

## **THE ART FORM CALLED PHILOSOPHY**

by Richard Schain

I believe that the main thing to know about philosophy is that it is a form of art. Philosophy is the art of reflection on the realities of the human condition; a philosopher who has not experienced life in its many manifestations is like a composer who has never heard music. The idea is inconceivable. Much of what goes under the name of philosophy today is actually science, theology, mathematics, history, or journalism. Philosophy is none of these; it is an art form whose identifying characteristic is the expression of ideas about the realities experienced by the philosopher. The appreciation of philosophy requires a taste for art that is not greatly different from that required for other art forms. The person whose spirit is not touched at one time or another by music, by painting, by architecture, or by poetry will not be touched by genuine philosophy. Plato, regarded as the founder of discursive western philosophy, was seen as a poet by the scientifically minded Aristotle.

With a little imagination, one can notice that the style of philosophers is often similar to the style of other artists of their locale and time. Thus British philosophy of the 17th and 18th century resembles British landscape painting and portraiture; it is somber and oriented toward the surface of phenomena. One could envision Hobbes, Locke, and Hume as intellectual landscapists. French philosophers of the Enlightenment resemble their country's fiction writers and dramatists; they are clever, light, and full of nuances. Voltaire and Rousseau are like frothy cakes. The French impressionist school of art continued in this vein. In central Europe, however, one finds philosophers in the expressionist style, resembling artists such as Ernst Kirchner, Edvard Munch (Norwegian but worked in Germany), or Franz Marc. The emphasis is on seriousness, depth, and feelings. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are the foremost examples of Expressionism in philosophy (a better term than Existentialism); both were explicit in their identification with art.

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At one time, systematic philosophy, which may be regarded as an architectural mode of philosophical expression, was the principal form of philosophy. One can

detect a theological spirit in the works of systematizers like Spinoza, Leibniz, and Hegel, except they are founded upon a feeling of intellectual rather than divine revelation. The persecution of philosophers as heretics is explicable as churches' response to rival theologies. Churches rarely burned other types of artists; even the New England Puritans were content to limit their punishment of artistic sinners to a day or two in the stocks. Raphael could include his voluptuous mistress in his Transfiguration that now hangs in the Vatican. However, the gentle Spinoza and the harmless Descartes were menaced by their churches, and in Italy, that country's promise of a humanistic philosophy was brought to an end by the Inquisition. Père Teilhard de Chardin, the last European systematizer, had his enlightened conceptions worked out in *Le Phénomène Humain* (1947) suppressed by the Vatican. At the present time, systematic philosophy has gone out of fashion, largely as a result of the loss of reputation suffered by all non-empirical cosmologies in a scientific era.

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The expropriation of the term 'philosophy' by academicians has been catastrophic for this high form of human expression. Genuine philosophy as originated in the ancient Greek world does not exist today. There is philosophy as cognitive science, there is the form of psychological anatomy known as phenomenology, there is philosophy expressed through mathematical symbols and there is, as always, the history and critique of former philosophers that is the stock in trade of university professors in need of academic advancement. A more recent trend is lucrative popular philosophy that has become a commercial affair of university extensions and other business enterprises.

The prototype modern western philosopher is a person who writes in a scholarly manner, but also with a smooth journalistic touch. He finds his audience in an intellectual elite who enjoys scholarly accounts of happenings on the world's stage. However, the world is in need of art, as Nietzsche wrote, not scholarly historians and certainly not journalists. The world needs art because it needs to experience life in newer and more profound ways than in the past; the onslaught of technology has concealed the reality of life from contemporary individuals. It is through experiences that individuals deepen the reality of their lives; it is the purpose of art to provide experiences to those who yearn for them, to both the artist and the auditor of art. Of all the arts that are needful to human beings, the art of philosophy is needed most of all since it is in meaningful concepts that the modern age is most deficient. Technology builds robots everywhere but it cannot provide the inner life needed by living individuals. Concepts that enliven one's soul do not

come mechanically from the powers of science any more than they can be handed down by powers on high; they appear during internal ‘processing’ (for want of a better term) of meaningful experiences. The experience of the feelings of another human being occurs through art; when these feelings are expressed through conceptions of reality, they are called philosophy.

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Today, the independent philosopher must be an artist who believes in the value of ideas objectified in literary form and that stand for his life experiences. The era of a Socrates enchanting his listeners verbally is long over. Now the philosopher is an alchemist who should transform written language into experiences for the reader. His art is judged not by the fluency of his prose, his virtuosity with language, or his gifts of imagery and metaphor. All of these may contribute to his art but are not central to it, any more than accuracy of representation or cleverness in composition is central to the work of a great painter. What is central is the expression of thoughts that represent his own realities, and thereby open the reader’s eyes and ears to what he has not previously seen or heard—or perhaps his nose to what he had not smelled! It is the task of the reader to relate to the truth of the philosopher’s ideas, not truth as understood scientifically from the viewpoint of acquisition of facts, but a deeper truth in which the reader *experiences* the ideas of the philosopher as they represent his own unformed feelings. The successful encounter of the artist and his auditor is much like falling in love; it is an event clothed in mystery that is impossible to predict or insure. Goethe caught the spirit of philosophical creativity in lines from the prologue to Faust in which the Lord is speaking to mankind:

*Das Werdende, das ewig wirkt und lebt,  
umfass euch mit der Liebe holden Schranken,  
und was in schwankender Erscheinung schwebt,  
befestiget mit dauernden Gedanken!*

Which I translate as:

New creation, eternally occurring,  
ye shall contain with love’s kind attention,  
and what freely floats, dimly swaying,  
surely shall ye fix with lasting conception!

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Therefore, the task of the artist-philosopher is to express ideas that lastingly affect his readers. He cannot rely on sound, story, rhyme, rhythm, or visual effects to affect them; when he does so, he moves away from his role as a philosopher. It is his ideas that are his central concern and it is their expression that he must rely upon to accomplish his goal—affecting the interior state of his readers. Suzanne Langer defined philosophy as the continual pursuit of meaning; but meanings, of course, can only come from the philosopher's own experiences. Thus the ancient maxim, 'first live, then philosophize'. In his concentration on conceptualizing from the reality of his own experiences, the philosopher is more purely an artist than any other type of creative person since he does not honey his work with sweet glosses. When a philosopher adulterates his work with the attractions of poetic form, drama, or story, he may facilitate attracting an audience, but it is at the price of loss of attention to his ideas. Who takes seriously now the ideas of Shelley, Byron, D.H. Lawrence, Bernard Shaw, or even Thoreau who wove his profound thoughts into his discussions about nature? (Goethe was unique). Heraclitus was on target when he wrote that "the Sibyl with raving mouth uttering her solemn, unadorned, unperfumed words reaches out with her voice over a thousand years."

Philosophy is not for children any more than Rembrandt or Beethoven is for them. It is not a question of chronological age but of maturity of mind. The majority of people never develop their interior selves sufficiently to be responsive to philosophic thought; for those people, there are other art forms or if all else fails, there are the myths of religion to provide for their needs for transcendence. Still there is an element of pathos felt when a chronologically mature person cannot experience philosophy; it is a form of illiteracy that implies cultural impoverishment within a society. A large number of philosophically illiterate individuals indicates cultural impoverishment, akin to reading illiteracy in a society. Such societies are vulnerable to all forms of demagoguery and oppression. Without philosophy, it is difficult to maintain one's dignity into adult life; this may be why philosophically illiterate societies are youth oriented.

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Scientists impose control on their surroundings through technology; artists influence their surroundings through their art. The faith of the artist is that the feeling or thought he expresses in his art will affect someone, even if it should be just one person. Once this is understood, the nature of philosophy as an art form becomes clear. The difficulty with philosophy arises when the philosopher is

deluded into thinking that he transmits universal facts instead of personal expressions. The systematizers, positivists, and phenomenologists do not want to be artists; they want to be scientists. They are frustrated physicists, mathematicians, or cognitive psychologists who try to adapt philosophy to their own purposes. Edmond Husserl famously asserted that philosophy must be ‘strict science’.

The urge to be scientists, linguists, or theologians, anything but philosophers, is why philosophers have been prone to disconnect their concepts from their human origins. One then has philosophy as natural law, descriptive science, or revelation from without. Somehow the ‘philosopher’ has been privileged—how, one is never told—to be given special insights into the world of reality beyond ordinary mortals. Ralph Waldo Emerson said that the generalizing urge is felt to be a manifestation of divinity in human beings; this is why a thrill is felt upon creation of every generalization. Emerson was speaking with tongue in cheek, but there is more to be learned from his comment than all the epistemology of logicians. Religions developed out of the desire of men to transform their personal conceptions into eternal truths. This tendency reveals a failure of understanding of the personal nature of conceptions and essentially a lack of respect for the creative process. Philosophy as analytic science is the most recent attempt to place philosophic thought on some absolute platform.

Faith in the power of art is the only faith I know that acknowledges the capacity of human beings to themselves transcend their animal being. It is the only faith that does not violate one’s intellectual conscience. A clear, well-founded feeling for the place of art in human life is the best antidote to religious superstition or scientific domination. The Socrates of the *Phaedo* understood philosophy—the love of wisdom—as the greatest of the arts and rejected its transformation into science. There has never been any justification for defacing this greatest of all the human arts, which has been so fruitful in elevating the character of those who have embraced it.

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The philosopher succeeds by bringing his spirit to life in his writings. He cannot live in a bloodless, abstract world (this was a fault of Emerson); neither should he be primarily concerned with topical issues of morality or politics. He must convey the conceptions deriving from his own experiences, acknowledging that his concepts are his mystical reactions to the surround of phenomena in which he exists. He is a mystic. Individuals are often victimized by the thoughts of others;

the philosopher is the Good Samaritan who stands up for the interior life of every individual. He creates, using the imagery of Père Teilhard, the beneficent noosphere in which the life of the mind can develop as it should.

Voltaire commented that no army can stop an idea whose time has come, but Emerson was more accurate when he said beware when the great God lets loose a thinker upon the planet ('Circles'). The time of an idea arrives because the powerful mind of a human being has stimulated its emergence in the minds of others. It might have been better to say that no army can destroy an idea once it has been brought into existence by one seized with the spirit of philosophy.

The faith of the philosopher is that someone else, not all but someone, can feel and think what he feels and thinks. The philosopher is intoxicated with the idea that he has a spiritual brother somewhere in the world. It is only when this intoxication proceeds to forgetfulness of self that he becomes a comical figure. Much worse than this forgetfulness, however, is loss of faith in his vision. The spiritual imperative for philosophers is to act as if their spiritual perceptions can be perceived by someone else. If this faith flags, as it apparently did in the case of Nietzsche, the philosopher "geht zugrunde", he perishes.

All art forms have their special type of experience that they offer. The art of the novel is the portrayal of characters; it is axiomatic that ideas that interest the novelist must remain secondary to his characters. A poet transforms his inner state into the rhythms and imagery of his language. The experiences offered by theater, musical, and visual arts are self-evident. There are historical changes in receptivity of styles of expression. For example, long narrative poems and poetry as philosophy went out of fashion long ago—as Robinson Jeffers discovered to his chagrin. However, the interesting prose poem *Das Energi* (sic) by Paul Williams (1978) might have been a forerunner of a swing back to Lucretius' use of poetry as a philosophical vehicle. So far, this has not happened.

Philosophical expression as a literary art form has not entered the consciousness of the contemporary public. It is by his ability to present his feeling-generated ideas that the philosopher must be judged, not by his journalistic abilities or scholarly expertise. Ideas even more than emotions are capable of affecting an individual because they can take root and grow in his mind. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, the two modern philosophers who have had the greatest impact on western culture, although learned, were quite unscholarly, often exhibiting incoherent prose styles, and were not understood at first by many well-educated readers. However, they were artists in philosophy who believed that expression of

their feelings took precedence over all other considerations and, ultimately, their thoughts took hold. One should be suspicious of a philosopher whose language flows too easily—it is not likely he is expressing his feelings in a meaningful manner.

Philosophy as an art form is found elsewhere besides western culture. It is evident that the forest thinkers of the Vedic world of Hindu India had mastered the art of philosophy. One must peer between lines of the awkward translations of Sanskrit into English to discover the force and liveliness of the ancient Indian philosophers. The Upanishads were the repository of Vedic wisdom, and, unlike ancient Greek philosophy, have been carefully preserved up to the present time. A fine contemporary means of gaining access to the Hindu world of long ago is to view the remains of Hindu erotic temple art. Those Hindus were people of breadth and depth who understood the relationship of eroticism to wisdom! But like the ancient Greeks, the Vedic wise men are long gone along with the world that produced them. India now eagerly snaps up the technology of the west and exports gurus in exchange.

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Professors and scholars in the university world of philosophy are in the habit of demanding detailed documentation of scholarly credentials as a requirement for publication in philosophy. This is a characteristic of all areas in which scholarly specialists form a guild. It is a means of maintaining control over their areas. But few creative personalities have the inclination to subject themselves to guild control. Scholars reject the idea that the ‘unscholarly’ can express themselves philosophically in a manner that deserves serious consideration. This is a dog in the manger attitude since ‘philosophers’ formed by scholarship cannot themselves create original philosophy. Their skills are appropriate for historical research or cognitive science but are of little value in an independent art form like philosophy. The academic monopoly of western philosophy has resulted in its virtual disappearance as a vital form of expression.

The creation of philosophical writing is not like building an architectural monument, it is more like composing a sonata; there are threads to pursue and themes to work out but they are intermingled, not carved out separately. The reader needs to expand his receptive self to follow the expressions of a philosopher; one cannot read authentic philosophy without this expansion any more than one can appreciate Bach without some experience of classical music. Philosophers do not systematically proceed from one foundation stone to another in laying out the

‘truth’. The systematic philosophers have deceived their readers since they have provided illusory logical structures in which the human feelings of the philosopher are no longer discernable. This discovery forms the basis of Kierkegaard’s criticism of Hegel. Kierkegaard proposed that Hegel would have been an important thinker if he had acknowledged the comical nature of his philosophy; perhaps Hegel might have compared his complex ‘system’ to a ten-ring circus in which all the acts interact with one another.

The same kind of objection applies even more to the theologians—Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and others of a similar ilk. They all bring their own religious prejudices into the philosophical arena, claiming to be the recipient of metaphysical revelations that underpin their own philosophies. In my judgment, they are harmful figures that have impeded philosophical development and constricted the minds of those who trusted them.

The philosopher artist does not follow the 1, 2, 3... infinity steps of logical analysis aiming toward scientific truth. He expresses himself according to a different tempo; here, there, there, here. It is the tempo of the tides rather than that of Kant. Each position in his work is existential, not sequential. Critics who find this approach disorganized, unscholarly, or unhistorical should turn to scholarship or history for their edification. However, a reader should remember that a philosophical exposition that does not project the interior state of the philosopher is like a caress not motivated by love; it leaves one with the unpleasant sense of having been used by the caresser.

As for science, it is the plumbing of humanity. As such, it deserves greater or lesser attention according to one’s interest in plumbing. Societies are generally not habitable without plumbing of some sort. Nonetheless, few will disagree that when a society gives all its energies to the plumbing, it seems hardly worth the effort to maintain it.

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I think it important that a philosopher guard against writing too much; gigantic philosophical tomes are like the Pyramids of Egypt—monuments whose impact derives from their size rather than their substance. The length of many contemporary books tends to be based on commercial advantage instead of the writer’s instincts. If a philosophical book is too long, the spiritual blood of the philosopher is drained before the book is completed. Nietzsche’s *Untimely Reflections* are ideal lengths for works of philosophy; later as Nietzsche grew

shriller, his books proliferated until finally there was nothing left of the exhausted philosopher.

The capacity to stop writing is fully as important as the art of starting. Books of historical analysis may go on for thousands of pages; extreme examples are provided by Spengler and Toynbee. This is impossible for philosophy that is the outcome of the finite mind of a writer. Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's early short works are their best because they reflect the natural movements of their minds and one does not sense that either of them strained to complete them. On the other hand, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* seem to fade away in their endings.

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The philosopher who writes with the requirements of success in the market place is akin to a lover who woos for the purpose of sexual copulation. Both are reprehensible since they are not straightforward in their expressions. One promises wisdom, the other promises love, but both only desire conquest. No societal or sexual success is worth the deformation of personality caused by deceitfulness. Socrates maintained that the health of the soul is dependent upon cultivation of truthfulness. It is difficult to think of a worse deception than dishonesty of personal expression. It is in direct opposition to the highest human ideal, that of transmission of one's own inner state to other individuals. If a person lies in personal expression, literary or otherwise, he degrades himself and sets the stage for his spiritual oblivion.

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The philosopher as an expressive artist lives much of his life removed from the milieu of societal living. It is not that he retires from the world out of disdain for it; in fact, the philosopher is a person who intensely responds to the world. It is rather because he alters his personality so that it functions expressively instead of interactively. The alteration cannot be a superficial one—there is nothing as unrewarding as a superficial philosopher—but must reach into the depths of his being and involve his total life's energies. The effort to function expressively and yet maintain a societal life with relationships and all that goes with them produces a great strain on his personality. This is why philosophers seek solitude and are prone to nervous breakdowns as was both pointed out and exemplified by Nietzsche.

Yet one cannot create philosophy in a state of complete isolation. One may find God in a cave or on a mountain peak but if the philosopher wishes to experience mankind instead of God, that is to say reality instead of illusion, then he must reach out to people—even if only to one other person. Dostoevsky wrote that at least one profound relationship is necessary to justify one's presence on earth. More than that is beyond the abilities of most philosophers.

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