one defines modernity or the genetic method, it should be clear that, from the point of view of my own argument, Vico’s *Life* hardly constitutes a significant departure from the paradigm of philosophical autobiography laid down by Plato and further developed by

---

Verene’s book is indispensable reading not only for the student of Vico’s *Life*, but also for those who are interested in philosophical autobiography in general, both as an idea and a historical phenomenon. Based upon a thorough survey of the literature, I can say that Verene’s book is one of the best short introductions to philosophical autobiography as a subject matter. On a personal note, I wish I had read it much earlier in the course of researching the present work.
Augustine. Remarkably Verene himself, in comparing Vico’s *Life* and Augustine’s *Confessions*, doesn’t indicate any significant difference between the two works and certainly not at the formal level. He doesn’t do this, moreover, because no one can, because the texts themselves forbid such a move, outside of grossly misrepresenting the character of these works. On the contrary and somewhat at odds with his own position, Verene’s comparison of the two works tends to highlight their similarities as opposed to their differences. At the very least more work needs to be done to make the case that Vico’s *Life* should be considered specifically “modern” in contradistinction to earlier philosophical autobiographies, but I doubt that such a case can be convincingly made.  

For one thing, we would have to know what modernity is, which is no small task; for another, even assuming we knew that, it would not be an easy matter to isolate features of Vico’s *Life* that could be characterized as specifically modern. Vico’s *Life* serves the same purpose as Descartes’ *Discourse*, Augustine’s *Confessions*, and Plato’s autobiographical writings, and these works are formally identical, as $x = 2y$ is the same whatever values one gives to $y$ and $x$.

Verene’s second claim is that Vico’s text “offers, implicitly, the first conception of autobiography as a philosophical idea” (p. 73). But Vico is hardly the first to make autobiography thematic, and both Augustine’s *Confessions* and Descartes’ *Discourse* have better claims to developing autobiography as a philosophical idea (for Vico’s word on autobiography, see FB 182 and below). On the other hand, none of these works makes autobiography, much less philosophical autobiography, a subject of study in itself. On the contrary, we are almost justified in maintaining that this study is a prerogative of twenty-

---

211 For Verene’s comparative discussion of Augustine and Vico, see pp. 92-107.
first century philosophy. As Verene himself recognizes, the philosophical idea of autobiography was first suggested, though hardly worked out, by Wilhelm Dilthey. Dilthey’s discussion is unique as one of the first philosophical discussions of autobiography outside of an actual autobiographical context. As we have seen, Dilthey and his student (and son-in-law) Georg Misch took some of the first tentative steps in the direction of recognizing autobiography as a subject matter for serious study. It’s really only in the twentieth century that autobiography emerges as a theoretical or philosophical idea.

Yet, although Vico’s *Life* shares the basic form of other philosophical autobiographies, it has its uniqueness and provides particularly strong points of contrast with Descartes’ *Discourse*. First of all, as a counterpoint to the highly general character of Descartes’ discussion of his education, Vico provides a very specific and concrete account of his own intellectual development, citing particular teachers and others who influenced him, as well as particular books that he studied. Second, whereas Descartes’ judgment about his education is fundamentally negative and serves to justify a radical new beginning, Vico’s approach is more cumulative or synthetic. Although like Descartes he wants to present new principles, Vico shows how he gradually put the principles of the new science together from different ideas and studies that he undertook at various stages of his life. He writes, “the constant reading of orators, historians, and poets his intellect took increasing delight in observing between the remotest matters ties that bound them together in some common relation” (*FB* 123). Finally, Vico’s use of the third, as opposed to the first, person in writing his autobiography is unique in the history of philosophical autobiography. Whereas other philosophical autobiographies bring
subjectivity to the foreground, Vico’s practice of referring to himself throughout the work in the third-person allows him to assume a more objective attitude toward his own life.

Thus Vico’s account of his education is more specific, more synthetic, and more concerned to assume an attitude of objectivity than the account we find in Descartes’ *Discourse*.

11. *The historical origin of Vico’s Life.*— The story of how Vico’s *Life* came into being sheds some light on the emergence of an autobiographical consciousness in western Europe. The initial impetus to the project seems to have come in a roundabout way from Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716), who, in the aforementioned 1714 letter to Louis Bourguet (1678-1742), advanced the idea of encouraging philosophical innovators to write histories of their discoveries. His complaints about Descartes’ *Discourse*, alluded to above, are also of some interest:

Descartes would have had us believe that he had scarcely read anything. That was a bit too much. Yet it is good to study the discoveries of others in a way that discloses to us the source of the inventions and renders them in a sort our own. *And I wish that authors would give us the history of their discoveries and the steps by which they have arrived at them.* When they neglect to do so, we must try to divine these steps, in order to profit the more from their works.\(^{212}\)

Leibniz’s idea seems to be that by following the steps an author has made on the way to her discoveries, we can appreciate these discoveries in a more profound way and, in a sense, make them our own. This is a powerful claim for the educational value of philosophical and, we might add, scientific autobiographies, and as such it is in harmony with one of the central ideas of the present work, which is that one big reason philosophers write autobiographies is to educate others, especially prospective

---

\(^{212}\) Quoted by Fisch (1944) in his Introduction, p. 5, my emphasis.
philosophers. Like Leibniz, the philosophical autobiographer believes that autobiography can make an important contribution to philosophical education.

Now Bourguet apparently communicated Leibniz’s idea to a number of Italian scholars, including Count Gian Artico di Porcia, under whose auspices a proposal for a volume of lives of Italian scholars was worked out and sent forth to various scholars, including Vico, around 1721. Vico was somewhat reluctant to undertake the proposed project but relented upon repeated appeals from Porcia. Also, as Fisch notes, Vico’s well-attested devotion to pedagogy must have provided him with a strong incentive to compose his *Life* (FB 12). The original plan to produce a volume of lives was never realized, however, and in 1728 Vico’s *Life* was published on its own, in a Venetian academic journal, in the hope that it would serve as a paradigm and encourage others to write similar works. As Verene describes the thing, the “volume of lives did not materialize, and Vico’s manuscript instead appeared in the first issue of a new journal, among articles on the birth of vipers and a history of the city of Prato” (p. vii). This incident is emblematic of Vico’s strange career, which as many scholars have remarked was that of a genius unrecognized in his lifetime. As the term had not yet been coined, Vico did not call his work “Autobiography,” and it is worth noting that reference to the book by this title is a misleading scholarly convention that began in Italy and has been carried over into English-language Vico studies. As noted above, Vico himself called his work *Vita di Giambattista Vico scritta da se medesimo*, that is, the *Life of Giambattista Vico Written by Himself* (or even: “by himself, the very same”). Now, although it is not the acme of wisdom, it is good to call

---

213 For a more detailed historical account of the inception and publication of Vico’s *Autobiography*, see Verene pp. 61-66. See also Fisch’s Introduction to FB, pp. 1-19.

214 See, for example, Berlin (1976), p. 3.
things by their right names, and so in the present chapter, I jettison (as scholars should) the usual practice and refer to Vico’s work by its actual title. This title is notable and impressive, since Vico basically articulated the definition of autobiography prior to the coming-to-be of the name. The “Life of Giambattista Vico Written by Himself” combines the ideas of self, life, and writing that define autobiography and constitute, etymologically, the name.

12. Vico’s poetics of autobiography as a philosophical genre.— The specificity of Vico’s account of his education in the Life provides a stark contrast with the broad, general terms in which Descartes recounts his own education in the Discourse. Early on in the text, Vico claims he will write “with the candor proper to a historian (con ingenuità dovuta da istorico),” and he indicates that this means, “we shall narrate plainly and step by step the entire series of Vico’s studies, in order that the proper and natural causes (le proprie e naturali cagioni) of his particular development as a man of letters may be known” (113/N5). In the 1731 continuation of the Life, only published after Vico’s death in 1818, Vico characterized what he believed himself to have done in the earlier version:

As may be seen, he wrote it as a philosopher, meditating the causes, natural and moral, and the occasions of fortune; why even from childhood he had felt an inclination for certain studies and an aversion from others; what opportunities and obstacles had advanced or retarded his progress; and lastly the effect of his own exertions in right directions, which were destined later to bear fruit in those reflections on which he built his final work, the New Science, which was to demonstrate that his intellectual life (la sua vita letteraria) was bound to have been such as it was and not otherwise (FB 182/N 75).

A nice passage from Ezra Pound’s “Digest of the Analects” in his Guide to Kulchur: “Tseu-Lou asked: If the Prince of Mei appointed you head of the government, to what wd. you first set your mind? KUNG: To call people and things by their names, that is, by the correct denominations, to see that the terminology was exact.”
Although less abstract than the Discourse, Vico’s Life is like it in being primarily concerned with the author-subject’s intellectual becoming. 216 Whereas, however, Descartes almost universally rejects his prior education, Vico is far more selective. Vico’s procedure is both more synthetic and more specific, showing step-by-step how he acquired the basic ideas that he later combined and developed in order to arrive at his new science. In accordance with Leibniz’s wish, Vico attends to the particulars of his education, so that in principle another could follow the same progression and make the same discoveries. At the same time, the specificity of Vico’s account demonstrates how difficult it would be to follow in Vico’s footsteps, particularly given the breadth of his learning. How many scholars today can claim to have studied extensively Plato, Tacitus, Francis Bacon, Hugo Grotius, Suarez, Cicero, Virgil, Horace, Boccaccio, Dante, Petrarch, Aristotle, Lucretius, not to mention Descartes and a host of others?

Vico’s account of his intellectual becoming is much more synthetic than Descartes’, in the sense that he devotes a lot of space to discussing his discovery of ideas he accepted, and not only to ideas he rejected. There are clearly synthetic aspects in Augustine’s Confessions, too, for example, in Augustine’s descriptions of how he incorporated Cicero’s basic injunction to seek wisdom or how reading the Neoplatonists helped him to grasp the idea of an incorporeal substance. 217 By contrast, the Platonic autobiographical writings adopt a predominantly negative stance toward alternative doctrines, and the negative approach of Descartes’ Discourse could hardly be more striking. Vico speaks of the highly associative character of his mind, and in his Life he

216 The contrast is clearest with the autobiographies of Augustine and Rousseau that devote significant attention to the emotional, as well as the personal, private side of life.
217 For the sake of further comparison it’s worth noting that Mill’s Autobiography, too is highly synthetic, because he attributes many of his most important ideas to the education he received from his father and to his association with his father’s friends, especially Jeremy Bentham.
attempts to show how he synthesized the ideas gleaned from various sources into the philosophical worldview that he ultimately formulated.

13. *The new science as the purpose of Vico’s Life.*— Vico’s *New Science* aims to establish a philosophy of history. Vico wrote two continuations to the original 1725 text of the *Life*, the first in 1728, which was published in the same year together with the 1725 text, and the second in 1731 that wasn’t published in Vico’s lifetime. The continuations of 1728 and 1731 are significant because they followed upon the publication of the first two editions of the *New Science* in 1725 and 1730, respectively. Since Vico’s main purpose in writing his *Life* is to show how he discovered the principles of the new science through the course of his studies and over time, an examination of the central elements of this science will prove useful. The *Life* and the *New Science* are closely connected, each throwing light on the other, and as Verene observes, the principles that ground and guide the new science are also the principles that ground the *Life*. In other words, Vico’s autobiography is determined by the same principles it is intended to introduce, especially the idea that it is possible to grasp historical truth only by understanding how the human things change over time. Vico also asserts that a central goal of his philosophy is to reconcile the particulars of history with the universal genera (or kinds) of metaphysics, and thus, where his autobiography is concerned, he cannot fail to recognize his own humanlife as a chapter within universal history. His humanlife, and in fact any humanlife, is a part of the historical whole, and this whole cannot be understood independently of its parts. But neither can the parts be apprehended without a knowledge of the whole.

Vico’s most famous idea is that we know what we make (the so-called *verum-factum* principle), and according to him, that which humans make and are therefore in a
position to know is history. With this making-knowing idea, Vico attempts to give epistemological justification for his attempt to establish history as a philosophical science. Science, at least insofar as it is philosophical, requires some account of how its objects can be known, and for Vico humans have access to the objects of the new, historical science that he has discovered because history itself is literally made by human beings. History is made in texts such as the epic poems of Homer and Virgil, but also in the written codes of laws that have been handed down from antiquity. It is also made in the actions that such texts reflect, and in such artifacts as these texts describe and that are sometimes preserved in their material being down through the ages. Whereas Vico maintains that our knowledge of nature remains external, he argues that we can know the works of history from the inside. The reason for this is that he believes human beings know what it is to be human. As Isaiah Berlin puts it, Vico’s “deepest belief was that what men have made, other men can understand.”

All this is not to say that on Vico’s view we humans have been completely conscious creators of ourselves throughout history; rather, quite the contrary is true according to him. “Men,” he writes, “first did things through a certain human sense, without attending to them, and then, much later, they applied reflection to them and, by reasoning about their effects, contemplated their causes” (FNS pp. 21-22). In the course of history that Vico envisages, human beings are unconscious creators of civilization who gradually become conscious.

For Vico, moreover, humans do not make history alone. Rather, he claims an important place in history for the workings of what he calls “providence,” which can be

---

understood as the design of the supremely intelligent god that brings about the preservation of humankind. This raises a number of questions, perhaps the most pressing being the question of how to distinguish god’s role in making history from specifically human contributions. Jules Michelet (1798-1874) and Croce (1866-1952), both of whom were greatly influenced by Vico, attempted to resolve this problem by simply dismissing the notion of providence. For them, human beings alone make history, and divine providence plays no role. It is important to keep in mind that this was not Vico’s view, as Karl Löwith, for example, emphasizes in his fine short study of Vico. In contrast to the tendency of secularizing thinkers such as Croce and Michelet, Löwith believes that Vico “saw the course of history much more adequately, namely, as a world made by men and, at the same time, everywhere surpassed by something which is closer to fate than to free choice and action” (my emphasis). According to Löwith, Vico understood that, “history is not only deed and action but also and even primarily event and happening. It is not single minded but double minded” (ibid.).

The question of who or what makes history is really a question of causality, which has as good a claim as any to being a perennial philosophical question, whether this question is addressed within the time-honored framework of the God-human relationship or in the near-contemporary formulations of evolutionary theory, psychoanalysis, and neuroscience that investigate the relation between voluntary and involuntary, conscious and unconscious processes (with an emphasis in evolutionary theory and neuroscience on the materiality of these processes, i.e., trying to understand them in terms of brain function). Taking his cue from Augustine, Vico himself saw this

---

219 Karl Löwith (1949), p. 126. In the Preface to this same work, Löwith quotes T. S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*: They know and do not know, that acting is suffering / And suffering is action.
problem in traditional terms, but he nevertheless outlines the basic positions that continue to characterize philosophical debate about historical causation, namely, determinism, compatibilism, and voluntarism. In the *Life*, he suggests that his early studies of the debate about grace within Catholic theology led him to accept the Augustinian position and to reject the opposed extremes of deterministic Calvinism and voluntaristic Pelagianism (119). Like Augustine and others (such as Boethius), Vico thinks that a belief in god’s providential design does not preclude a belief in human free will. The role of god appears most clearly in the unconscious aspect of human history, because on Vico’s account human beings began making institutions without knowing what they are doing. As Jacques Lacan says, “*Dieu est inconscient,*” and Vico sees the workings of god in the unconscious aspect of human history, especially early on when humans make the historical world through the “human sense” without really knowing what they are doing. Indeed, on Vico’s account, the earliest humans were not doing what they thought they were doing.

Despite the fact that for him humans are not always the conscious creators of history, Vico nevertheless thinks that once we, as a species or as a particular “nation,” reach the age of reflection and reason, we are able to reconstruct intellectually our

---

220 Certain complexities arise if we try to compare traditional, theocentric theories of causation with modern, atheistic ones. Within the theocentric tradition, the debate can be understood as one among various stripes of concurrentists, occasionalists, and deists. Broadly speaking, concurrentism is similar to compatibilism, since both assert that humans have at least some freedom to determine their own world. Occasionalism, by contrast, looks a lot like determinism though it is a determinism of a supernatural kind. The hardest question to answer is perhaps about the place of freedom in the deistic worldview. Deism is certainly compatible with determinism, but it might also make a place for freedom.

221 Calvinism teaches a sort of determinism rooted in god’s grace; Pelagianism argues that our freedom is perfect and that through its proper use we can achieve the perfection of our kind.

historical becoming in a way that makes this becoming comprehensible to us. Such understanding is proper to what Vico calls the human age, as opposed to the first age of gods and the second the age of heroes.

As with Descartes, Vico’s concern with the question of principles stems from a deep appreciation of the importance of starting points within philosophy. In his Life, he claims that his goal is “to unite in one principle all knowledge human and divine (che in principio unisse egli tutto il sapere umano e divino)” (FB 146/N 39). Vico further specifies this principle as a “principle of the natural law of the nations (un principio di dritto natural delle genti)” (FB 119/N12). This is the primary principle of the new science itself, but what is it? In fact, the principle might be better understood as three tightly interconnected insights, although one of the three is primary. According to Vico, certain fundamental human institutions serve as the font of natural law and hence form the basis for all historical development. As Leon Pompa puts it, Vico discovered “the indispensable nature of the institutions of religion, marriage, and burial of the dead” (FNS, p. xxx). For Vico the human discovery of the gods is closely linked with human fear of them, and on his view the earliest human societies, those of the family, grew up around the principle of propitiating the gods. The nations of the world grew up around this principle, with the fathers of the first families acting as the primary intermediaries between the various gods and the human communities of which they were the leaders. Not unlike Plato and Aristotle, Vico argues that “the time of the families…certainly preceded cities among all nations,” and indeed the cities arose from the families (FB 169). The unique relationship between the fathers of the various nations and their gods formed the basis for a communal identity to emerge, an identity that was enhanced and
guarded by the fundamental human institutions of marriage and burial of the dead. According to Vico, these institutions were the first laws as well as the basis for all future laws. The story of history is the story of the development of law from these first foundations, especially in light of the conflict that gradually emerged between the founders of the nations and their clients. These clients were those people who came to the sanctuaries of law and order established by the first families in order to escape the bestial wilderness. Vico was therefore one of the earliest theorists of what came to be known in the nineteenth century as class conflict.223

The history of his own life that he narrates is a part of human history as a whole and can only be understood within the context of this whole: “there remains his own particular story, which exists within that of humanity and which includes the discovery of the principles of humanity’s life and is itself recountable as a philosophical history by applying these principles to it” (73). Furthermore: “Vico conceived his life as having a providential structure” (Verene 1991, p. 1).224 The Autobiography is founded on the same basic principles that Vico articulates in the New Science. “Vico’s life of nations and Vico’s own life of letters share the principle that what they each describe had to be such and not otherwise; the events narrated in both are products of neither chance nor fate” (p. 1).

Because he believes that we only know what we make, Vico’s assessment of autobiography is far more positive than that of Descartes. Whereas Descartes calls into question whether history and autobiography can present us with truth, Vico attempts to

---

223 Certainly there are precedents for this in Plato, with his doctrine of the three social classes that either fight each other or, in the best case, cooperate.
argue and to show that we can know the truth about history and hence life-histories better than we can know the natural world.

14. The order of Vico’s Autobiography with an eye to topics.— Vico’s exposition is chronological, which is the natural mode of history and hence autobiography. Vico repeatedly insists that chronology and geography are the two eyes of history (e.g., at FB 167), and in order to understand something we must track the changes it undergoes in space and time. Whereas Descartes divides the Discourse into parts, with each one devoted to a specific theme, Vico’s Life forms a continuous whole. Vico’s portrait of his intellectual development conforms, moreover, to Leibniz’s wish, inasmuch as it really is possible to reconstruct Vico’s specific studies on the basis of the Life. Perhaps surprisingly, given Vico’s career as a teacher of rhetoric and his insistence on the importance of eloquence within the Life itself, the Life is both more difficult to follow and less memorable than the Discourse. How are we to account for this? Well, a simpler story may be easier to follow and remember but that doesn’t mean it’s truer. Vico’s account of his life is far more faithful to the particulars, less stylized and streamlined than that of Descartes.

Vico’s Life is a fascinating book that rewards close study. It teaches a great deal about the history of intellectual life in late seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century Naples, which forms an intriguing and important chapter in the history of ideas. By most accounts, Naples existed on the periphery of the learned world in western Europe during Vico’s lifetime, yet the intellectual milieu in which Vico grew up and worked presents us with an illuminating case study of the way that modern ideas spread

225 Although Nicolini introduced divisions in his edition, Vico’s original text is not divided into parts. I am grateful to Donald Phillip Verene for corresponding with me about this and other aspects of Vico’s text.
and took hold alongside other, older strains of thought associated with the so-called Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In the *Life*, Vico shows the coexistence of medieval, renaissance, and modern elements in the Naples of his lifetime, where Neoplatonic ideas, refracted through the lens of Renaissance Neoplatonists like Ficino and Pico, persisted alongside the growing influence of the mechanistic worldview, an important impetus to which had been Descartes’ publication of the *Discourse* and the *Essays* a century earlier. At the same time, we see how the medieval curriculum, and many of the problems that preoccupied the so-called scholastic philosophers, were still alive and influential during Vico’s childhood. Vico tells us how, as a child, he studied various summulae, for example, those of Petrus Hispanus and Paulus Venetus; how he studied Suarez; and how he was affected by the debate between realism and nominalism. In light of the rich and diverse intellectual world he depicts, Vico describes how he gradually amassed and synthesized a plurality of ideas out of this abundant manifold, transmuting and recombining them in the smithy of his mind to produce his new science of history.

The key point to grasp about Vico’s life-story is how the two primary concerns that were to govern his intellectual life, the study of metaphysics and the civil institutions, emerged already during his boyhood. Vico thus accounts for his endeavor to harmonize “the metaphysical mind (*la mente metafisica*)” with the study of the particulars of human history (FB 117, 138). Two key events in Vico’s story set the course for all of his future studies. The first was his introduction to philosophy by two Jesuits, Antonio del Balzo and, a little later, Giuseppe Ricci. The philosophical side of his education gradually led Vico to the momentous discovery of Plato and the Neoplatonists, whom Vico interprets as metaphysical realists teaching not only that ideas, or certain “metaphysical genera,”
are real, but that they are the causes of the particulars humans encounter in the actual course of history and life. The Jesuit Balzo, the first of Vico’s teachers mentioned by name in the *Life*, was a nominalist philosopher, and Vico admits that he was never taken with the nominalist worldview. Thus, although Vico takes particulars seriously, he believes in the reality of universals, which he sometimes calls “metaphysical genera” (see, for example, the comparison of metaphysics and Euclidean geometry at FB 123/N 16). In fact it was Ricci, a Scotist and hence a realist, whose teaching first captured Vico’s mind:

> From him he was greatly pleased to learn that ‘abstract substances’ had more reality than the ‘modes’ of the nominalist Balzo. This was a presage that he in his time would take most pleasure in the Platonic philosophy, to which no scholastic philosophy comes nearer than the Scotist does (FB 114).

After studying with Ricci, Vico reports he left school for a year in order to study Suarez’s *Metaphysics*, since he had heard that Suarez “discussed everything that could be known in philosophy in a distinguished manner such as becomes a metaphysician, and in an extremely clear and easy style” (FB 114/N 6-7). This study further informed Vico’s “metaphysical mind,” and it was also to prove decisive in that it caused him to prefer Platonic to Aristotelian metaphysics, as I discuss below.

The second event was when, luckily, his “good genius” led him to pop in on a class being taught by the law professor Felice Aquadia, just at the moment when Aquadia was lecturing on the merits of Hermann Vulteius. In Aquadia’s opinion, Vulteius was, “the best who had ever written on the civil institutes” (FB 115/N 7). This led Vico to ask his father, a bookseller, for Vulteius’ book, “difficult to obtain in Naples.” His father recalled having acquired a copy for a professor of law by the name of Nicola Maria
Giannettasio, and he asked Nicola Maria to borrow the book for his son. That such a young boy wanted this book piqued Nicola Maria’s curiosity, and he desired an interview with Vico to ask him why he wanted to study Vulteius. The story of this interview that Vico tells suggests that, even as a boy, he had also begun to appreciate an important difference between the cognitive powers of memory and intellect. He explained to Maria that he wanted to study Vulteius because his current teacher of law, a man named Francesco Verde, gave lessons in which “only the memory (memoria) was exercised and the intellect (intelletto) suffered from lying idle” (FB 116/N 8). On the basis of this remark, Nicola Maria was so satisfied with this interview that he “gave outright to the youth not only the Vulteius but also the Canonical Institutes of Henricus Canisius” (FB 116/N 8). As Vico says, this set him on “the good road to both the laws (ragione),” that is, the civil law as well as the canon law of the Catholic Church. Thus by discussing his introduction to philosophy and jurisprudence, Vico recounts how already in his youth he began the two courses of study that would eventually converge to produce the new science.

With respect to his study of the civil law, Vico notes that “he found a great pleasure in two things” (FB 116). The first was what may be described as the inductive method of the scholastic jurists, who “abstracted into general maxims of justice the particular considerations of equity which the jurisconsults and emperors had indicated for the just disposition of cases” (FB 116). Because it emphasized the general truths about many particular cases, this method suited “the metaphysical mind (la mente metafisica)” that Vico says he had already begun to acquire. The second was seeing how the jurisconsults carefully examined the wording of the laws, which led Vico to the serious
pursuit of philology, including the comparative study of the great Latin and Italian writers. As Vico says: “Each of these pleasures was a sign: the one of all the study he was to give to investigating the principles of universal law (principi del dritto universale), the other of the profit he was to derive from the Latin language, especially from the usages of Roman jurisprudence.”

Having already discovered the two decisive concerns that were to shape his philosophical vision, Vico says he felt “an ardent desire for leisure to continue his studies” (FB 118). Vico’s accidental meeting, in a bookstore, with Geronimo Rocca, a bishop, provided the leisure Vico sought, when Rocca recommended that he become tutor to his nephews, who lived in Vatolla (according to Verene, about a three-day carriage ride south of Naples). There, Rocca said, “he would have all the leisure he needed for study,” and Vico says it turned out to be so. Thus he entered into a period of relative seclusion and leisure to study that lasted nine years (1686-1695), during which, he says, he made “the greatest progress in his studies, digging into laws and canons, as his duties obliged him to” (FB 119). Like Descartes, Vico suggests that a long period of study and meditation was required for his philosophy to germinate.

During this period, Vico says that the study of canon law led him to study dogmatic theology, the two clearly being closely related, and as already mentioned, through this study he was attracted to the debates about freedom and grace. In light of what is perhaps the central paradox of Vico’s philosophy, that humans make history, even while history is also determined by divine providence, his remarks on this topic are of great interest. Again, a Jesuit played an important role in Vico’s life, for through reading the writings of Richardus (the French Jesuit Étienne Deschamps), Vico says he
was led “by a geometrical method” to see that “the doctrine of St. Augustine is midway between the two extremes of Calvin and Pelagius” (FB 119). According to Vico, it was his appreciation of Augustine’s teaching that:

enabled him later to meditate a principle of the natural law of the nations (un principio di dritto natural delle genti), which should both be apt for the explanation of the origins of Roman law and every other gentile civil law in respect of history, and agree with the sound doctrine of grace in respect of moral philosophy (FB 119/N 12-13).

Vico believed he could reconcile a belief in providential causes with a belief in humanity’s freedom to create itself historically. History would have to be “double-minded” on his account.

Vico goes on to devote a significant portion of the Life to a discussion of his studies during his tenure with the Rocca family. In a memorable passage that illustrates Vico’s dedication to the study of language and the reading of poets and eloquent writers, he notes how the study of Lorenzo Valla (c. 1407-1457), the Italian humanist and champion of Latin eloquence, motivated him to cultivate the study of certain great Latin authors, “beginning with the works of Cicero” (FB 119). Further reading caused him to discover the opinion that Virgil was a model of Latin elegance in poetry.

Vico also began to contemplate his philosophy of education during this period. He excerpts a portion of an oration that has not come down to us, in which he advocates a conception of childhood education rooted in the cultivation of memory, imagination, and what he calls ingegno, as Fisch notes, a difficult term to translate. It is related to the English word ingenuity and, as Fisch suggests, might be translated variously as “invention” or “the faculty of discerning the relations between things” (FB ft. nt. 141 to p. 123). Perhaps the best translation is intellectual perception, along the lines of what
Aristotle means by νοῦς (nous), since it is the power that is responsible for our ability to make analogies, similes, metaphors, and scientific hypotheses, as Fisch again notes (ibid.). According to Vico, the studies that exercise memory, imagination, and intellectual perception are those of languages, history, and geometry, respectively. It is worth noting that this entire meditation on education comes in the context of Vico’s recollection of his own, unsuccessful attempt to study geometry while living with the Rocca family. The reason for his failure, he claims, is that the study of geometry is suited to “minute wits” and not to minds such as his own that are “already made universal by metaphysics” (FB 123). For Vico, “it was easier to grasp all those minute truths (of geometry) together, as in a metaphysical genus, than to understand…particular geometrical quantities.” He argues that children’s minds are much better suited to such minute studies and that indeed the study of geometry possesses many distinctive benefits for children, exercising not only intellectual perception (ingegno), but also memory and imagination.

In the course of discussing his intellectual development, Vico famously singles out four figures as his own special authors—Plato, Tacitus, Francis Bacon, and Hugo Grotius—whose writings served him as constant sources of guidance and inspiration. Vico took something different from each of these authors, while he also judged each of them to have certain limitations. His critical beliefs are indicated by a passage devoted to his discovery of Grotius, the last one of the four that Vico adopted. Here Vico summarizes the limitations of Plato, Tacitus, and Bacon in order to explain why he took Grotius as having something crucial to contribute to his own thought:

Plato adorns rather than confirms his esoteric wisdom with the common wisdom of Homer. Tacitus intersperses his metaphysics, ethics, and politics with the facts, as they have come down to him from the times, scattered and confused and without system. Bacon sees that the sum of
human and divine knowledge of his time needs supplementing and emending, but as far as laws are concerned he does not succeed with his canons in compassing the universe of cities and the course of all times, or the extent of all nations. Grotius, however, embraces in a system of universal law the whole of philosophy and philology, including both parts of the latter, the history of facts and events, both fabulous and real, and (the history) of the three languages, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin; that is to say, the three learned languages of antiquity that have been handed down to us by the Christian religion (FB 154-155/N).

According to Vico, Plato does not appreciate the historical origin of human wisdom in poetry; Tacitus is unsystematic, allowing the historical particulars to overwhelm a generic and hence metaphysical understanding of history; and Bacon does not adequately comprehend the importance of laws within history or the necessity of a historical understanding of laws. Grotius in some way remedies all these shortcomings, and yet even Grotius does not achieve the understanding required for a new science of human history.

With the exception of Tacitus, Vico gives an account of how he discovered each of his four authors, but I will focus on his discovery of Plato because it illustrates the importance Vico placed on a metaphysical understanding of history and civil institutions. It also shows the roundabout way in which Vico made many of his intellectual discoveries. Vico’s road to Plato began with Horace. Studying Horace, whose Ars Poetica emphasizes the edifying character of poetry, Vico discovered the idea that “the richest source of poetical suggestion is to be found in the writings of the moral philosophers” (FB 120).

226 This hint inspired him to take up the study of Aristotle’s ethical writings, since Vico “had observed in his reading” that “the authorities on the

---

various principles of the civil institutes frequently referred” to Aristotle’s ethics (ibid.).

This study threw new light on two different approaches to the study of the law, the one inductive and drawing general principles from particular cases, the other deductive, starting from metaphysical principles. Vico associates Aristotle with the deductive view, namely, with the view that particular laws and institutions followed from “a few eternal truths” (FB 120-121). By contrast, “Roman jurisprudence was an art of equity conveyed by innumerable specific precepts of natural law which the jurists had extracted from the reasons of the laws and the intentions of the legislators.” Vico finds both of these approaches necessary to the proper study of law, and this made him redouble his efforts in the study of metaphysics.

Although his ethical doctrines were influential for Vico, Vico rejected Aristotle’s metaphysics on the grounds that it leads “to a physical principle, which is matter, from which the particular forms are drawn” (FB 121). Surprisingly Vico associates Aristotle’s philosophy with the materialistic view of the universe advocated in modern times by Descartes, Gassendi, and others, and Vico even seems to think of Aristotle as something of a mechanist, opining that Aristotle’s metaphysics “makes God a potter who works at things outside himself.” His dissatisfaction with Aristotle’s metaphysics led him to take up the study of Plato, in which he found a metaphysics that leads to “the eternal idea, drawing out and creating matter from itself, like a seminal spirit that forms its own egg” (ibid.). This doctrine would perhaps be more accurately characterized as Neoplatonic than Platonic, but the important point to grasp is that for Vico the principle, or source, of material beings is an immaterial principle.
Vico opposed the naturalistic bent of Descartes’ philosophy and criticized Descartes’ conception of metaphysics, which he viewed as a watered down version of Platonic metaphysics. For Vico, Plato’s philosophy remained the consummate expression of metaphysics and the true domain of what Vico calls “the metaphysical mind.” As he shows in his *Life*, at every turn his studies reconfirmed Vico as “a partisan of the Platonic metaphysics” (FB 130). Vico attempts to marry the metaphysical mind with the study of the particulars of human history. Although he values physics, or the ability to give an account of nature, Vico objects to the primacy of physics within Cartesian philosophy, and it is important to note that as his career progressed Vico, at odds with his age, became increasingly opposed to the mechanistic view of the cosmos that came to predominate in Naples and elsewhere. In line with this, he also contends that Descartes’ metaphysics is inconsistent with his physics. According to Vico, Descartes’ “physics calls for a metaphysics that should set up a single kind of substance, the corporeal, operating…by necessity” (FB 130). Thus Vico anticipated the common nineteenth-century criticism of Descartes that viewed his philosophy as essentially a materialism that makes only tactical concessions to an immaterial principle. Vico further argues that Descartes’ philosophy is amoral: “his metaphysics do not yield any moral philosophy suited to the Christian religion…and his treatise on the *Passions* is more useful to medicine than to ethics” (FB 130). Vico makes no mention of Descartes’ provisional morality in the *Life*.

Where Vico seriously takes issue with Plato is in regard to his political philosophy. He remarks how Plato, in the spirit of his metaphysics, “founds a moral

---

227 For an orienting reception history of Descartes’ materialism, see Gaukroger’s Introduction to his *Descartes* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 1-14.
philosophy on an ideal or architectonic virtue of justice.” Vico proceeds to criticize Plato’s ideal commonwealth, showing in the process how the new science began to take shape in his mind:

From the time that Vico felt himself dissatisfied with the metaphysic of Aristotle as an aid to the understanding of moral philosophy, and found himself instructed by that of Plato, there began to dawn on him, without his being aware of it, the thought of meditating an ideal eternal law (*un diritto ideale eterno*) that should be observed in a universal city after the idea or design of providence, upon which idea have since been founded all the commonwealths of all times and all nations. This was the ideal republic that Plato should have contemplated as a consequence of his metaphysic; but he was shut off from it by ignorance of the fall of the first man (FB 121-122/N 15).

What is Vico’s criticism of Plato’s ideal city? Whereas Plato’s republic is ideal, outside history, and thoroughly rooted in the belief that human beings can become philosophers, Vico sees the ideal eternal law expressing itself in the actual historical becoming of the various nations of humanity. His reference to the fall, and Plato’s ignorance of the fall, shows the tremendous significance of the belief in human imperfection for his philosophy of history. As Vico writes in the 1744 *New Science*, the principal property of human beings is that they are social. Due to human imperfection, however, there are obstacles to sociability, and this is precisely the point at which Vico’s belief in divine providence comes in, explaining the alchemy by which god transforms the meager earth of human licentiousness to the glittering gold of lawful societies:

In providing for this property (i.e., the sociability of human beings) God has so ordained and disposed human institutions (*le cose umane*) that men, having fallen from complete justice by original sin, *and while intending almost always to do something quite different and often quite the contrary—so that for private utility they would live alone like wild beasts*—have been led by this same utility and along...different and contrary paths to live like men in justice and to keep themselves in society and thus to observe their social nature (*la loro natura socievole*) (NS/N 367-368, my emphasis).
Like Erasmus of Rotterdam and Vico’s contemporary Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733), Vico sees divine providence transmuting human selfishness and vice into justice. He therefore objects to Plato’s vision of an ideal republic, first of all, because it is superfluous, and it is superfluous precisely because Vico sees divine providence actually realizing an ideal justice through history. Vico’s debatable but reasonable assumption is that Plato takes his ideal commonwealth seriously, that he views it as a real possibility that a society could come into being governed entirely by virtue, in which the family is abolished and each class of the city does its proper work thereby securing the harmony of the whole. On this assumption, Vico believes that Plato needs to be corrected to reflect a different view of human nature, one that takes into account human fallenness and hence the fundamental imperfection of human beings. Vico therefore has a less optimistic, more negative view of human nature than Plato, at least on Vico’s interpretation of Plato. At the same time, Vico has a more positive estimation of the way things actually work out in history. For Vico, the selfishness of individual human beings and their injustice toward one another constitutes a basic fact of human nature, at least for the greater part of human history. The miracle brought about by providence is the transmutation of private vice into increasingly just societies over time. At the same time, Vico thinks that there are limits inherent to human nature that make a republic like Plato’s impossible. In particular, Vico’s belief that marriage is one of the three principles of human society is diametrically opposed to Plato’s abolition of marriage in the Republic (see FNS §269).

Vico’s devotion to Plato was also tempered by his commitments to his other three authors, especially Tacitus. According to Vico, “the wise man should be formed both of esoteric wisdom such as Plato’s and of common wisdom such as that of Tacitus” (FB
For him, Plato represents the importance of metaphysical principles, and Tacitus stands for the import of particulars where historical understanding is concerned. Despite his reservations about Plato’s political teaching, Vico remains a dedicated Platonist in metaphysics.

Vico’s opposition to mechanism in physics extended to Descartes, and he recounts his study of Lucretius in order to suggest that his repudiation of Epicureanism and its modern forms (for example, in Pierre Gassendi) is not uneducated (FB 126). He opposes the Stoic idea of fate as inconsistent with his belief in the divine governance of the world. For this reason, too, Vico professes himself to have been completely at odds with the metaphysical materialism of Epicurus, as he discovered it through his study of Roman philosopher-poet Lucretius. With respect to materialistic atomism, Vico unequivocally asserts that “this is a philosophy to satisfy the circumscribed minds of children and the weak ones of silly women” (FB 126). Vico repeatedly says that his various forays into the domain of materialist philosophy and physics served only to confirm him more profoundly in his attachment to Plato.

Vico presents the gradual genesis of his main idea: a philosophy of history that marries metaphysics to the historical particulars. At the same time, Vico also maintains that he always wanted a philosophy of history that would be consistent with the best ethical doctrine, and he notes that he continued to prefer the philosophical writings of Cicero, Aristotle, and Plato, because these philosophers demonstrated a concern for “the good ordering of mankind in civil society” (FB 122). He rejects the moral philosophies of Stoicism and Epicureanism for the same reason, because he thinks they are not concerned with civil society, but instead “they are each a moral philosophy of solitaries.”
Following the nine years he spent as tutor to the Rocca family at Vatolla, Vico returned to Naples, and he claims that he discovered, to his dismay, the metaphysics of Descartes’ *Meditations* were very much in fashion. Vico found Descartes’ metaphysics to be little more than some simplifications of ideas cribbed from Plato and decked out in new garb. He does not consider the *Meditations* a profound metaphysical work, and he attributes the popularity of the work to the overriding preoccupation with the study of physics in the Naples of his early adulthood. Because of the attention they devoted to physics, Vico argues, his contemporaries were almost entirely unaccustomed to metaphysical thinking, and his point is that only such a debased audience could view Descartes’ metaphysics as difficult and profound.

15. *The orations, the first publications, and the discovery of the new science.*— In the *Life*, Vico devotes fairly extensive discussion to the major works he undertook prior to his discovery and formulation of the new science. He includes remarks on the six orations he gave to inaugurate the academic year beginning in 1699; the seventh oration, more extensive and published under the title *De nostri studiorum de temporiss*; and the major works of 1710.228 It is common for philosophers to include in their autobiographies reflections on their other, previous works, since these works certainly constitute an

---

important part of their lives. Thus Augustine includes some discussion of his previous works in the *Confessions*, and Descartes summarizes the unpublished treatises on light and the human body in Part Five of the *Discourse*. Nietzsche, as we shall see, included a substantial discussion of the works he published in his lifetime in *Ecce Homo*.

Vico’s characterization of these orations indicates his understanding of metaphysics and the human mind, as well as his philosophy of education and the ethical dimension of his thought. His discussion also exemplifies how his thought was developing toward the invention of the new science, showing, as he says, how “Vico was agitating in his mind a theme both new and grand, to unite in one principle all knowledge human and divine” (FB 146). Vico’s most specific characterization of the overall plan of the orations comes when he says that he considered them an opportunity to take “universal arguments from metaphysics” and give them “social applications” (FB 139-140).

Just as Descartes outlines a “provisional morality” in the *Discourse*, Vico elaborates a practical philosophy in the *Life*. Basing his ethical teaching on the three pillars of virtue, knowledge, and eloquence (*virtù, scienza, eloquenza*) (FB 144/N37), Vico argues that these achievements are necessary to correct the defects in human nature. Returning to the theme of human fallenness, Vico contends that because of “sin…man is divided from man by tongue, mind, and heart” (ibid., slightly altered by me). His account of how humans are divided in each of these aspects stresses the disagreements that arise among people from the misuse of language, the diversity of opinions and tastes, and, perhaps above all, the viciousness of individuals that makes them pursue their private interests against each other, making conciliation (*concilia*) and social harmony difficult to
achieve. Virtue remedies this viciousness in the heart; knowledge transcends the diversity of opinions that derive from the diversity of tastes; and eloquence corrects the defects of the tongue, giving human beings the capacity to communicate with one another in such a way as to promote mutual understanding.

In the 1728 continuation, Vico discusses the *First New Science*, which had been published, as he says, in Naples in 1725:

In this work he finally discovers in its full extent that principle (*principio*) which in his previous works he had as yet understood only in a confused and indistinct way. For he now recognizes an indispensable and even human necessity to seek the first origins of this science in the beginnings of sacred history (*le prime origini di tal Scienza da' principi della storia sacra*) (FB 166/N 61).

Thus Vico announces his discovery of the principle of the new science, namely, that civil society began with religion. The characteristics of the first religion form, of course, one of the main subjects of the *New Science*.

13. *The question of an opposition as a way of concluding.*— The basic conflict between Vico and Descartes is representative of a conflict within modern philosophy itself, one that continues to shape our understanding of ourselves and the world and that we shall have to negotiate for the foreseeable future. Wilfrid Sellars, in a more specialized context, described this as the conflict between the manifest and scientific images of humanity. This is the conflict between the world as it appears from our human point-of-view and as it appears in light of the progressive unfolding of natural science, which is also a human endeavor though of a special kind. Descartes’ *Discourse* announced a project that continues to this day. Vico thought that greater sources of truth were to be found elsewhere, in the contemplation of humanity’s historical becoming, while he also believed that the understanding his new science would promote would be beneficial to
human beings in what he took to be the essence of humanity, namely, its social or political character. Although Descartes is often regarded as the founder of modern philosophy, there is a sense in which Vico’s central ideas can be viewed as more germane to the philosophical concerns of our own age, since the most pressing questions today are arguably political or social ones. Both visions have their strengths and limitations.

The philosophical autobiographies of Vico and Descartes enhance the genre without constituting a major reconfiguration of its form and function. Certainly the difference between Augustine’s *Confessions* and Plato’s autobiographical writings is significantly more pronounced than is the difference between the Platonic autobiographies and those of Vico and Descartes. We have to wait for Rousseau for anything comparable to Augustine’s achievement. Vico’s *Life* is not, as Verene claims, “the first instance of philosophical autobiography in its modern form” (p. x). That honor, if it is to go to anyone, must be accorded to Descartes, even if it is yet more appropriate in the case of Rousseau. In modern philosophical autobiography, insofar as it is distinct from the classical exemplars, the individual philosopher comes to be more and more identified with the truth he teaches.

Modern philosophy begins with Descartes’ autobiographical *Discourse*, and it is fitting that it should begin this way. A salient characteristics of modernity is its autobiographical awareness. If we want to understand what this awareness is, then it is necessary to know its cause or at least to have a theory about it. Such a theory has to take into account how autobiographical awareness is tied to the way in which the “I,” or “ego,” comes to the foreground in modern thought. Clearly the “I” is prominent in Descartes’ philosophy in more ways than one; it is identified with the first principle of
the Cartesian philosophy, but it is also the peculiar “I” that is René Descartes and the human life of this “I” is significant at the origin. Now there is something to be said for the view of many scholars that autobiography is a distinctly modern literary genre, but there is even more to be said for the view that awareness of autobiography as a genre is modern.²²⁹ In fact, as many scholars have noted and as this study goes to show, autobiography emerged avant la lettre and prior to modernity. This is also true of philosophical autobiography in particular, that is, as a distinctive literary genre, since it clearly antedates our so-called modernity and Descartes, beginning as it does with Plato. Some scholars have argued that Descartes had other models of intellectual autobiography in mind when composing the Discourse.²³⁰ Despite the clear historical precedents, however, there can be no doubt that autobiography, as both a practice and a product, proliferates in modern times, and this goes for philosophical autobiography too.

Beginning with Descartes, it is worthwhile to raise the question whether there are important differences between modern and pre-modern philosophical autobiography. Does philosophical autobiography change in significant ways beginning with Descartes and in subsequent modern philosophical autobiographies such as those of Vico,

²³⁰ See Stephen Menn, “The Discourse on the Method and the Tradition of Intellectual Autobiography,” in *Hellenistic and Early Modern Philosophy*, eds. Jon Miller and Brad Inwood (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 141-191. Menn contends that Descartes’ model may go back to Galen (129-c.200/c. 216) and that the Discourse bears a strong resemblance to certain autobiographical works within the Islamic intellectual tradition that also take Galen as a model, in particular, the autobiographical works of Ibn al-Haitham (965-1040) and Ghazâlî (1058-1111). The connection to Descartes is rather tenuous, however, and one cannot help but wonder that Menn, who wrote a book on Descartes and Augustine (called *Descartes and Augustine* and published by Cambridge, 1998), does not consider the much more likely possibility that Augustine’s *Confessions* may have served Descartes as a model. In fact, he does consider this possibility but only by the way, at the margins of his text and in a footnote.
Rousseau, Mill, and Nietzsche? Does it become something fundamentally different from what it was for Plato and Augustine? It may be surprising, but I think the answer to this question is a qualified no. My contention is that, where philosophical autobiography is concerned, the continuities over time are more pronounced than the disparities.

One feature that does distinguish modern from pre-modern autobiographies, however, is an increased emphasis on individuality, in particular, on the individuality of the philosopher who writes his life. In modern philosophical autobiography, insofar as we can speak of such a thing, the truth itself gradually becomes more and more closely identified with the philosopher who writes his life. This trend is most pronounced, of course, in Rousseau and Nietzsche, but it emerges already in Descartes.
Chapter 5
Philosophy and the Mirror of Nietzsche

The wise Rabbi Bunam once said in old age, when he had already grown blind: “I should not like to change places with our father Abraham! What good would it do God if Abraham became like blind Bunam, and blind Bunam became like Abraham? Rather than have this happen, I think I shall try to become a little more myself.”

The same idea was expressed with even greater pregnancy by Rabbi Zusya when he said, a short while before his death: “In the world to come I shall not be asked: ‘Why were you not Moses?’ I shall be asked: ‘Why were you not Zusya?’”


1. The difficulty of interpreting Nietzsche and its relation to the dual program of Ecce Homo.— Nietzsche was aware of the interpretive difficulties his writings pose for readers. Since Nietzsche himself raises this issue in Ecce Homo, and because Nietzsche scholarship has long focused on “metainterpretive” questions about how to approach Nietzsche’s texts, it seems sensible to begin our discussion of Nietzsche’s autobiography with some consideration of how to read Nietzsche’s. In a passage from Ecce Homo, famous among Nietzsche scholars, Nietzsche writes:

   Ultimately, nobody can get more out of things, including books, than he already knows (als er bereits weiss). For what one lacks access to from experience (vom Erlebnisse) one will have no ear (kein Ohr). Now let us imagine an extreme case: that a book speaks of nothing but events (Erlebnissen) that lie altogether beyond the possibility of any frequent or

---

232 Nietzsche, The Gay Science, §270. For my method of citing Nietzsche’s texts, including my use of translations, see note 4 below.
233 See the still-useful article by Steven Hales, “Recent Work on Nietzsche,” in the American Philosophical Quarterly, vol. 37, no. 4, October 2000, pp. 313-333. Hales argues convincingly that two kinds of debates characterize recent work on Nietzsche: first, debate about conceptual and philosophic issues and, second, what he calls the “metainterpretive disputes” referred to above. One might mention any number of studies that take such a metainterpretive approach to Nietzsche’s texts. An interesting, but somewhat technical, monograph is Eric Blondel’s Nietzsche: The Body and Culture, trans. Seán Hand (Stanford 1991), which discusses, among other topics, the question of the philosophical significance of Nietzsche’s use of metaphor, mythologism, paronomasia, metaplasia, apenthesis, and so forth. For a fine review of post-WWII Nietzsche scholarship in the United States, see Steven Taubeneck’s Afterword to his translation of Ernst Behler’s Confrontations: Derrida/Heidegger/Nietzsche (Stanford, 1991), pp. 159-177.
even rare experience (Erfahrung)—that it is the first language for a new series of experiences (Erfahrungen). In that case, simply nothing will be heard, but there will be the acoustic illusion that where nothing is heard, nothing is there. This is, in the end, my average experience (meine durchschnittliche Erfahrung) and, if you will, the originality of my experience (die Originalität meiner Erfahrung). Whoever thought he had understood something of me, had made up something out of me after his own image—not uncommonly an antithesis to me; for example, an “idealist”—and whoever had understood nothing of me, denied that I need be considered at all (EH “Books” §1, Kaufman translation/KSA 6: 299-300, my emphasis, translation slightly altered by me).234

Nietzsche’s average experience is of readers reading themselves into his texts, and he even ventures to say that this constitutes the originality of his experience. Like the rightwing Prussian newspaper, which amused Nietzsche by interpreting Beyond Good and Evil as something clearly inimical to his own thought, namely, “as the real and genuine Junker philosophy,” Nietzsche’s readers regularly read their own beliefs, hopes, and prejudices into his books (EH “Books” §1). They (we) make an image of ourselves (ourselves) out of Nietzsche’s texts, and this image, Nietzsche claims, is not uncommonly antithetical to what he really is. At least during his lifetime, he insists, his philosophy has been subject to nothing but misinterpretations.

For a thoughtful reader, the passage cited above suggests a number of questions. For example, if one cannot learn or experience anything that one does not already know from experience, then how is learning or new experience possible at all? (A very Greek

234 In most cases, I either use Walter Kaufmann’s translation or make my own. I have consulted three translations of Ecce Homo: Kaufmann’s (1967), Judith Norman’s (2005), and that of Duncan Large (2007). All translations have shortcomings. Gadamer: Jede Übersetzung ist wie ein Verrat (GW 8: 279). In my opinion, however, Kaufmann is still the best. One reason is that Nietzsche himself placed so much emphasis on the musicality of his style (see EH “Books” §4 and below), and I find that no translator captures the rhythm and tonality of Nietzsche’s German better than Kaufmann. Kaufmann’s translations are sometimes questionable but usually accurate. KSA stands for Kritische Studienausgabe (critical student edition), the standard critical edition of Nietzsche’s works in German, edited by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999, in 15 volumes). I refer to volume and page number, hence 6: 299-300 refers to volume 6, pages 299-300. Ecce Homo appears in volume 6 of the KSA.
question.) Here, however, the question that will interest us is whether Nietzsche’s experience is really so original as he claims. Are Nietzsche’s writings, as he suggests, truly an exception when it comes to individual readers making something out of them after their own image? Don’t readers always in some sense do this? Don’t they, in any case, always bring their beliefs and prejudices, their desires and fears, to the texts they read? One of the central points in Gadamer’s hermeneutics, it is worth remembering, is that it is impossible, even in theory, to approach a text entirely outside a certain framework of prejudices and beliefs. Rooted in the Heideggerian concept of Geworfenheit, or thrownness, Gadamer’s idea is that we are always already immersed in a lifeworld, prior to the encounter with a text. The lifeblood of this lifeworld is, moreover, made up of beliefs and prejudices, and not only according to Gadamer. Isn’t it inevitable that we as readers interpret every text after our own image, at least in the beginning, before we have made some progress within the hermeneutic circle? And, even then, is there not an irreducible subjective element in everything toward which a human being turns her attention?

One could cite texts endlessly in this connection. Rousseau (1990, p. 64) refers to “the natural game of amour-propre: one sees what one believes and not what one sees.” In a talk on Ecce Homo, Derrida suggests that “everything comes down to the ear” with which each one of is able to hear. John Stuart Mill, in his Autobiography (Ch. 1), shows how the Socratic method relates to popular prejudices and “the understanding which has made up all its bundles of associations under the guidance of popular phraseology.” In other words, individuals always come to philosophy full of unexamined presuppositions.

There is a wonderful passage in John Venn’s The Principles of Inductive Logic, originally published 1889, 1973 reprint by Chelsea Publishing Company New York, New York, wherein he demonstrates the proposition that “the complete attainment of the ideal position of the mere observer is nowhere to be secured even in Physics” (p. 21). Basically his proof is that, if one accepts the universality of the law of gravitation, it follows that the observer affects or exerts a force on that which he observes, for example, planetary bodies in astronomy. Of course, we can say that the force exerted by the observer is negligible and can be discounted, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t real.
In Nietzsche’s case, it is a matter of historical record that his writings have been interpreted and made use of in a remarkable variety of ways over the last hundred and some odd years, and not only by scholars and philosophers. Indeed, if we consider the history of Nietzsche’s reception, his remark about his average and original experience starts to take on an aura of plausibility. During World War I, the British, French, and American presses regularly attributed a goodly share of blame for the war to Nietzsche, and indeed, some bellicose Germans found in him a warlike jingo and preacher of heroism on the battlefield.\(^{237}\) He was admired by poets and romantics and revolutionaries, who saw their own concerns and desires reflected in his writings. In Germany, “his initial and most explosive and enduring impact was upon diverse circles of the intellectual, artistic, and literary avant-garde.”\(^{238}\) Later, during World War II, “Nietzsche was incorporated into the Nazi pantheon of German giants and became an integral part of National Socialist self-definition.”\(^{239}\) Philosophers with a metaphysical bent found in him a metaphysician, in Heidegger’s words, “the last metaphysician” of the Western tradition. As preparations were being made for the Blitzkrieg, Heidegger emphasized the importance of the will to power for Nietzsche and, in line with his own preoccupations,

\(^{237}\) See Steven E. Aschheim’s valuable reception history, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany 1890-1990* (University of California Press, 1992), pp. 128-129. The whole book is well-worth reading for those interested in the historical reception of Nietzsche’s thought in Germany. One wishes there were comparable books about other philosophers, such as Plato. Personally I would relish a book on Plato’s legacy in the Western World since, say, the Battle of Waterloo.

\(^{238}\) Ibid., p. 51. See also p. 6, where Aschheim argues that, “by and large, traditional elites (in Germany) continued to regard the philosopher as a dangerous and insane subversive. When the right did seriously adopt Nietzsche it was after World War I during the Weimar Republic, and then it was the work of mainly radical-revolutionary elements.” Further: “Far from representing the reactionary (or even conservative) sectors of society (Nietzscheans) were characteristically emancipatist, progressive, and moved by humanistic concerns. Socialism, anarchism, feminism, the generational revolt of the young—these were all touched by the libertarian magic of Nietzsche.”

\(^{239}\) Ibid., p. 233.
viewed Nietzsche as a thinker of being. After WWII, Walter Kaufmann’s translations of Nietzsche and his monumental study, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, in which he argued for a conception of Nietzsche as a philosopher of “experimentalism” and self-overcoming, decisively influenced the American reception of Nietzsche’s thought. Later, in the 1960s and 1970s, poststructuralist philosophers, like Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard, found in Nietzsche an anti-dialectical, anti-Hegelian thinker, whom they could enlist in their (libertarian?) resistance to what they viewed as the predominant homogenizing (and “phallogocentric”) forces and discourses that characterized a culture they took to be obsessed with what Lyotard called “performativity.” This predominantly French “new Nietzsche” hit the shores of the United States in the 1970s, around the time of the bicentennial.240 Meanwhile, those Nietzscheans who wanted the recognition of the predominant analytic movement in American and British philosophy, interpreted Nietzsche in light of the epistemological mania, and they are still at it. Is Nietzsche’s thought coherent? Is Nietzsche concerned with problems of knowledge? Of language? “Respectable” thought in general wanted to know, is Nietzsche’s thought respectable? Some answered no, others yes, depending on whether or not Nietzsche could meet their standard of “respectability.”241 Political philosophers read him politically (what politics do we derive from the doctrine of the will to power?), and systematizers read him to see if he had a system.242 In the United States, Nietzsche’s influence on popular culture has

240 David Allison’s edited collection, *The New Nietzsche* (MIT 1999, originally published 1977) was the text that introduced the (predominantly) French Nietzsche to many readers within the United States.

241 No one did more to make Nietzsche respectable in America than Walter Kaufmann.

242 One example of an attempt to read Nietzsche as a systematic thinker is John Richardson’s *Nietzsche’s System* (Oxford, 1996). Nietzsche’s relevance for political thought is more questionable. Strauss and Cropsey devote a chapter to Nietzsche in the *History of Political Philosophy* (Chicago 1987, Third Edition), but in Alan Ryan’s recent thousand page, two-volume
been significant; the Beats read Nietzsche in New York, and Jim Morrison read him in Los Angeles. Within the recent history of the American academy, Allan Bloom interpreted Nietzsche as both the principle source of moral relativism that Bloom found within the American university and as the antidote to the shallowness of this relativism. Nietzsche figures centrally in the thought of Harold Bloom and Richard Rorty, and to a lesser extent in that of Stanley Cavell. These and other thinkers have attempted to reconsider the meaning of philosophy and wisdom at the present historical moment and within an American context. One could go on and on listing different interpretations and uses to which Nietzsche’s writings have been put, and clearly there will have been something for everyone in Nietzsche.

So perhaps Nietzsche’s books really are a special case in this regard, as he suggests. Nietzsche himself says that his texts are all over the place, that his “art of style” is “the most multiple” (vielfachste) there has ever been. Throughout his writings, Nietzsche assumes a number of personae and employs multiple figures, in various contexts; his texts appear altogether multifaceted and multivoiced. A vast array of

---

243 Nietzsche appears on the first page of Jack Kerouac’s epoch-making novel On the Road. Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen (2012, pp. 252-253, and see note 14 below) notes another intriguing pop culture use of Nietzsche, namely, Hugh Hefner’s mention of him in the editorial to the first issue of Playboy. According to Hefner, gentleman like a nice cocktail, a bit of jazz, and a little chat about Nietzsche.


245 Again, see Ratner-Rosenhagen, pp. 263-305. I also cannot fail to mention the superb study by Geoff Waite, a serious contribution to political thought that takes up a position against Nietzsche and Nietzsche’s influence, particularly on the political Left: Nietzsche’s Corps/e: Aesthetics, Politics, Prophecy, or, the Spectacular Technoculture of Everyday Life (Duke University Press, 1996).

246 I take the term from Professor Evans.
personae jostles for position, sometimes agreeing with one another, at other times trying to outdo each other in the effort to state a worldview, a philosophy.

All this is common ground among serious readers of Nietzsche, scholars and others; the question that arises, however, is: why are Nietzsche’s texts like this? What purpose or purposes does this multiplicity serve? It seems that the multiplicity that characterizes Nietzsche’s work invites readers to see themselves in it as in a mirror, and one wonders: what is the purpose of this mirror? Is Nietzsche trying to make a mirror of the human world in all its diversity? One might retain certain doubts about this, especially since one might hear a fairly consistent voice running throughout Nietzsche’s writings, early to late, subtending the polyphony and play of masks. There can be no doubt that Nietzsche has been read and used in many different ways in the relatively small amount of time since the years after his collapse, when his writings first began to become famous. Perhaps it is a mistake to read Nietzsche as though there were only one facet or one voice there. His texts are almost endlessly complex, “wrapped in paradox after paradox,” to quote Erich Heller.247 Probably if you don’t recognize all the others, all the personae and voices, you miss the point. Probably this multiplicity is itself an important part of the point. Perhaps it is related to Nietzsche’s “paganism,” understood as a philosophical worldview that celebrates difference and individuality against the grand communal metanarratives that suggest there is only one right way to think, to act, to live.248

248 See especially *The Gay Science* §143, “The greatest advantage of polytheism.” Compare GS §117. For further insight into Nietzsche’s critique of morality metanarratives, see D §108. In this regard, TSZ, First Part, “On the Thousand and One Goals,” is also interesting, but there, too, one finds Zarathustra suggesting the idea of a new metanarrative that would unite all humanity in the pursuit of “one goal.”
How does the multiplicity of Nietzsche’s texts connect with what he is trying to do in *Ecce Homo*? Does *Ecce Homo* fit the pattern that is established by Nietzsche’s other books? In some sense, *Ecce Homo* is less multiple than many of Nietzsche’s other texts, and perhaps here, more than anywhere else in his work, Nietzsche’s own voice is to be heard in its purity. The principal subject of the book is Nietzsche himself. At the same time, Nietzsche wants to advance the idea that individual human beings should take up the project of becoming who or what they are.

In *Ecce Homo*, the title and subtitle lay out the two main purposes of the work. On the one hand, “*Ecce Homo,*” “behold the man,” indicates that in this work Nietzsche will try to say who he really is. On the other hand, “*Wie man wird, was man ist,*” how one becomes what one is, announces that this is not only a book about Nietzsche, but also about how anyone might come to be the being that he or she is. The title, as many have noted, comes from Jerome’s translation of John 19: 5 in the Christian Scriptures. “Ecce homo” is what Pontius Pilate says when he presents Jesus to the crowd that is calling for his blood. However parodic this may be, Nietzsche explicitly compares himself with the Christian Christ in the title of his autobiography. The Christian Christ probably figures more prominently in Nietzsche’s thought than it does in the thought of any other generally recognized major philosopher, excepting perhaps Augustine. The subtitle, meanwhile, is adapted from Pindar’s second *Pythian Ode*, where Pindar advises Hieron of Syracuse to “become such as you are, having learned what that is.”249 The title thus evokes the Christian tradition, whereas the subtitle harks back to ancient Greece. This reference on the one hand to Christianity, on the other to ancient Greece, mirrors exactly

the opposition of the final words of *Ecce Homo*, namely, “Dionysus against the Crucified.” I will not insist that Nietzsche intended the chiastic structure—in the case of the title and subtitle, Christianity comes first, Greece second; in the last words of the book this order is reversed—but I do think that understanding his view of the oppositional relationship between Christianity and Greece, between Dionysus and the Crucified, is essential for understanding what Nietzsche is up to in *Ecce Homo*. One key goal of the present chapter is to present what I take to be a new interpretation of this opposition and these last words.

A key way in which my interpretation of *Ecce Homo* departs from previous ones can be brought to light in terms of a memorable analogy employed by Slavoj Žižek. Žižek suggests that “the triad of paganism-Judaism-Christianity” repeats itself twice in modern philosophy, “first as Spinoza-Kant-Hegel, then as Deleuze-Derrida-Lacan” (Žižek 2004, p. 33). Žižek neglects to mention Nietzsche, though Nietzsche recognized many of his own most characteristic thoughts in Spinoza\(^{250}\) and inspired Deleuze. Hence Nietzsche is a key link in the modern movement of “paganism” within philosophy, which means at least that he denies a moral world order. At the level of being or nature, we are simply beyond good and evil. At the same time, there are also reasons why Žižek has to exclude Nietzsche from these triads. For one thing, central to my interpretation, is that in certain key contexts Nietzsche reduces Judaism and Christianity to a single phenomenon, which he further links to Platonism, since “Christianity is Platonism for the ‘masses’ (das

\(^{250}\) See, for example, Nietzsche’s 1881 postcard to Overbeck, where he announces his discovery of Spinoza. Nietzsche suggests he and Spinoza are as one in denying free will, purposes, the moral world order, the nonegotistical, and evil. Translated in Middleton (1996 p. 177).
Volk),” and to the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer. But what is even more
significant is that Nietzsche does not identify himself solely with paganism; rather, he
indicates that Judeo-Christianity, as well as what it represents (Plato, Schopenhauer, etc.),
is also part of what he is. The central argument of this chapter is therefore that Nietzsche
identifies himself with both of these forces, with paganism and Judeo-Christian
Platonism, at the same time. The true meaning of Ecce Homo’s last words, “Dionysus
versus the Crucified,” is not only, as almost everyone thinks, that Nietzsche identifies
himself with Dionysus and paganism against the “King of the Jews.” This is of course
undeniably true in some sense, but it is also not the whole story. On the contrary, what I
claim is that Nietzsche identifies himself with this opposition as such, that is, he himself
is, in his own person, Dionysus versus the Crucified. The reading of Ecce Homo
presented here will tend to confirm this view, but there are also numerous indications
throughout Nietzsche’s texts, especially his later texts, that it is an accurate and
defensible interpretation. As Erich Heller says, Nietzsche “once exclaimed in the secrecy
of his notebook,” that the “ruler’s virtues (Herrscher-Tugenden)” were to be understood
in terms of the formula “the Roman Caesar with the soul of Christ.” It cannot be stated

251 On the connection between Christianity and Platonism, see BGE Preface. Nietzsche’s thought
with respect to Judaism is complex, but on some level he definitely agrees with Lichtenberg, who
wrote, “In the end, we are nothing more than a sect of Jews.” The “we” refers, of course, to the
Germans but also to Christians in general. Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, Aphorismen (Manesse
Verlag, 1958), my translation, p. 375. For further insight into the complexity of Nietzsche’s
thought about Judaism see note 48 below. With respect to Lichtenberg, incidentally, it is worth
noting Nietzsche’s admiration for his writings, especially since this affinity is almost never
mentioned in the Nietzsche literature. In a discarded draft, apparently intended for EH “Clever”
§3, Nietzsche mentions his fondness for Lichtenberg (KSA 14: 477/rendered in English by WK,
on p. 339 of his translation). Much neglected in the English-speaking world, Lichtenberg was one
of Nietzsche’s forerunners as a writer of aphorisms in Germany.

252 KSA 11: 289. Kaufmann has this as §983 in his translation of Nachlass fragments, entitled The
Nietzsche, pp. 685-87. After Nietzsche went “insane” he signed letters both as Dionysus and as
the Crucified.
too emphatically that Nietzsche’s ideal is a kind of combination of the two spirits, or forces, that he identifies with Christ and Dionysus. I will call it an antithetical synthesis, which can be understood, why not, as a kind of Hegelian speculative concept. (Nietzsche, it goes without saying, would dislike the use of Hegelian concepts to characterize his philosophy.) Nietzsche’s own preferred name for this concept is, of course, der Übermensch.

What the rest of this chapter aims to show is that this antithetical synthesis is in some sense the very essence of Nietzsche, as he himself presents himself. Obviously Nietzsche sides with, or favors, that which is (whatever it is) symbolized by Dionysus, but neither can he do without the element of the negative that the Crucified represents. Further, the Dionysian logic, or the logic of amor fati, itself requires Nietzsche to affirm the role of the Crucified in human history, since this logic dictates “that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity” (EH “Clever” §10). Judaism, Platonism, and Christianity are themselves part of the reality that Nietzsche seeks to affirm. Nor have scholars paid enough attention to Nietzsche’s claim in Ecce Homo that he only attacks that which he honors:

attack is in my case a proof of good will (angreifen ist bei mir ein Beweis des Wohlwollens), sometimes even of gratitude. I honor, I distinguish by associating my name with that of a cause or a person: pro or con—that makes no difference to me at this point. When I wage war against Christianity I am entitled to this because I have never experienced misfortunes and frustrations from that quarter—the most serious Christians have always been well disposed toward me. I myself, an opponent of Christianity de rigueur, am far from blaming individuals from the calamity of millennia (EH “Wise” §7/KSA 6: 274-275).

Autobiography and self-presentation are undeniably the most prominent task of Ecce Homo, but we should also not forget the program indicated by the work’s subtitle.
In addition to telling about himself and his life, Nietzsche also wants to encourage us as individual readers to reflect on ourselves and to get involved in the project of becoming what we are. In *Living with Nietzsche*, Robert Solomon emphasizes the importance of this dimension within Nietzsche’s work, saying that he “reads Nietzsche as presuming…a powerful prejudice, that we are free to develop our character and our talents and it is our responsibility to do so.” And further that: “living with Nietzsche means taking our own potential—and our responsibility for that potential—seriously.” If not in a literal sense, Nietzsche wants to teach his readers how to become the authors of their own lives. One might reasonably say, then, that Nietzsche’s philosophy aims to promote a sort of autobiographical consciousness, especially in *Ecce Homo*. Nietzsche wants to advocate what he calls *Selbstbesinnung*, self-examination, on the part of individuals as well as humanity taken as a whole.

This becoming is to be affirmed by the individual who says, thus I willed it, I have lived, I have been myself. If, as Socrates suggests, philosophy is learning how to die, then for Nietzsche the proper words for the philosopher to say on her deathbed are: I am happy with the one I was and have become, which can be reduced to the formula: I will this unique life to recur eternally. Which can also be expressed by means of Nietzsche’s formula: *amor fati*. Even better of course is to be able to say this to oneself before one is about to die, and perhaps often.

---


254 Nehamas argues that this is precisely Nietzsche’s point. That Nietzsche aims to teach individuals how to create themselves as a kind of unity from multiplicity. See especially Ch. 6 of *Nietzsche Life and Literature*, which deals specifically with *Ecce Homo*.

255 See EH “Clever” §10. Compare also GS sections 276 and 340.

256 For some insight into Nietzsche’s thought about death, see *Daybreak* §349 and *The Gay Science* §278.
2. There is then at least a double program in *Ecce Homo* in accordance with the two titles of the book. Both of these programs, moreover, tie into Nietzsche’s presentation of a philosophical principle, which is his belief that a revaluation of values is both possible and desirable at this point in human history. One of the primary reasons that Nietzsche gives for his wanting to write and publish an autobiography is that he believes it to be his destiny to confront humanity with “the heaviest demand (der schwersten Forderung) ever made of it” (EH “Foreword” §1/KSA 6: 257, Large translation). This “heaviest demand” is the demand to revalue all values, which Nietzsche describes in the last chapter of *Ecce Homo* as his “formula for an act of supreme self-examination (Selbstbesinnung) on the part of humanity, become flesh and genius in me (der in mir Fleisch und Genie geworden ist)” (EH “Destiny” §1).\(^{257}\) *Selbstbesinnung*, which Kaufmann and Norman translate as “self-examination,” and which Large translates as “self-reflection,” also means that humanity is to become conscious of itself and to think about itself anew. Nietzsche elaborates on the theme of *Selbstbesinnung* in his discussion of *Daybreak* in *Ecce Homo*:

> My task (*meine Aufgabe*) of preparing a moment of the highest self-examination for humanity (*einen Augenblick höchster Selbstbesinnung der Menschheit*), a *great noon* (*einen grossen Mittag*), when it looks back and far forward, when it emerges from the dominion of accidents and priests and for the first time poses, *as a whole* (*als Ganzes*), the question *Why?* (*warum?*) And *For What?* (*wozu?*)—this task follows of necessity from the insight that humanity is *not* all by itself on the right way, that it is by no means governed divinely, that, on the contrary, it has been precisely among its holiest value concepts (*ihren heiligsten Werthbegriffen*) that the instinct of denial, corruption, and the *décadence*-instinct (*der décadence-Instinkt*) has ruled seductively. The question concerning the origin of moral values (*die Frage nach der Herkunft der moralischen Werthe*) is for me a question of the very first rank because it is crucial for the future of humanity (*die Zukunft der Menschheit*). The demand that we should believe that everything is really in the best of hands, that a book, the Bible,

---

\(^{257}\) Duncan Large notes that the expression “become flesh” is an allusion to John 1: 14, “And the word was made flesh.” See his translation of *Ecce Homo*, note to p. 88, which appears on p. 115.
offers us definitive assurances about the divine governance and wisdom in the destiny of man, is—translated back into reality—the will to suppress the truth about the pitiable opposite of all this; namely, that humanity has so far been in the worst of hands and that it has been governed by the underprivileged, the craftily vengeful, the so-called “saints,” these slanderers of the world and violators of man (EH “Daybreak” §2/KSA 6: 330-331; translation slightly altered by me).

Because he is the source of this heaviest demand, because it has become flesh and genius in him, Nietzsche says he feels a “duty (Pflicht)” to tell others who he is. By explaining how he arrived at the belief in the desirability of a revaluation of all values through his life and personal experience, Nietzsche aims to inform readers about the meaning and importance of this teaching. He also hopes that Ecce Homo will prevent people from doing mischief with him; he fears that one day people will pronounce him “holy” and set up a religion around him; he would rather be a buffoon than a holy man (EH “Destiny” §1). He prefers “to be even a satyr to being a saint” (EH “Foreword” §2).

3. A new kind of exemplary life.— As in the case of other philosophical autobiographies, Nietzsche means his autobiography to present an exemplary life and so to be instructive. He expects, however, that it will be exemplary in a strikingly new way. Because, while insisting on his own uniqueness, Nietzsche insists just as much on that of each one, at least as a possibility. For this reason, Ecce Homo aims to present one model, and not the model, of a philosophical becoming. Alexander Nehamas speaks to this dimension of Nietzsche’s project when he writes that:

(Nietzsche) does not believe that there exists a single proper kind of life or person. He thinks...that admirable people are one and all what he calls “individuals.” But the very notion of an individual is one that essentially refuses to be spelled out in informative terms. To give general directions for becoming an individual is surely...self-defeating.²⁵⁸

A little later in the same text, Nehamas says that, “to imitate Nietzsche properly would produce a creation which…would…be perfectly one’s own—something which is no longer an imitation” (ibid., my emphasis). On this interpretation, to be a Nietzschean means not to treat Nietzsche himself and his writings as a model to be scrupulously imitated, but rather to find a way to become yourself.

In this respect, the difference between Nietzsche’s autobiography and other philosophical autobiographies becomes clearer. Perhaps the contrast is clearest in the case of Rousseau, primarily because he and Nietzsche are close together in sharing an appreciation for the uniqueness of the human individual. The difference is that whereas Rousseau is fascinated by his own uniqueness, Nietzsche is more alive to the uniqueness of others and to the immense possibilities presented by the innumerable human beings now living and yet to be born. In this connection, we might see Rousseau as one of the first to formulate a strong conception of human uniqueness, and Nietzsche as one of those who extended this insight to give it a more universal application. In other words, Nietzsche radicalizes Rousseau’s insight be expanding it. In The Gay Science, Nietzsche expresses this awareness of human uniqueness very clearly:

> I should think that today we are at least far from the ridiculous immodesty that would be involved in decreeing from our corner that perspectives are permitted only from this corner. Rather has the world (die Welt) become “infinite” for us all over again, inasmuch as we cannot reject the possibility that it may include infinite interpretations (unendliche Interpretationen). (GS §374/KSA 3: 627).

This passage indicates how Nietzsche takes up and transforms another of Rousseau’s major ideas, the idea that human beings are distinguishable from all other animals because humans possess what Rousseau calls la faculté de se perfectionner, i.e., the
faculty of perfecting themselves (Rousseau 2011, p. 53). Whether one considers human beings collectively or individually, the point is that no one knows what human beings may yet become, which also means, what interpretations of actuality and of how one should live, are still possible. This idea is in stark contrast to the ancient view that humans have a fixed nature and that there is therefore a limit to the human capacity for change. Whereas Aristotle, for example, had maintained that, in practical life, there is only way to go right, while there are infinitely many ways to go wrong (see EN 1106b27-35), Nietzsche wants to entertain the idea that there are potentially many different ways to live, each one possessing its own unique shortcomings and advantages. What constitutes a good life differs from individual to individual and in different historical circumstances.

In addition to the subtitle of *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche gives ample other indications that this is what he is up to in this book. At the end of the Foreword, for example, Nietzsche quotes from his *Zarathustra*, when Zarathustra, at the end of the First Part of the book, admonishes his disciples, saying:

> You had not yet sought yourselves; and you found me.  
> Thus do all believers; therefore all faith amounts to so little.  
> Now I bid you lose me and find yourselves; and only *when you have denied me* will I return to you.

The challenge to his disciples, as to Nietzsche’s readers, is to seek themselves and to find themselves, an enterprise the importance of which Nietzsche reiterates at various points throughout *Ecce Homo*. The many readings of Nietzsche as a kind of existentialist are
aware that one of the fundamental questions Nietzsche repeatedly addresses to his readers is: “Is that your will?” (GS §383).

Nietzsche’s emphasis on difference coincides with the philosophy of self-becoming that he wants to advocate, not only in Ecce Homo, but in his work as a whole. But how does Nietzsche’s emphasis on individuals and self-becoming tie in with his teaching about the revaluation of values? The revaluation will have to take place in light of awareness of individual difference, and with the revaluation itself Nietzsche wants to affirm the innocence of these multiple individual becomings. The formula “Dionysus versus the Crucified” is the formula for Nietzsche himself.

4. Yet Ecce Homo is also undeniably Nietzsche’s autobiography, which is to say, it is his story about his own life and philosophical becoming. In the passage intercalated between the Foreword and the beginning of the first chapter, he says, “I tell my life to myself.” While writing for himself, he also writes for others, to show them (and us) how one becomes what one is by showing them how he became himself. In Ecce Homo, Nietzsche promises to tell us who he is. “For I am such and such a person,” he italicizes. “Above all, do not mistake me for someone else” (EH Foreword §1/KSA 6:257).

It is important to emphasize that Nietzsche knew something about autobiography and biography. In fact, this is a great understatement, because the biographical and the autobiographical alike were major preoccupations with Nietzsche throughout his life. Nietzsche was particularly interested in the connection between philosophy and the life of the philosopher, and, as we saw in the Introduction to the present work, he even ventures to suggest that all philosophies are nothing more than the disguised and perhaps

---

259 Nehamas, Solomon, and Pippin all emphasize this aspect of Nietzsche’s philosophy in their aforementioned monographs.
unacknowledged autobiographies of their creators. In works both early and late, both published and unpublished, Nietzsche returns again and again to consider the relation between philosophy and human life and, in particular, the relation between single philosophies and the lives and characters of the individual human beings who constructed them.

Nietzsche’s interest in autobiography can be traced back to his adolescence. One of Nietzsche’s biographers, Rüdiger Safranski (2002, p. 25), tells us that “during his high school and college years, from 1858 to 1868, Nietzsche penned no fewer than nine autobiographical sketches,” each one following “the general theme of ‘How I became what I am.’” As a student of classical philology, Nietzsche studied Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* extensively, and Diogenes was a significant source for Nietzsche’s early lectures on those he christened the “Pre-Platonic” philosophers.²⁶⁰

Nietzsche mentions his early studies of Diogenes in *Ecce Homo* (EH “Clever” §3). Commentators have rarely, if ever, noted how the style of *Ecce Homo* resembles that of the biographies in Diogenes’ *Lives*: a proliferation of anecdotes and characterizations coming in rapid succession, by no means always chronologically ordered. In light of his abiding interest in the connection between philosophy and both biography and autobiography, it is both fitting that Nietzsche’s final major work should be an autobiography, and reasonable to expect that when it came to working within this genre, Nietzsche knew what he was about.

Scholars have been perplexed by Nietzsche’s apparent claim to tell the whole truth about himself and his life in *Ecce Homo*. Unlike Augustine and Rousseau, both of whom express their struggle to say who they really are, Nietzsche seems to believe that he is fully capable of expressing himself and his life. Oscar Wilde’s “No artist is ever morbid. The artist can express everything.” would seem perfectly to characterize Nietzsche’s attitude to his own autobiography. This is not, of course, to say, that Nietzsche did not have an appreciation for the limitations of language. Quite the contrary is the case, as can be seen from numerous passages in Nietzsche’s work. Nietzsche nevertheless avows a certain self-knowledge in this text, however much readers may be inclined to doubt his claims. He also makes strong, perhaps extravagant, claims about his mastery of language, about how he has achieved a certain perfection of expression that allows him to communicate himself fully, without remainder.

5. *If this be madness, yet there is method in it.*—*Ecce Homo* is a strange philosophical autobiography for a number of reasons. In a memorable remark, Sarah Kofman says that,

---

261 See, for example, *The Gay Science*, sections 179, 244, and 354. Compare, too, GS §189. The unpublished fragment “On Truth and Lies in an Extramoral Sense” is highly relevant to this topic as well (KSA 1: 873-890; there is an English translation by Breazeale).

262 A footnote is the proper place to discuss philosophical and scholarly resistance to Nietzsche’s claims for his mastery of language. Of course one might question whether what he says here accurately reflects what human powers of expression are actually capable of doing, as well as what human knowers are actually capable of knowing. The relation between word and object, between word and feeling, remains, after all, a much-contested area, not only within philosophy but within modern cognitive psychology as well. Isn’t Rosenzweig, for example, correct, when he adduces the example of people’s proper names as being “sufficient witness to the fact that there is something exterior to man, a ‘without’ surrounding him”? (Rosenzweig 1999 p. 80). Part of this has to do with the fact that, as Eyers (2012, p. 20) puts it, the proper name is “chosen for the child even before birth,” and stems from some “opaque parental desire.” But Rosenzweig’s point also seems to be that a proper name doesn’t even really name. There is something that exceeds our linguistic capacities. In a very lively, often questionable, but generally illuminating treatment of *Ecce Homo*, Gary Shapiro employs the Lacanian matrix to suggest that Nietzsche is caught up in the imaginary and the symbolic without awareness of the real. The suggestion is that Nietzsche denies the real, and that, as a consequence, his text is haunted by the real, by the disavowed thing. For another Lacanian reading of Nietzsche, see Alenka Zupančič’s *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche’s Philosophy of the Two* (MIT 2003).
“Ecce Homo has to be considered, by far, the most ‘crazy’ (‘fou’) text in all of philosophy.” According to Kofman, the text’s “craziness” is related to the way that Nietzsche radically subverts the autobiographical genre. Ecce Homo is a highly “depersonalized” autobiography (22); “we can’t call Ecce Homo an autobiography without putting (the word) in quotations” (29). There is, Kofman seems to lament, neither “stable and substantial subject,” nor bios, in Ecce Homo. Indeed, in Ecce Homo, Nietzsche confronts us with the spectacle of the “death (mort)” of the subject and of “life.” The title of Kofman’s extensive commentary on Ecce Homo is Explosion, which reflects Nietzsche’s repeated use of this trope, for example, in his famous remark: “Ich bin kein Mensch, ich bin Dynamit” (EH “Destiny” §1/KSA 6: 365). Kofman, however, takes the explosion to refer to Nietzsche himself, to his personality. To paraphrase, she says there is more than one person in Nietzsche’s “I (‘ich’),” that there really is no unified person at all, that there is rather, “nothing but a superabundant accumulation of forces that explodes,” again and again (29-30). Kofman seems to interpret these explosions as “symptoms” of Nietzsche’s “madness (folie),” which, however, she also thinks Nietzsche is desperate to hide. The secret of the book, Kofman suggests, is that no one is really there at the center of these repeated explosions. Or that, if there is something there, it is “madness (folie).”

This is hardly Kofman’s last word, but I think I have given a fair presentation of an important dimension of her argument. This is important because I want to contest the longstanding idea that Ecce Homo is a “crazy (fou)” book and the product of “madness (folie).” It seems to me that Ecce Homo is far from crazy, that the Nietzsche of this text is

---

263 Sarah Kofman, Explosion I, (Paris: Galilée, 1992), p. 21. All translations of Kofman’s text are my own. To my knowledge, the book is unavailable in English translation.
no less a “stable and substantial subject” than others, and that the argument and rhetoric of the book are carefully wrought and wholly consistent, despite the obvious complexity. I believe that *Ecce Homo* has an argument and that this book, considered as a whole, is actually one of the most tightly and intricately designed in all of Nietzsche’s corpus. It is a Laertian self-portrait that moves in the last chapter toward a self-imposed simplification or concentration of what Nietzsche himself takes to be the essence of his philosophy. Because of this self-imposed simplification, Nietzsche’s autobiography also offers itself as a heuristic for reading his other texts, especially since Nietzsche provides comments on each of his major published works as part of his autobiography.

Except for the order in which Nietzsche discusses his published books, *Ecce Homo* does not for the most part proceed chronologically. To quote Duncan Large, “there are major chronological gaps in the narrative, and a great deal of basic information which one might legitimately expect to be provided in a biographical account is missing” (Large 2007, p. xi). If chronology is essential to narrative, then *Ecce Homo* is only a narrative work in a loose way of speaking. If narrative is essential to autobiography, then *Ecce Homo* is questionably an autobiography. It is not like Rousseau’s *Confessions*, or even those of Augustine, which despite their numerous digressions, prayers, and so forth, hew fairly closely to the chronology of life. To quote Walter *Kaufmann*, “the self-portrait (of *Ecce Homo*) is not naturalistic” (EH p. 202).

---

264 To make matters more difficult, what chronology there is in *Ecce Homo* suggests an embarrassing inconsistency in Nietzsche’s text. Nietzsche claims that he only started to become himself around 1876, and that many of his crucial thoughts have their origin beginning around then. He credits his sickness with bringing him to himself, as I discuss in detail below. But this chronology presents a problem because it relegates *The Birth of Tragedy* and the *Untimely Meditations* to the period before Nietzsche became himself, and yet even in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche argues that many of his central thoughts already appear in these works.
Despite the understandable reservations that its strangeness inevitably provokes, *Ecce Homo* clearly is an autobiography and a kind of “Geschichte meiner Seele.” The reader gets as much of a sense of Nietzsche as a person, his life, his tastes, his philosophy, as one gets of Augustine or Rousseau from their, arguably more standard, autobiographies. Nietzsche communicates the central, as well as the characteristic, *experiences* of his life, along with a strong impression of how he has lived and changed over time. Throughout the text he multiplies little anecdotes and brief sketches of various aspects of his character, a style familiar to readers of Diogenes Laertius. To say this again, apparently no one has noted the strong stylistic resemblance between *Ecce Homo* and Diogenes’ *Lives*. Nietzsche treats readers to tableaux of him wandering around like a miserable shadow in 1879; of him dancing in the mountains around Nice, around the time he was working on the third part of *Zarathustra* (EH “TSZ” §4); of him picking up and reading from his *Zarathustra*, when he would “walk up and down in (his) room for half an hour, unable to master an unbearable fit of sobbing” (EH “Clever” §4). We see him drinking grog and writing Latin essays at Schulpforta. Later, he tells us, he gave up alcohol entirely. We learn of his preference for Piedmontese cuisine; of his dislike of coffee and for sitting. Nietzsche tells us that as a teacher at the Pädagogium in Basel, he made the troublemakers behave and the lazy students work hard (EH “Wise” §4). He tells us how once, looking for a place to stay, he went to the papal residence in Rome to ask if they had a quiet room for a philosopher (EH “TSZ” §4).

Taking all this into account, Kofman’s claim that “*Ecce Homo* is the most ‘depersonalized’ autobiography there could be” appears less convincing. One clearly gets
a picture of Nietzsche the man and his life from *Ecce Homo*. It is also significant that Nietzsche shows himself as an individual and not merely as a type.

Nietzsche does frequently employ the detonative trope highlighted by Kofman. But if not to the repeated outbursts of his madness, then what is Nietzsche getting at with this metaphor? In one passage, he writes, “I understand the philosopher as a terrible explosive, endangering everything (als einen furchtbaren Explosionsstoff, vor dem Alles in Gefahr ist)” (EH “The Untimelies” §3). Socrates is in the background here, as well as other philosophers who were perceived as endangering the established order. For Nietzsche, the philosopher is destructive, though not merely so, for he is also creative, and even needs to be destructive, in order to create.

6. In terms of its design, *Ecce Homo* does have a surface order that readers can easily appreciate, corresponding to the way Nietzsche divided up the book: a Foreword, the famous intercalated passage, three chapters (“Why I am so Wise,” “so Clever,” and “Write Such Good Books,” respectively), subsequent sections in which Nietzsche discusses each of his published writings in turn, ten different books in all, and finally, the last chapter entitled “Why I Am a Destiny.” Counting the intercalated passage and the ten parts devoted to Nietzsche’s books, *Ecce Homo* has sixteen major parts in all.

This order, of course, tells us little about what actually happens in *Ecce Homo*, about how the argument of the text is to be construed by us, its readers. To quote Kaufmann again, it is hard to disagree with the statement that *Ecce Homo* “is not easily accessible.” (p. 214). Nietzsche’s text makes special demands on the reader, which are consonant with his desire that readers should take up the project of becoming themselves.
This is a peculiar conception of leading-the-soul (ψυχαγωγία, psuchagôgia), but it certainly intensifies the experience of the reader’s freedom.

7. **Sickness as central to Nietzsche’s self-conception.**— One of the most surprising features of *Ecce Homo* is the central role that sickness (Krankheit) plays in Nietzsche’s life story. Probably no commentator on *Ecce Homo* has given this aspect its proper weight, but it is the key to my interpretation of the text. Nietzsche’s view of sickness is counterintuitive, because sickness is naturally regarded as an essentially bad condition or negative experience. Nietzsche, by contrast, attributes a positive role to sickness in his life. Sickness helped him, he says, to become himself, so much so that, if he’d never been sick, he might have missed out on the opportunity for the self-realization he claims to have achieved. In another text of 1888, *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, Nietzsche succinctly expresses his belief about the role of sickness in his life:

> And as for my long illness (Siechtum), do I not owe it indescribably more than I own to my health (Gesundheit)? I owe it a higher health (eine höhere Gesundheit)—one which is made stronger by whatever does not kill it. *I also owe my philosophy to it* (NCW Epilogue §1/KSA 6: 436; translation slightly altered by me).  

Obviously Nietzsche’s “infirmity,” his “sickness,” looms very large in his thought about his own life and philosophy. The question that then arises is: how exactly did sickness come to assume such a prominent role for Nietzsche? However perverse Nietzsche’s estimation of sickness might appear, he clearly has certain reasons for going against the common sense view and crediting sickness with a beneficial role in his life.

One thing that Nietzsche wants to show in *Ecce Homo* is that his life exemplifies how wisdom can be won from illness, since on his account sickness helped him to

---

become himself, to achieve a “higher health,” as well as his own, peculiar philosophy.  

More specifically, Nietzsche claims both that sickness gave him special powers and that it provided an occasion for other, latent powers to come into play, powers which he associates with what he calls “the great health (die grosse Gesundheit).” In Ecce Homo, Nietzsche identifies five reasons why he is grateful for his experience of sickness: first, sickness prompted him to stop living “idealistically” and “selflessly;” in other words it freed him up, he claims, to become himself. Second, sickness transformed him into a dialectical philosopher, like Socrates. Third, Nietzsche says sickness taught him about, and ultimately allowed him to free himself from, ressentiment. Fourth, Nietzsche claims that his experience of sickness was beneficial insofar as it was counterbalanced by his more characteristic and fundamental experience of health. This opposition between health and sickness in him opened up for Nietzsche the possibility of a revaluation of values. The desirability of a revaluation of values is precisely the philosophical principle that Nietzsche wants to advance in Ecce Homo, and he offers it as the starting point for future philosophy. The discovery and possibility of the revaluation, however, hinges on Nietzsche’s experience “in questions of décadence” (EH “Wise” §1), décadence being more or less synonymous with sickness, both here in Ecce Homo and elsewhere in Nietzsche’s writings. Fifth and finally, sickness forced Nietzsche to give up the philosophy of pessimism to which he had previously subscribed, but here it was his underlying health that took his sickness as an occasion to decide against philosophical pessimism. His basic healthiness allowed him to take sickness as an occasion to branch out and formulate a new philosophy.

266 The phrase comes from a talk Jonathan Lear gave at Duquesne University on April 12, 2013.
8. In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche says that before he became sick, he lived selflessly, by which he means that he went along with the crowd and lived as an “idealist.” Difficult as it may be for us to think of Friedrich Nietzsche as an idealist and as going along with the crowd, this is what he says about himself at that time. In a characteristic passage, describing his years as a professor at Basel, he writes:

> During my Basel period my whole spiritual diet, including the way I divided up my day, was a completely senseless abuse of extraordinary resources, without any new supply to cover this consumption in any way, without even any thought about consumption and replenishment. Any refined self-concern (*Selbstigkeit*), any protection by some commanding instinct was lacking; I simply posited myself as equal to any nobody; it was a “selflessness” (*Selbstlosigkeit*), an oblivion of all distance between myself and others that I shall never forgive myself. When I was close to the end, *because* I was close to the end, I began to reflect on this fundamental unreason of my life—this “idealism.” Only my *sickness* brought me to reason (*Die Krankheit brachte mich erst zur Vernunft*) (EH “Clever” §2/KSA 6: 283 following Nietzsche’s italics as they appear in the KSA).

“Only my *sickness* brought me to reason,” expresses a theme to which Nietzsche returns again and again in *Ecce Homo*. Sickness was valuable to him because it prompted him to take a step back and consider how he was living. In other words, it created a distance for reflection, reflection being by its very nature impossible without distance.

There is a sense in which the key year in Nietzsche’s autobiography is not 1881, when he first had the thought of the eternal recurrence, but rather 1876, when he experienced the equivalent of a conversion (περιπέτεια). The year 1876 marks the reversal, or περιπέτεια (*peripeteia*), in Nietzsche’s life. Of this time, he writes:

> It was then that my instinct (*mein Instinkt*) made its inexorable decision against any longer yielding (*Nachgeben*), going along (*Mitgehn*), and confounding myself (*Mich-selbst-verwechseln*). Any kind of life, the most unfavorable conditions, sickness, poverty—anything seemed preferable to that unseemly “selflessness” (“Selbstlosigkeit”) into which I had got myself originally in ignorance and youth and in which I had got stuck
later on from inertia (aus Trägheit) and so-called “sense of duty” (aus sogenanntem “Pflichtgefühl”) (EH “HAH” §4/KSA 6: 326).

At the moment of reversal, there is always a decision close by. In a definite sense, the decision itself is the reversal, as it is in the other philosophical autobiographies we have considered. What decides here is not “Nietzsche,” but what he calls “mein Instinkt.” He suggests, rather paradoxically, that he himself didn’t know what he was doing: “ignorance and youth” had led him to the point where “inertia” and “sense of duty” had him trapped in an uncongenial routine. It is hardly necessary to state that the experience Nietzsche describes is a common one, and also that it is difficult, once in, to slip the trap prepared by one’s own history and professional training. But, as every schoolchild knows, sickness can be a path to freedom and a break in the oftentimes dreary routine of schooldays. In Nietzsche’s case, too, sickness came to the rescue:

Here it happened in a manner that I cannot admire sufficiently that, precisely at the right time, my father’s wicked heritage (jene schlimme Erbschaft) came to my aid—at bottom, predestination to an early death. Sickness detached me slowly (Die Krankheit löste mich langsam heraus): it spared me any break, any violent and offensive step. Thus I did not lose any good will and actually gained not a little. My sickness also gave me the right to change all my habits (Gewohnheiten) completely; it permitted, it commanded me to forget; it bestowed on me the necessity (Nöthigung) of lying still, of leisure (Müssiggang), of waiting and being patient.—But that means, of thinking! (Aber das heisst ja denken!) (EH “HAH” §4/KSA 6: 326)

Sickness gave Nietzsche an excuse to retire that others understood and respected; it allowed him to escape from his habitual routine and the “sense of duty” that had made him stick to it. But if sickness gave Nietzsche freedom from his habits and the demands of his profession, it also gave him freedom to think. But then Nietzsche doesn’t speak of freedom in this context, but rather, of necessity. Sickness compelled him to give up his habits, to forget his stupid routine, and it imposed lying still and idleness (Müssigang) on
him as a necessity. Idleness here should be understood in light of the Greek, and essentially Platonic, conception of \( \sigma\chi\omega\lambda\eta \) (scholê), i.e., leisure, free time, idleness. Leisure is essential for philosophy or science to emerge.\(^{267}\) Nietzsche says that sickness made leisure necessary for him. In *Twilight of the Idols*, he had written: “Müssigang ist aller Psychologie Anfang. Wie? wäre Psychologie ein – Laster?” (KSA 6: 59). “Idleness is the beginning of all psychology. What? Would psychology then be – a vice?” The passage alludes to a German proverb (as noted by WK in *The Portable Nietzsche*, p. 466), which says, *Müssiggang ist aller Laster Anfang*, that is, idleness is the source of all vices. Similar to the English proverb about the devil finding work for idle hands, this is the voice of “the sacred cause of labor,” of the “work ethic,” in its purest form, and work is opposed to philosophy, insofar as philosophy requires leisure. (Two of the most brilliant pages ever written on this topic can be found in Leo Strauss’ *Natural Right and History*, pp. 257-258, in the context of a discussion of Rousseau, no less.) As Karl Löwith has noted, Nietzsche is at one with Plato, Aristotle, and other representatives of the ancient tradition in championing the *vita contemplativa*, even while Nietzsche also thinks that the modern world is far more inimical to such a life than the ancient polis ever was.\(^{268}\)

Sickness freed Nietzsche from philology; it freed him from books. “For years I did not read a thing—the greatest benefit I ever conferred on myself.” Nietzsche’s ambivalence with respect to books is profound, because books take us out of ourselves and away from ourselves, and in some sense compel us to submit to the will of another.

---

\(^{267}\) See, for example, *Theaetetus* 172d175e. Leisure is a central theme in Plato’s *Phaedrus*. See also Aristotle, *Metaphysics* A, 981b15-25. We saw in the previous chapter that Descartes and Vico also placed significant emphasis on the importance of leisure for philosophical activity.

In this way, Nietzsche is very similar to Rousseau, who also thinks that books have the capacity to alienate us from our true selves. Relative to this forced prohibition against reading, Nietzsche discusses how in the midst of his illness his “deepest self” gradually emerged:

That deepest self (jenes unterste Selbst), which had become entombed and silent as a result of continually having to listen to other selves (and indeed that is what reading means!), awakened slowly, shyly, doubtfully—but finally it spoke again. Never have I had so much happiness in myself as in the sickest and most painful times of my life: one has only to look at Daybreak, or perhaps The Wanderer and his Shadow, in order to grasp what this “return to myself” was: a superlative kind of convalescence (Genesung). The other (convalescence) merely followed from this one (same section as above, KSA 6: 326, but this is my translation).

Here sickness itself appears paradoxically as the highest kind of convalescence, but of course this isn’t really a paradox according to Nietzsche’s way of thinking. Sickness prompted an improvement in Nietzsche’s condition; it taught him to stop living mindlessly, as most people do, and to begin taking seriously questions that are usually ignored by philosophers and other people alike, especially such questions as relate to human life and about how one is actually to live. For this reason, questions concerning nutrition, place, climate, recreation, and “the whole casuistry of selfishness (die ganze Casuistik der Selbstschaft),” assume a central place within the argument of Ecce Homo (EH “Clever” §10/KSA 6: 295). Most of the second chapter of Ecce Homo, “Why I Am So Clever,” is devoted to a consideration of these questions. Nietzsche says he came to see how these, arguably more mundane concerns, actually have a far greater importance for human life than traditional philosophical, and Christian, concerns about God, soul, the beyond, and so forth (see EH “Clever” §1, compare “Destiny” §8).

Nietzsche thus opposes a kind of “realism” to what he calls “idealism,” and for him “idealism” is a kind of “anti-nature” and not wanting to see the world as it actually is. This idealism has both grander and more mundane forms. Platonism, the philosophy of Schopenhauer, and, above all, Christianity are prime examples for Nietzsche of the anti-natural approach to life (see EH “BT” §2). Nietzsche also describes these belief-systems as “nihilistic,” by which he means that, by negating the only world that there is in favor of an “imaginary” beyond, these belief-systems negate life. Nietzsche also gives more commonplace examples of this “idealistic” tendency as well, for example, when he scoffs at the ideal of classical education in Germany. He finds it amusing to imagine a “classically educated” man with a Leipzig accent (“Clever” §1, the quotation marks are Nietzsche’s). The point can be stated in the form of a question: what does classical education have to do with living in nineteenth-century Leipzig? Nietzsche suggests that such education is “idealistic,” not “realistic,” because it ignores humanlife. In general, Nietzsche lambasts the Germans for being idealists in every way. The Germans have no historical sense; they are nationalists and even racists; through Luther, Germany ruined the Renaissance; German philosophy is rife with counterfeiters and veil-makers; and the Germans not only lack, but don’t even want, clarity about the real world.

Just prior to the passage quoted above, Nietzsche confesses that he has “no welcome memories whatever” from his entire childhood and youth. Hyperbolic though this statement no doubt is, it serves further to illustrate Nietzsche’s point about how, prior to his sickness, he lived “selflessly,” “idealistically,” ignoring physiology and real life. He ate “selflessly,” he listened to music “selflessly,” he became a philologist “selflessly,” and so on. Insofar as one acts or does things without considering what is truly important
in, and for, humanlife, one acts “selflessly,” “idealistically,” in Nietzsche’s sense of the term. In his own life, it was sickness that brought him to reason and reality.

9. Nietzsche also claims that his long illness turned him into a kind of Socratic philosopher. Nietzsche believes that Socrates’ philosophy is itself inseparable from sickness. If for Plato and Aristotle philosophy begins with wonder, for Nietzsche it begins with illness, at least where Socrates and his ilk are concerned (the Presocratics are perhaps another matter for Nietzsche). One has to be sick in order not to go along with the happy herd, and the happy herd has no use for sick philosophers. It is only when the herd itself begins to become sick, moreover, that it becomes susceptible to the extreme form of sickness that Nietzsche identifies with dialectical, Socratic philosophy. As Nietzsche says, “the decadent typically chooses means that are disadvantageous for him,” and this is particularly true of the ailing community insofar as it welcomes philosophy (EH “Wise” §2).

Readers of Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Twilight of the Idols* will be familiar with Nietzsche’s arguments about Socrates, which he both refers to and revisits in *Ecce Homo*. “My readers,” he says, “know perhaps in what way I consider dialectic as a symptom of décadence; for example in the most famous case, the case of Socrates” (EH “Wise” §1/KSA 6: 265). According to Nietzsche, something has to go radically amiss in order for a philosopher like Socrates to emerge. Nietzsche’s idea seems to be that happy, well-turned out human beings are indifferent to the search for reasons, to the Socratic “magic…of cause and effect, of ground and consequence” (D §544). Why, after all, should I bother to ask what things are, and about how I should live, when I am already healthy and happy with my life?
Nietzsche also talks about such communal illness in terms of the demise of the ability to live according to instinct. With the onset of the illness, one begins to doubt oneself; instead of acting, one withdraws to think about how one should act. Writing about *The Birth of Tragedy* in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche boasts that he was the first to recognize Socrates as:

an instrument of Greek disintegration, as a typical décadent (*als Werkzeug der griechischen Auflösung, als typischer décadent*)...“Rationality” against instinct (*“Vernunftigkeit’ gegen Instinkt*). “Rationality” at any price as a dangerous force that undermines life (*als gefährliche, als leben-untergrabende Gewalt*) (EH BT §1/KSA 6: 310)!

In the first section of “Why I Am So Wise,” Nietzsche draws attention to the turning point of his life mentioned above that figures prominently at certain key junctures in *Ecce Homo* (especially in the part on *Human All-Too-Human*). This was the period around 1876-1880, or so, prior to Nietzsche’s writing *The Gay Science*, which marks a new period of health. Nietzsche says that in 1879, he reached the lowest point of his vitality; he says, “I still lived, but without being able to see three steps ahead.” He tells of how he retired from his professorship in Basel and wandered around “like a shadow.” He spent the winter in Naumberg, of all places, and states that this was his absolute minimum. He began the *Wanderer and His Shadow* at that time, and says “doubtless, I then knew about shadows.”

Work on *Daybreak* commenced the next winter, in Genoa, but Nietzsche tells us that he was still ailing. “The perfect brightness and exuberance of the spirit, reflected in this work, is compatible in my case not only with the most profound physiological weakness, but even with an excess of pain” (“Wise” §1, my emphasis). He recalls how he

---

270 Again, see the Preface to the second edition of *The Gay Science*, signed 1886 at Ruta, near Genoa, especially sections 1 and 2.
had a three-day migraine, “accompanied by laborious vomiting of phlegm.” But in the midst of all that, he claims, he “possessed a dialectician’s clarity par excellence,” and that at this time he was able to think through “with very cold blood matters for which under healthier circumstances I am not mountain-climber, not subtle, not cold enough” (ibid., my emphasis). At this point, Nietzsche makes the connection to Socrates explicit; to repeat, he says that “my readers know perhaps in what way I consider dialectic as a symptom of decadence; for example in the most famous case, the case of Socrates.”

Nietzsche suggests that *Daybreak* epitomizes his sick or décadent philosophy. If dialectic is the symptom of sickness, and if sickness isolates one from the community, then *Daybreak* might be read as the product of the breakdown of the communal authority in Nietzsche. His sickness gives him the distance necessary to see moral values from the outside, allowing him to examine dialectically the “moral prejudices” of his own political community, as well as those of other political communities both in his own time and throughout history. As opposed to ailing ones, healthy communities are held together by authority, not by reason (see “The Problem of Socrates,” in *Twilight*). Nietzsche’s argument pertains to the breakdown of the authority of the political and cultural regime, a general decline that he sees as being most advanced in the person of the philosopher. Similar in this respect to Vico, Nietzsche believes that the authority of the regime rests on prejudices, especially moral prejudices; more or less “healthy” communities run more or less smoothly on the basis of unexamined assumptions. Another name for these unexamined assumptions is *tradition*. The philosopher, at least one of the Socratic sort, emerges only when the authority of the old beliefs is already in decline. The community is already sick, but because he embodies the communal sickness to a higher power, the
philosopher is able to accelerate the advance of this disease. The authority of the old beliefs is breaking down in each one of the individuals that comprise the political community, but the philosopher still appears extraordinary because in him the general breakdown is far more advanced. Nietzsche believes that in his own era Germany and Europe in general are going through a similar period of decadence, which he famously connects with the “death of God” and the breakdown of the Judeo-Christian worldview.

But this experience is not merely negative, and the decomposing organism of the political community may provide the matter out of which a new humanity can come into being. On Nietzsche’s account, the work of sickness—which can be likened to the labor of the negative in Hegel—is necessary in order for change to occur. It is clear, I think, that Nietzsche himself seeks a constructive alternative to the decaying belief-systems that he sees all around him.

10. Ressentiment and its relation to sickness.— According to the argument of “The Problem of Socrates,” in Twilight of the Idols, dialectic springs from ressentiment and the associated desire for revenge. But what is ressentiment? And against whom, or what, does it desire to take revenge? Nietzsche’s answer to the second question is in some sense straightforward; he says, it is the desire for revenge against well-turned out human beings, the “happy animals” and “good cows.” In On the Genealogy of Morals, ressentiment is the key motivating factor behind the Sklavenaufstand in der Moral, the slave-uprising in morals, through which the slaves seek to revenge themselves on the masters. In Ecce Homo, Nietzsche says one of the new truths he uncovered in the Genealogy was that Christianity was born out of the spirit of ressentiment, that

---

271 See GS §24.
Christianity itself represents “the great rebellion against the dominion of noble values (der grosse Aufstand gegen die Herrschaft vornehmer Werthe)” (EH “GM”/KSA 6: 352). Yet it is important to note that Nietzsche also thinks that it was only with this great rebellion that human beings became truly interesting. Further, this rebellion could never have succeeded if the old order, the order of “noble values,” had not already been in decline.

In Ecce Homo, Nietzsche confesses that he has had firsthand experience of ressentiment. He also emphasizes how his “protracted sickness (meiner langen Krankheit)” gave him both “freedom from ressentiment (die Freiheit vom Ressentiment)” and “enlightenment about ressentiment (die Aufklärung über das Ressentiment)” (EH Wise §6). Nietzsche says “the problem is far from simple.” A full understanding and a thorough exposition of the concept would depend on a close reading of all those texts in which Nietzsche elaborates the workings of ressentiment, but such an investigation lies beyond the scope of the present work. In the main, I am interested here only in what Nietzsche says about ressentiment in Ecce Homo, and especially in the connection between sickness and ressentiment that Nietzsche establishes as part of the book’s overarching argument. What he says about ressentiment in Ecce Homo nevertheless throws a great deal of light on what Nietzsche thinks with this concept. Ressentiment, it turns out, is the desire for the world to be other than it is, and as such, we might see it as the source for Nietzsche of all so-called normativity, or any set of beliefs about how the
world should be. Ressentiment is therefore also closely connected for Nietzsche with the idealistic, anti-natural, and nihilistic philosophies and religions discussed above.

Alluding to his aforementioned ability to reverse perspectives, to see things by turns from the perspective of decadence and from that of health, Nietzsche claims that to understand ressentiment, one needs to have experienced it “from strength as well as from weakness.” In an important passage he writes:

> If something must be said in general against being sick (Kranksein) and against being weak (Schwachsein), then it is that when one is sick and weak, the proper saving-instinct (der eigentliche Heilinstinkt) of human beings, which is the defense-and-attack-instinct (der Wehr- und Waffen-Instinkt), becomes worn out (mürbe). One doesn’t know how to get away from anything, to get over anything, to rebuff anything – everything hurts. People and things come intrusively near, experiences strike too deeply, and memory is an ulcerous wound. Being sick (Kranksein) is itself a kind of ressentiment (EH “Wise” §6/KSA 6: 272, my translation).

The sick person (der Kranke) is more or less completely vulnerable to the world and can no longer maintain his independence from everything else, for example, from other people and things. Pushed around by everything, hurt by everything, the sick one experiences the world as too much. In this condition, Nietzsche suggests, the desire to take revenge on everything arises naturally. Since everything hurts the sick one, the sick one desires to lash out and retaliate against so many sources of suffering. Nietzsche’s response to this, the “remedy (Heilmittel)” he recommends to the sick one, is to do nothing, is to cease from reacting at all. His name for this remedy is “Russian fatalism,”

---

272 Heidegger gives this a metaphysical spin, interpreting ressentiment as clinging to the idea of an unchanging being because of a hatred of time and becoming. Compare EH “BT” §3, where Nietzsche describes his conception of Dionysian philosophy: “The affirmation (die Bejahung) of passing away and destroying, which is the decisive feature (das Entscheidende) of a Dionysian philosophy; saying Yes to opposition and war; becoming (Werden), along with a radical repudiation of the very concept of ‘being’ (‘Sein’)—all this is clearly more closely related to me than anything else thought to date” (KSA 6: 313, WK’s translation does not have the quotation marks around “being,” but they appear in the KSA).
“that fatalism without revolt which is exemplified by the Russian soldier who, finding a campaign too strenuous, finally lies down in the snow.” In Nietzsche’s case, Russian fatalism meant “tenaciously clinging for years to all but intolerable situations, places, apartments, and society, merely because they happened to be given by accident: it was better than changing them, than feeling that they could be changed.” He goes on to explain the reason for this in some detail:

Because one would use oneself up too quickly if one reacted in any way, one does not react at all any more: this is the logic. Nothing burns one up faster than the affects of ressentiment. Anger, pathological vulnerability, impotent lust for revenge (Rache), thirst for revenge (Rache), poisons-mixing in any sense—no reaction could be more disadvantageous for the exhausted: such affects involve a rapid consumption of nervous energy, a pathological increase of harmful excretions—for example, of the gall bladder into the stomach. Ressentiment is what is forbidden par excellence for the sick (für den Kranken)—it is their specific evil—unfortunately also their most natural inclination (EH “Wise” §6/KSA 6: 272-273)

Nietzsche’s enlightenment about ressentiment comes from his experience of being sick and hence naturally inclined to resentfulness. He learned that ressentiment becomes creative in its desire for revenge, and that the most intelligent and creative amongst the sick take revenge on life by teaching other worlds, or “true worlds.” These “true worlds,” or worlds behind the world, are the means by which the resentful ones revenge themselves on life. This life, the only life we know, is judged by them and found wanting. Nietzsche, however, learned to free himself from ressentiment by not reacting to his own desire for revenge. Instead, he says, he learned simply to accept things as they were whenever he found himself in this situation; he forbid himself the desire to react, ceasing to struggle or to wish that things were otherwise. Later, when he had regained his health, he says he was even more able to resist resentful feelings: “During periods of decadence I forbade myself such feelings as harmful; as soon as my vitality was rich and proud
enough again, I forbade myself such feelings as *beneath* me” (ibid.). *Ressentiment* just makes the sick even worse, but Nietzsche’s fundamental health and vitality allowed him, even in the worst cases, not to act on the promptings of *ressentiment*. His “philosophy” has “seriously pursued the fight against vengefulness and rancor,” and this involved, he claims, his own overcoming of the negative affects of *ressentiment*. For Nietzsche, Socrates provides an illuminating contrast to his own practice, because Nietzsche wants to interpret Socrates’ philosophical practice as through and through motivated by the desire to take revenge on the world as it actually is. At the same time, as we have seen, Nietzsche clearly identifies with Socrates in a significant way, saying that like Socrates he too was occasionally a sick or *décadent* dialectician.

11. *Nietzsche’s “dual ancestry.”* — But if Nietzsche was sick just like Socrates, how could he be any better than Socrates? Nietzsche answers that he had a countervailing experience of health (*Gesundheit*). Although he clearly maintains the importance of sickness in his life, Nietzsche argues that it is less fundamental than his experience of health. “As *summa summum*, I was healthy; as an angle, as a specialty, I was a decadent” (EH “Wise” §2/KSA 6: 266). Nietzsche claims that he was, and is, basically healthy, that health as he conceives it determined his basic outlook. It was this underlying health that made even sickness an occasion for him to advance and improve himself and his philosophy. The first two sections of “Why I Am So Wise” in particular establish health and sickness as the basic points of reference in Nietzsche’s autobiography.

The first section of “Why I Am So Wise,” begins with Nietzsche meditating on his relation to his parents and claiming that he himself is a mixture of the two opposing qualities they represent. One parent represents ascent; the other, decline; and Nietzsche
claims these two tendencies are counterbalanced in him. The passage is worth quoting in full:

The good luck of my existence (meines Daseins), its singularity (Einzigkeit) perhaps, lies in its undoing (Verhängnis): to express it in the form of a riddle, I am already dead like my father, while, like my mother, I still live and become old. This dual ancestry (diese doppelte Herkunft), at the same time from the highest and the lowest rung on the ladder of life, at once décadent and beginning – this, if anything at all, explains that neutrality, that freedom from party in relation to the total problem of life (im Verhältnis zum Gesammtprobleme des Lebens), which perhaps distinguishes me. I have a finer nose for the signs of ascent and decline than any person has ever had, I am the teacher par excellence with respect to this,—I know both, I am both (ich kenne Beides, ich bin Beides) (“Wise” §1/KSA 6: 264, my translation).

In light of Nietzsche’s other comments about his parents later in Ecce Homo, what he says about them here is somewhat puzzling, and there seems to be some confusion amongst scholars about how to interpret this riddle. This passage is usually, and I think correctly, taken to imply that Nietzsche associates his father with death and decline and his mother with ascent and life. In light of the positive tenor of his later comments about his father, however, and the extremely scathing character of his later remarks about his mother, what Nietzsche says about them here is actually rather riddling. Nietzsche presents his father as a kind of otherworldly figure, “delicate, kind, and morbid,” “more a gracious memory of life than life itself.” These qualities suggest the anti-natural tendencies that Nietzsche associates with sickness, décadence, and “idealism.” His mother, by contrast, however unsavory a figure, seems to symbolize for him rude health and life. If his mother, along with his sister, is also “the greatest objection to ‘eternal return.’” Nietzsche’s “truly abysmal thought,” then isn’t it clear that Nietzsche sides in a definite sense with what his father represents, and therefore, with “death,” “decline,”

Nietzsche wants to show that, however much he may have overcome ressentiment and “idealism” in his own life, he nevertheless cannot be properly understood without taking into account these “sick” elements.

12. The revaluation of all values as a result of Nietzsche’s dual nature, and why there may be a third in addition to the two.— The interplay of these two countervailing experiences, sickness and health, in him is what Nietzsche says is decisive for the particular kind of philosopher he has become. Most significantly he attributes his invention of a revaluation of values to this interplay:

Looking from the sick-optic (Kranken-Optik) out toward healthier concepts and values (gesünderen Begriffen und Werthen), and, vice versa, looking again from out of the fullness and self-assurance of abundant life (des reichen Lebens) back down into the furtive work of the décadence-instinct – that was my longest practice (Übung), my authentic experience (meine eigentliche Erfahrung), in which, if in anything, I became a master. I now have ready at hand the ability to reverse perspectives (Perspektiven umzustellen): first reason why perhaps a “revaluation of values” (Umwerthung der Werthe) is possible for me alone (EH “Wise” §1/KSA 6: 266, my translation).

---

273 A footnote is the proper place to discuss an issue that, from my point of view, is a side note, though worth mentioning. Later, it is true, Nietzsche calls this idea of himself as a product of his parents into question. This happens in the controversial third section of “Wise,” initially suppressed by Nietzsche’s literary executors (in particular, Heinrich Köselitz and Elizabeth Forster-Nietzsche, Nietzsche’s sister). This might appear to be one of the more “crazy” passages of Ecce Homo, but, despite its undeniable metaphorical character, it seems intelligible and sensible to me. The fact is, children are sometimes not very much like their parents at all, and it is somewhat mysterious to us how natural talents and characters arise. Nietzsche writes (in Judith Norman’s translation):

…people are least related to their parents: it would be the most extreme sign of vulgarity to be related to your parents. Higher natures have their origins infinitely further back; collecting, economizing, accumulating has gone on longest for their sake. Great individuals are the oldest: I do not understand it, but Julius Caesar could be my father – or Alexander, that Dionysus incarnate…
Health and sickness, each one plays a dual role within this scheme, since healthy concepts and values are the object of the *Kranken-Optik*, whereas the secretive workings of the *décadence*-instinct are the object of the healthy perspective characterized by abundant or overflowing life. Nietzsche claims that he has firsthand experience of seeing things from these two perspectives and even that he is now able to adopt and reverse these perspectives at will.

This passage and the surrounding text also suggests that Nietzsche has a *third* perspective in addition to the perspectives of sickness and health, since he also knows that he has these two perspectives and can adopt them at will. Gary Shapiro does a good job of calling attention to this feature of Nietzsche’s argument, writing that Nietzsche’s “rhetoric in the long discussion of his doubleness emphasizes that he *knows* his doubleness; the knowing subject then stands outside the system of doubles…Nietzsche claims not only to have an unusual system of multiple perspectives available to him but to be in a position (to have a metaperspective) that allows him to play upon this system” (Shapiro 1989, p. 150). Nietzsche therefore has at least two main perspectives and possibly a third from which to view things, and his philosophy is consequently determined by these two, or rather three, perspectives.

The key point to grasp in this connection, however, is that Nietzsche sees himself as different from Socrates, because he is not only, or even primarily, a *décadent*. Nietzsche claims that he is something else, and that what he is depends upon a certain “physiological presupposition,” which he calls *die grosse Gesundheit*, “the great health” (KSA 6: 337). This is also the presupposition of Nietzsche’s creation, Zarathustra, with whom Nietzsche strongly identifies. Like Zarathustra, Nietzsche “says no and *does* no to
an unheard-of degree, to everything to which one has so far said yes,” and yet, at the same time, he is “the opposite of a no-saying spirit” (EH “TSZ” §6).

The alternative to Socratic philosophy is Nietzschean philosophy, and the difference between them is that, whereas the Socratic philosophy is dialectical and based on ressentiment, the Nietzschean philosophy is also creative, affirmative, and fully expressive. This “also” is crucial, and it would be a great mistake to believe that Nietzsche’s thought and writings are devoid of the Socratic element. On the contrary, the whole argument of Ecce Homo tends to show how Nietzsche understands Socratic philosophy as a part of Nietzschean philosophy. In other words, the Nietzschean philosophy encompasses the Socratic philosophy, just as the great health includes sickness. This coupling of “antipodes” also points to the final synthesis in Ecce Homo, signified by the phrase: “Dionysus versus the Crucified.” The formula for Nietzsche himself is “Dionysus versus the Crucified,” and though the Dionysian element predominates, and Nietzsche of course in some sense prefers it, the Crucified nevertheless symbolizes an essential element of Nietzsche’s character. Like his father, like sickness or décadence, and like Socrates, “the Crucified” is an indispensible element in the totality signified by “Nietzsche.”

13. Overcoming pessimism.—Commenting on the role of sickness and health in Nietzsche’s thought, Jaspers writes that “Nietzsche comprehends his own illness as a symptom of the very great health which vanquishes everything.”

Nietzsche’s concept of health, it should be clear, is also central to my interpretation. Nietzsche himself,

---

attempting to characterize his kind of health, talks about how for a fundamentally healthy person like him even sickness can be an incentive to life:

A typically morbid being cannot become healthy, much less make itself healthy. For a typically healthy person, conversely, being sick can even become an energetic *stimulus* for life, for living *more*. This, in fact, is how that long period of sickness appears to me *now*: as it were, I discovered life anew, including myself; I tasted all good and even little things, as others cannot easily taste them—I turned my will to health, to *life*, into a philosophy (EH “Wise” §2/KSA 6: 266-267).

Like the phoenix that rises from the ashes, Nietzsche emerges from his sickness a new man bearing a new will to life and a new philosophy. Nietzsche’s long illness provided the occasion for his underlying health to come into action, and this had a major effect on his entire philosophical outlook.

The above passage continues: “it was during the years of my lowest vitality that I ceased to be a pessimist; the instinct of self-restoration (*der Instinkt der Selbst-Wiederherstellung*) forbade me a philosophy of poverty and discouragement.” The reference is of course primarily to Schopenhauer’s philosophy, which culminates in an ideal figure of the ascetic who denies her will to live. As is well known, Nietzsche as a young man became an adherent of Schopenhauer’s philosophy, and in *Ecce Homo* he claims, among other things, that “atheism led (him) to Schopenhauer” (EH “UM” §2). Ultimately, however, Nietzsche rejected Schopenhauer’s philosophy because it says “no” to life, or at least strongly suggests this “no”:

---

Perhaps at the end of his life, no man, if he be sincere and at the same time in possession of his faculties, will ever wish to go through it again. Rather than this, he will much prefer to choose complete non-existence.\(^{276}\)

Prior to his illness, Nietzsche had accepted this “no.” His long illness, however, forbid him this answer to the problem of life, and it activated his healthy instincts that helped him to form a philosophy entirely antithetical to Schopenhauer’s. Nietzsche claims that his fundamental healthiness voted against this pessimism. The new philosophy that emerges is, by contrast, animated by a supreme “yes-saying pathos” (EH “TSZ” §1) It is a philosophy that loves fate, that wills the eternal recurrence. Nietzsche expresses the core of his new philosophy in the last section of “Why I Am So Clever”:

> My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all in eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it—all idealism is mendaciousness (*Verlogenheit*) in the face of what is necessary—but *love* it (EH “Clever” §10/KSA 6: 297)

What, however, does Nietzsche understand by this health that allows him to make even sickness as occasion for philosophical progress? Although Nietzsche discusses various characteristics of his health in “Why I Am So Wise,” the most significant passage pertaining to health comes when, in his discussion of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche reproduces in slightly altered form section 382 of *The Gay Science*, which is entitled “The great health (*die grosse Gesundheit*).”

> Whoever has a soul that craves to have experienced the whole range of values and desiderata to date (*bisherigen Werthe und Wünschbarkeiten*)… whoever wants to know from the adventures of his own most authentic experience (*aus den Abenteuern der eigensten Erfahrung*) how a discoverer and conqueror of the ideal feels, and also an artist, a saint, a legislator, a sage, a scholar, a pious man, and one who stands divinely apart in the old style—needs one thing above all else: the *great health*

(die grosse Gesundheit)—that one does not merely have but also acquires continually, and must acquire because one gives it up again and again, and must give it up (EH “TSZ” §2/KSA 6: 337-338).

The great health allows one to experience multiple becomings, multiple values, and multiple perspectives. It gives one insight into what Nietzsche regards as the highest human types and hence contributes to the comprehensiveness of Nietzsche’s understanding of humanlife in all its diverse manifestations and turns.

14. How oddly one becomes what one is.— In order to grasp the novelty of Nietzsche’s understanding of how one becomes oneself, it is necessary to see how, for him, the task of becoming what one is differs significantly from the project of pursuing self-knowledge as traditionally conceived by the Socratic-Platonic tradition. Self-knowledge for Nietzsche doesn’t mean to know oneself as mind or soul, but rather to know oneself as an individual. In this sense, there is a certain tension between knowing oneself and becoming oneself. Ultimately Nietzsche thinks that self-becoming may converge with self-knowledge, but there are significant differences between the two conditions (i.e., insofar as one can speak of becoming as a condition). Here we come face to face with one of the most paradoxical arguments in Ecce Homo. Not only is becoming oneself different from self-knowledge, but Nietzsche claims that self-knowledge is, at least for a time, inimical to the project of becoming oneself. In other words, Nietzsche argues that becoming what one is requires, not knowledge, but rather a veil of ignorance about what one is, at least for a time. This “at least for a time” is an important qualification, because Nietzsche maintains that at some point the veil does (and perhaps must) drop, and a kind of self-knowledge emerges. At least this is how he says things happened for him in his own life.
Since Nietzsche’s argument here is paradoxical but extremely important for his program of becoming-oneself, it is necessary to consider it closely and by stages. Nietzsche initially characterizes his teaching about self-becoming by drawing the contrast with self-knowledge in strong terms:

For let us assume that the task, the destiny, the fate of the task transcends the average very significantly: in that case, nothing could be more dangerous than catching sight of oneself with this task. To become what one is, one must not have the faintest notion what one is (Dass man wird, was man ist, setzt voraus, dass man nicht im Entferntesten ahnt, was man ist). (EH “Clever” §9/KSA 6: 293).

This passage lays out the basic thesis that Nietzsche wants to defend, and I want to note a few things in particular. Nietzsche claims that this teaching is especially relevant for extraordinary types like him, which raises the question whether Nietzsche’s conception of becoming-oneself is really applicable to the majority of people. This question must remain open, though there are many suggestions in Nietzsche’s corpus that he shares the widely held and time-honored belief that only a select group of people have the stuff to become philosophers and artists (to say nothing of the saints). He furthermore sets self-knowledge and self-becoming in opposition to each other, which raises a question about how this opposition is to be understood. What does it mean to say that ignorance is essential in order for someone with an extraordinary task to become who she is? It seems strange to think of ignorance being helpful in any context, much less where one’s entire human life is at stake. Nietzsche, however, seems to see this ignorance about oneself as serving a protective function, and he claims that it is dangerous to get sight of one’s task

---

277 One of the great questions of philosophy, rarely asked, is the question to what extent all human beings are, or have the potential to be, philosophical. Are all human beings philosophical to some extent? (Doesn’t the existence of religion suggest the felt need on the part of the so-called common people for answers to the great questions?) The tradition seems to assume that natural talent for philosophy is as rare as natural talent for basketball or golf, if not rarer.
too early. In his own case, if he had known his task too early he might never have become a scholar, a Schopenhauerian, a friend of Wagner, and so forth. He would have avoided, in other words, all those things that from the point of view of his task were blunders. Yet these blunders, he wants to say, were ultimately instructive and hence beneficial for his task. He continues:

From this point of view even the blunders of life have their own meaning and value—the occasional side roads and wrong roads, the delays, “modesties,” seriousness wasted on tasks that are remote from the task (der Aufgabe). All this can express a great Klugheit, even the supreme Klugheit: where nosce te ipsum would be the recipe for ruin, forgetting oneself, misunderstanding oneself, making oneself smaller, narrower, mediocre, become reason itself. Morally speaking: neighbor love, living for others, and other things can be a protective measure for preserving the hardest self-concern (Selbstigkeit). This is the exception where, against my wont and conviction, I side with the “selfless” drives (der “selbstlosen” Triebe): here they work in the service of self-love (Selbstsucht), of self-discipline (Selbstzucht).

Here Nietzsche appears to reverse one of his key positions in a surprising way, arguing that selflessness has a positive value. This positive value, however, is directly proportionate to the extent that selflessness (Selbstlosigkeit) serves selfishness (Selbstsucht). This last qualification is crucial; Nietzsche is not actually reversing his position but is rather nuancing it in an interesting way. Forgetting oneself can be self-serving in some situations, as in the case where one commits blunders from the point of view of one’s task, which nevertheless end up serving that task. Nietzsche’s argument about the way this is supposed to work, however, raises a number of questions. For example, how is one supposed to distinguish between simple selflessness and selflessness that is in the service of self-seeking? And assuming one is pursuing this selfless route

---

278 Professor Polansky suggested to me that it is impossible to make such a distinction and that this is “convenient.” I take this to mean that self-seeking is in some sense inseparable from being human.
to self, how does it come about that at some time the veils fall, revealing the real task? Lastly, readers might also wonder about the invitation to think of a life as having only one, primary task. Why not two, or three, or multiple tasks? What is clear is that Nietzsche has come to think of his life as being dedicated to one task above all, and this is the task that in Ecce Homo he names “revaluation of all values.”

15. *Have I been understood?— Ecce Homo* ends in a curious way. On its surface, the last chapter, “Why I Am a Destiny (Warum ich ein Schicksal bin),” might appear excessively bombastic, full of self-adulation and invective against Christianity. Beneath the appearance, however, it is possible to see that Nietzsche is progressively moving toward a concentration of himself and his philosophy into a single formula. In this last chapter, Nietzsche announces the birth of great politics (grosse Politik); claims he is “the first immoralist;” and submits that he, like Socrates or Jesus, breaks the history of humanity in two. We need an entirely new calendar after Nietzsche to reflect this decisive break. The negation of Christian morality and “the good human being” mark the beginning of a new epoch. Prior to Nietzsche, no one recognized that what was valued most highly were counter-concepts to life. His psychological insight into the dark places of Christianity distinguishes him from the whole of humanity hitherto. Nietzsche has uncovered the secret motivations of what he calls “the crime against life” (EH “Destiny” §7). “There was no psychology at all before me,” he says.

It is always necessary to remember that in Nietzsche’s discourse, Christianity appears both as itself and as a symbol of a more fundamental trend, which Nietzsche links with numerous other things, including Platonism, the pessimistic philosophy of

---

279 Nietzsche himself suggests the need for a new calendar. See the “Law against Christianity” appended to The Antichrist/KSA 6: 254. An English translation can be found in Norman 2005, pp. 66-67.
Schopenhauer, and to some extent Judaism. What these belief systems have in common is that they are all expressions of “antinature (Widernatur)” and “the unselfing-morality (die Entselbstungs-Moral).” They are moralisms that teach a moral world order, an ontological and/or theological order that subtends the world as we actually experience it. The emergence of the “great politics” hinges on the rejection of these nihilistic belief systems, which harm life by occluding the real task of our earthly existence. Nietzsche blames the idea of a world behind the world for poisoning the human relation to life. He enumerates a list of concepts associated with the anti-nature belief system and contrasts them with considerations to which he assigns real importance for human life:

The concept of “God” invented as a counterconcept of life (als Gegensatz-Begriff zum Leben)—everything harmful, poisonous, slanderous, the whole hostility unto death against life (gegen das Leben) synthesized in this concept in a gruesome unity! The concept of the “beyond,” the “true world” invented in order to devaluate the only world there is—in order to retain no goal, no reason, no task for our earthly reality (keine Aufgabe für unsre Erden-Realität)! The concept of the “soul,” the “spirit,” finally even “immortal soul,” invented in order to despise the body, to make it sick, “holy;” to oppose with a ghastly levity everything that

---

280 Can one lump Judaism in with Christianity, Plato, et al.? Nietzsche’s attitude to Judaism is rather complex: certainly he believes that there is an ancient war between Judea and Rome, and that Christianity was the Jewish Trojan horse that destroyed the pagan empire, but he also respects Judaism _as Judaism_, much in the way that Gibbon says the Romans respected it, i.e., as an ancient and hence noble tradition (as compared with the Christians, whom the Romans viewed as truly “crazy”). On the opposition between Judea and Rome, see GM, First Essay §16. For the idea of Christianity as an extension of Judaism, see, for example, GS §137, A §44. Nietzsche also interprets Christianity as Paul’s revenge against Jewish law; see D §68. For Nietzsche’s view on Jewish conceptions of death, as opposed both to pagan and to Christian ones, see D §72. Nietzsche expresses respect for the Hebrew Scriptures. And, indeed, who is a more “Nietzschean” figure than that poet, warrior, dancer, and occasional murderer, David? Nietzsche’s thought about contemporary European Jewry, meanwhile, is complex, but by no means wholly or even mostly negative. See especially D §205 and BGE sections 250 and 251. Nietzsche found German anti-Semitism disgusting, a fact Walter Kaufmann was careful to emphasize in his interpretation of Nietzsche. The Nazi appropriation of Nietzsche naturally raised the question is Nietzsche a racist. In _Ecce Homo_, Nietzsche describes the German anti-Semite as an “abortion (Missgeburt)” (EH HAH §2). See also EH “The Case of Wagner,” sections 1 and 2. It is nonetheless undeniable that in GM the “slave rebellion in morality (Sklavenaufstand in der Moral)” is prominently linked with the Jews.
deserves to be taken seriously in life, the questions of nourishment, abode, spiritual diet (geistiger Diät), treatment of the sick, cleanliness, and weather (EH “Destiny” §8/KSA 6: 373-374, bold text = my emphasis).

In his own life, Nietzsche’s sickness woke him from his “idealistic” slumber, causing him to realize what he now claims is truly important in life: the questions of nourishment, living arrangements, place, climate, and recreation. To this list, he now adds “the treatment of the sick” and “cleanliness” (actually very Cartesian concerns). Nietzsche wants to redirect human concern to “the only world there is,” and he wants us to focus our energies on forming a goal, reason, and task “for our earthly existence.” The old politics gained support from anti-natural, otherworldly belief-systems, teaching humans that they had a preestablished place in a preestablished cosmic order. The laws of the community drew power from this cosmic phantasmagoria as well, which lent force to the project of subordinating individual interests to communal ones. This is why “great politics” begins with Nietzsche, because now humanity will have to work out its destiny in the absence of such cosmic supports and in the light of Nietzsche’s philosophy that seriously calls into question the authority of any community. On what basis could individuals now be persuaded to subordinate their interests to those of a community?

The question—Hat man mich verstanden?—recurs like a refrain at the head of each of the last three sections of Ecce Homo. Has one understood me? Nietzsche asks. We as readers will have understood him when we have grasped the meaning of his final formula for himself, “Dionysus versus the Crucified.”

Having first studied the roles of sickness and health in Nietzsche’s life story, and second, having considered the problem of how one becomes what one is in relation to ignorance about what one is, we are now in a position to gather together a discourse
about how, exactly, *Ecce Homo* can be understood as a philosophical autobiography and in terms of what it contributes to our understanding of Nietzsche’s philosophy. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche presents ultimate philosophical principles and an exemplary philosophical life, and the principle that he wants to prove above all is that a revaluation of all values is both possible and desirable at this point in human history. Nietzsche says, “Revaluation of all values: that is my formula for an act of supreme self-examination on the part of humanity, become flesh and genius in me” (*EH “Destiny”* §1). A revaluation of values is possible because Nietzsche has already accomplished it, and it is desirable because of what Nietzsche claims his experiences and investigations have taught him, namely, that humanity has been misguided up until now and that, consequently, we haven’t yet given serious thought to what kinds of goals we might formulate for our earthly reality.

The experience of sickness played a crucial role in Nietzsche’s life because it compelled him to look at his life anew and to think about how he was living. Sickness or *décadence* was his “angle,” his specialty; it introduced an element of distance into his thought, giving Nietzsche a new perspective from which to view things. It alienated him from the beliefs and practices that had hitherto determined his life, and Nietzsche suggests that such distance and alienation is, at least at some point, necessary for philosophy to emerge. The hammer has to be broken for us to begin reflecting on it.

Nietzsche is perhaps the first in a line of near-contemporary philosophers who view philosophizing itself as either an illness or a symptom of illness (e.g., Rosenzweig, Wittgenstein, etc.). One should contrast this perhaps uniquely modern (or even postmodern) view with the traditional view that, though humanity may be sick,
philosophy is not a symptom of the illness but rather a means to its cure. From Plato to Boethius to Hegel, so many philosophers thought that humans were fallen, but that philosophy, far from being a symptom of this fallen condition, was its cure. But be that as it may, there is something to be said for the idea that philosophy emerges (historically) only when something has gone wrong. Now, whether it is sickness or some other experience (or experiences), something has to enter in to the life of the philosopher in order to disrupt her life as a happy, healthy animal, a “good cow.”

On Nietzsche’s account, and based on his personal experience, something has to go wrong in order for questioning to begin. As Nietzsche writes in The Gay Science, “pain always raises the question about its origin while pleasure is inclined to stop with itself without looking back” (GS §13). If this is so, then perhaps philosophy truly does begin with a wound and pain. This can’t be the whole story, however. For pain is universal to the human condition, and if there really are happy, healthy humans, then they are happy and healthy despite the presence of pain and not as a result of its complete absence. Are those who become philosophers simply more sensitive to pain?

But sickness or whatever it is that introduces the negative, and hence distance, is not the end of the story for Nietzsche. Becoming a philosopher in Nietzsche’s sense of the term also requires overcoming sickness, requires health and, indeed, “the great health,” as its true foundation. His philosophy is not so much the symptom of an illness, as it is the expression of a very great health.

16. Bejahung (affirmation).— The interpretation of Ecce Homo presented here gives readers of Nietzsche a heuristic tool or method for approaching Nietzsche’s texts. We are now in a position to see that we may always address Nietzsche’s texts with the question,
which of the two (or three) Nietzsches is speaking in a given context? Is it the Nietzsche who speaks from the point of view of sickness? Or the one who speaks from the point of view of health? Or is it perhaps the third Nietzsche, the one who can take an overarching view of the two tendencies in their difference and productive tension? Perhaps it is this last one that is the most Nietzsche of all, assuming that there is some third position in life outside of those Nietzsche identifies with sickness and health. What Nietzsche seems to suggest is that the great health is different from what we might call normal health, since the great health includes sickness, and indeed cannot dispense with it in order to become what it is.

For various reasons, Nietzsche’s autobiography has not commanded the attention it deserves, especially among Nietzsche scholars (with some exceptions). This neglect is unfortunate because, studying *Ecce Homo*, one can become aware of the inadequacy and incoherence of the predominant interpretations of Nietzsche of the past hundred and some odd years. The will to power concept, so central to the interpretations of Heidegger, Kaufmann, and others, hardly figures at all in *Ecce Homo*, and in one case the reference is purely negative. Nietzsche does not present himself as a metaphysician, but rather as a psychologist and a new kind of philosopher. Meanwhile, the idea that Nietzsche’s repudiation of Christianity and Platonism is somehow unequivocal appears extremely dubious in light of *Ecce Homo*. By his own insistence, sickness, anti-nature, and décadence, as well as all the perspectives associated with these states, played an indispensable formative role in his own becoming. The Dionysian logic, or the logic of *amor fati*, has to affirm these negative states, has to affirm the necessity of Judeo-Christianity, Platonism, Schopenhauer in the history of humankind, just as Nietzsche
himself affirms the role of sickness, *décadence*, decline, corruption, *ressentiment*, pessimism, and so forth in his own life and becoming. Nietzsche, it is worth remembering, only attacks things as a sign of good will (*ein Beweis des Wohlwollens*) (EH “Wise” §7/KSA 6: 274-275). It would seem to follow that he possesses a tremendous fund of good will where sickness and its various expressions are concerned. *Ecce Homo* also concerns the question of how one becomes what one is in general. This raises the question whether, and if so, to what extent, Nietzsche considers his own life and becoming to be exemplary for others. As noted above, there seems to be a paradox here, because to the extent that one becomes oneself, one becomes like Nietzsche as well. This paradox, however, is only apparent. For, assuming there are individuals very different from Nietzsche (psychologically, in their tastes, and so forth), their becoming will only resemble his insofar as it is unique and therefore on some level incomparable.

But what if the basic opposition that Nietzsche identifies in himself is actually definitive of human nature and human history, so that no one, however fully realized and unique, escapes a choice in this regard? In the last chapter of *Ecce Homo*, “Why I Am a Destiny” (*Warum ich ein Schicksal bin*), Nietzsche contends that the conflict he represents will be decisive for the future of humanity, that with him “great politics” begins. Does he mean, perhaps, that each of us might, and perhaps must, recognize this conflict in herself or himself, and that the battles of the future he claims to foresee are to take place within each of us, in the struggle between the health that affirms life and the sickness that wills the nothing? Perhaps the “great politics” is great precisely because it concerns this struggle that inheres in each particular individual. And yet, were this so, it
would remain unclear whether, for Nietzsche, anyone has a choice in the matter. We become who we are, he says, precisely in ignorance of who we are, and it appears that for him there is no other way for us to become. Yet despite all this, and perhaps even because of it, one must choose. For just as Socrates chose to devote his life to the investigation of being in speeches; and Augustine to dedicate his life to a being called god; and just as Descartes chose to turn within himself to look for truth; and Vico to seek the causes of things in history; and, finally, just as Nietzsche himself made a decision against everything in him that longed for a world beyond the world; so, too, each of us may come to choose about the most important things (including, of course, about what the most important things are). In the course of a long search for truth, one opens, hopefully, to a certain event of mind, to a moment in which, to paraphrase a consummate Platonist, the object of our search is illuminated (Seventh Letter, 344b) and we see an unprecedented truth that we may call starting point, principle, beginning, ἀρχή. Then, in that moment, there would truly be something there for us to grasp and found our lives on, and we would have a choice between acceptance and refusal. And even were we to decline the choice, we would nonetheless choose. For, as Yancy (2002, p. xxvi) puts it, “to remain neutral is itself already a choice.”

According to Nietzsche, the moments that call for philosophical judgment may eternally recur.
Bibliography

Note: all publications by the same author are listed chronologically, from most to least recent.


University Press. (Originally published by Les Editions de Minuit in 1990.)

University Press. (Originally published in 1962 as *Nietzsche et la philosophie* by
Presses Universitaires de France.)

Bloomington: Indiana University Press.


Hackforth, R. (1913) The Authorship of the Platonic Epistles. Manchester at the University Press.


______ (1999) *Cartesian Questions: Method and Metaphysics*. Various translators, but the entire translation was reviewed by Jeffrey L. Kosky. The University of Chicago Press.


Cambridge University Press.


and Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr., with an Introduction by Richard C. Lyon. The MIT Press.


Strauss, Leo (1971) Natural Right and History. 7th Impression, with a new Preface. The University of Chicago Press.


