

Philosophy and the Expressive Freedom of Thought

1. In this chapter I address an ancient challenge: to present the virtues of a life devoted to the pursuit of philosophical wisdom, as contrasted with a life of sophisticated pleasure and a life of honorable political activity. One of the defining aims of philosophers is to address just such questions as how we ought to characterize, compare, and assess the worth of these different forms of life. My defense of a life of philosophical activity must include comparisons with these traditionally prominent alternatives. And it must be framed by a discussion of the conceptual basis that justifies a comparative evaluation. Although this topic is an ancient one—pursued most vigorously and memorably in Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*—I want to say something about things look from the here-and-now. For I don’t just want to talk *about* philosophy here, I want to *do* some.

So it is part of my plan to illustrate how philosophers think. It is a distinctive intellectual approach with which any student of the high culture, anyone who seeks to understand contemporary understanding, should be familiar—should be able to lay alongside such other distinctive ways of thinking as those characteristic of the engineer, the lawyer, the economist, the politician, and the sociologist. At its best the philosopher’s way involves working out deep, important metaphysical ideas by crafting, honing, and deploying concepts with immense sensitivity and critical attention to subtleties and details concerning their exact contents. Partly because my intent is in part pedagogical, I’m not going to be bashful about pausing for critical asides about the dangers—in the form of implicit, therefore in the first instance invisible

assumptions—involved in using certain concepts, terms, or ways of talking. In the end, I'm after big game; cleaning, oiling and otherwise maintaining the critical equipment the hunt relies on is a critical element of the enterprise—but a means only, never to be mistaken for the end itself.

The aim is essentially *evaluative*: critically to assess the merit of various forms of life. (Here is the first conceptually fastidious aside: Notice that I've said "forms of life". It would not do to substitute here the pop-speak term "life *styles*"—not because it is meaningless or trendy, but because of *what* it means. Style contrasts in the first instance with substance, and if we have to pick between these, our concern is with the latter. Even if there are cases where it is style all the way down—where there is nothing to assess *except* style—and even if pursuits of that character are not for that reason taken to be irretrievably trivial or light-minded, still one should not build into one's terminology at the very beginning the assumption or presumption that issue of the relative values of lives structured by devotion to different aims should be assimilated to these exceptional cases. Terminology matters, because commitments of various sorts are implicit in choice of vocabulary. End of quibble.) This comparative evaluative task already involves certain important conceptual obligations.

- One is to be clear and explicit about the kinds of lives being compared: what *are* lives of pleasure, political activity, or philosophical contemplation?
- Another, perhaps more fundamental one, is to be clear and explicit about the basis on which *normative* appraisals are to be made. What can justify assessments of *better* and *worse*? Where can one stand—on what ground—to *justify* such evaluations? What is one allowed to presuppose, if one is mindful of the danger of simply assuming at the outset the

values that one hopes to justify at the end? On this point we must be vigilant and critical, lest the rabbit later triumphantly produced be smuggled into the hat at this stage.

One of Plato's and Aristotle's big ideas concern the form of an answer to that very basic question: it is to be found in an account of what *kind of creature* we are, an account of *human nature*. The thought is that if we understand what kind of beings we are, we will have the basis for an assessment of what better or worse lives are for *us*—that is, better or worse for *that* kind of being.

This is an important idea, and it is one that I'll be pursuing in what follows. But just for that reason it is important to go slowly at this point, examine it carefully from different sides, and think about how one can put it without taking on optional or objectionable collateral commitments—commitments that may deflect, deform, or dictate the course of the subsequent investigation.

- To illustrate the sort of pitfall one wants to avoid, let me pick a not very threatening example. One way I just characterized what is to justify assessments of lives as better or worse is an account of “what kind of creature” it is whose lives are being assessed. ‘Creature’ literally means ‘created thing’, ‘part of God’s creation’. We clearly would not want that connotation of the term (in contemporary usage, a largely vestigial resonance—hence the non-threateningness) to tempt us (never mind somehow oblige us) to assume without further argument that the sort of normative assessment underwritten by knowing what kind of creature we are talking about must be “pleasingness to God”, or “consilience with God’s plan or providence.” When I’m being careful about this, I’ll talk about ‘beings’

instead of ‘creatures’. (The German equivalent is ‘Wesen’, which means ‘essence’, and has all the problems that go with the hylomorphic metaphysics in which *that* term is embedded.)

- In order to avoid this possible slide, one might be tempted to go to a different extreme, by substituting the more scientific phrase “kind of organism”. After all, whatever else we are, we surely are organisms—*that* is not a characterization that is controversial in the way that ‘creature’, when read literally, is. But what if on these same grounds we substituted ‘oxygen-breathers’. We are, indeed, oxygen-breathers. But answering the question “what kind of oxygen-breathers are we” does not seem to bear in the right way on the question of what the good life for beings of our sort is. The real issues might be just the same for nitrogen-breathers. By taking this path, we seem to be courting the danger of thinking of ‘us’ too narrowly, picking us out by contingent features, irrelevant to the issue at hand. In the same way “kind of organism” suggests that the notion of kind in question is specifically *biological* kind. Aristotle might have been happy enough with that, at least on some readings. But it is not *obvious* that biology is the right place to look for an account of *human* flourishing. This is a point I will return to.

- The other rough, initial characterization I offered of the metaphysical basis for normative evaluation of kinds of life according to the Plato-Aristotle line was “human nature”. This is a very common, and so seemingly innocuous phrase. But it, too, harbors potentially suspect implications. By exploring them we can begin to get into the philosophical meat of our issue.

We could call this general explanatory strategy Plato and Aristotle recommend the “metaphysical strategy” for grounding large-scale normative evaluations. It is predicated on the idea that if we know enough about what we in some deep (I’ve used the term ‘metaphysical’

without saying anything at all about what I mean by it) sense *are*, that that will enable us to draw conclusions about how we *ought* to live, what kinds of activity are *proper*, or *fitting*, or at least *better* or *worse* for us. In some sense, the metaphysical strategy is the only game in town for justifying normative assessments. It is the form of almost *everyone's* theory, not only of traditional theistic and theological accounts of the good life, and of those due to heavy-duty metaphysicians such as Spinoza and Hegel, and to such different thinkers as Kant, and Hobbes, but even of such avowedly anti-metaphysical thinkers as Nietzsche and Heidegger. But it is worth pointing out that Hume gave us the conceptual raw materials for a thorough-going critique of this way of thinking—of the very idea of a metaphysics of normativity. (And this in spite of the fact that his own naturalistic theory can itself be understood as employing a variant of the same general strategy.) For he denies that one can *ever* justify an inference from *is* to *ought*—from a mere *description* of how things in fact are to a *prescription* of how they *ought* to be. That is a conceptual gap he says no theory can bridge. Of course, he may not be right—and if he *is* right, it is not clear what conclusion we should draw from the in-principle failure of any metaphysical grounding of normative claims. (Should we be nihilists, and deny that normative claims *can* be justified?) But his critique (which I have only stated, not pretended to explain or justify) presents a challenge that would have been absurd to the ancients, but which we cannot today simply ignore—that is one of the deep differences between then and now, them and us. It has been seconded and deepened more recently by pragmatists such as Dewey and Rorty.¹

¹ Notice that these *sorts* of questions—just how one ought to distinguish the various kinds of life on offer, both the genus to which they belong (what is what I've been calling a “form of life”) and the various species (devotion to pleasure, political activity, or philosophy, all in broad senses of the terms), and what could be a justifiable, non-question-begging basis for comparative evaluation of them—are ones the *philosopher* is in a better position to address (indeed, perhaps being in a position to address them *is* being a philosopher). Of course, that by itself is not *dispositive* of the question whether the philosophical is the *best* sort of life. And even claiming—as I, like Aristotle, eventually will—that it is *probative* requires a serious argument. (The jurisprudential conceptual distinction I'm employing here is between evidential considerations that are decisive and final, that *settle* an issue, and those that merely *bear* on it, that provide *some* evidence, but evidence which may turn out to be outweighed or defeated by

Although objections have been made to it, I want to take seriously the metaphysical strategy for grounding normative appraisals of different forms of life. The conclusions of any such argument are going to be quite sensitive to its starting-point: the metaphysical characterization of the kind of beings we are. One characterization of us that seems to get at something central and important about us (by contrast, say, to our being oxygen-breathers) is that we are *conscious* creatures, creatures with *minds*, subjects of *awareness*. Only creatures of *that* general sort have even the theoretical option of leading lives of pleasure, political activity, or the pursuit of philosophical wisdom. So this much is common ground between them; starting with this characterization begs no questions against one or another of the forms of life.

If we look just a little bit closer at our consciousness or mindedness, we see that it comes in two importantly different flavors. We are *sentient* beings, and we are *sapient* beings—we *feel*, and we *think*. Sentience is *sensuous* awareness, of the generic sort also exhibited by at least our mammalian cousins. Paradigmatic states of sentience are feeling pain, seeing colors, and hearing sounds. Sentient awareness is what an organism has when it is *awake*, but, dreaming aside, not when it is *asleep*. Sapience is *conceptual* awareness—a kind of mindedness that is tied to *understanding* rather than *sensing*. Paradigmatic sapient states are thinking or believing *that* things are thus-and-so (or desiring or intending that they be thus-and-so)—*that* Vienna is the capital of Austria, *that* the Washington Monument is 555 feet high, *that* freedom is better than

other considerations.) Maybe what careful philosophical consideration of the relevant reasons will show is that the philosophical life is not *the* best, not *a* better, nor even a good one. And of course we must be wary of special pleading. Is the fact that when philosophers address this issue, philosophy often turns out to be a highly recommended way to direct one's energies best explained by those opinions reflecting a fact, which emerges after careful, dispassionate consideration? Or is it a reflection of the prejudices or interests of those undertaking an investigation whose conclusion is already—for them, given their commitments to that sort of life—foregone?

slavery. In order to be in these sapient states one must grasp the *concepts* that articulate its *content*. The content of sapient states is accordingly something that at least in principle can be *said*: specified by the use of declarative sentences (“The moon is round”), or a sentential ‘that’-clauses (“Sam believes *that* the moon is round”). By contrast, the content of my sentient visual awareness of a red triangle is something particular—an *instance*, or perhaps an *image* of a red triangle. For a sufficiently complex image, or a particular tactile sensation, we will not in general have words that let us exhaustively specify its content. (Can you *say* what a middle-C played on a French horn sounds like—even if in some sense you know perfectly well?)

2. Let us see what help the distinction between sentience and sapience can give us in thinking about the life of pleasure and the life of political activity (I will get to the philosophical life later on). At first blush, the relevance of the distinction to the life of pleasure may seem straightforward. There is such a thing as *sensuous pleasure*, paradigmatically associated with the satisfaction of various mammalian drives: for food, drink, and sex. Sensuous pleasure is a sentient state, which even non-sapient creatures such as dogs and cats can experience. And it has a sort of intrinsic *normative* significance: pleasure is sentiently experienced *as* good, and pain is experienced *as* bad. As sentient beings we know that normative character of the experiences as it were from the ‘inside’, that is, just from *having* pleasurable and painful experiences, from *being* sentient. And we can confirm it from the third-person, rather than the first-person point of view by noting that pleasurable experiences *positively* reinforce the behavior that brings them about, while painful ones *negatively* reinforce it.² Here the move from ‘is’ to ‘ought’ is

² There are subtleties concerning how to characterize the repeatable behavior-kinds that are properly understood as the objects of such reinforcement, and those subtleties matter a great deal for disputes between behavioristic

underwritten by the felt character of the experience: a sentient being that actually *is* in pain *feels* that it *ought not* to be.

These considerations motivate an argument of the following form:

- 1) Pleasure is the natural good for sentient beings as such, and pain is the natural bad for sentient beings as such.

So:

- 2) A life of pleasure is the best life for sentient beings.
- 3) We are sentient beings.

So:

- 4) A life of pleasure is the best life for us.

When it is thus baldly put, the fallacy in this voluptuary syllogism ought to be obvious. We are not only sentient beings, we are also sapient beings. If the as-it-were ‘natural’ good for *sapient* beings as such is something other than sensuous pleasure, the premises of this argument could all be true without them settling that the conclusion is also true. For they do not provide grounds for adjudicating the claims between what is best for us *as* sentient beings and what is best for us *as* sapient beings.

There is also a subtler way in which the fact that we are not only sentient but sapient bears on this line of thought. For our sapience means that it would be a mistake to equate ‘pleasure’ with ‘*sensuous* pleasure’ in our case, however much sense such an equation makes for

approaches to animal behavior and representationalist ones more characteristic of contemporary cognitive science. But for present purposes those subtleties can safely be ignored.

the non-sapient beasts of forest and field. Our sapience is not just something added to our sentience, leaving that base undisturbed. Sapience fundamentally transforms our sentience, turning mere inchoate *sensation* into articulated *perception*. Our sentience is not that of the beasts. What we share with them is only the physiological raw materials for our conceptually articulated sensuous experiences. Our seeing starts off as seeing-as. Pigeons can in one straightforward sense see red triangles—but we see them *as* red triangles. And so it is with even the most sensual of our pleasures. They are—one wants to say, using a term already flagged as potentially dangerous—distinctively *human* pleasures. Food is for us a thoroughly cultural affair. And the more pleasure one takes in it, the more *knowledge* and *understanding*, the more carefully *cultivated* practices are involved. For cooking to be an art, eating must also be one. We don't just *eat*, we *dine*. (The German language marks this point with the distinction between 'essen' and 'fressen'.) And the same point holds for the pleasures of drink. Beyond the bases subsistence level of those dying in the desert, the most characteristic feature of this form of life is the seemingly ineluctable drive to *connoisseurship*: not just in wine, but in whiskey, beer, tequila, tea, coffee, even water. We don't just drink, we sip and savor, we compare, contrast, assess, develop and articulate preferences. And the point is most obtrusively and ostentatiously manifest for the case of sexual pleasure. Since each of us can elaborate and illustrate it from our own experience, I will say about it only that it is not for nothing that the guiding precept and most important lesson of all those who study sexual phenomena—not just culturally, but just as much from the point of view of pure physiology—a slogan drummed into every student and emblazoned over the door of every research laboratory, is that overwhelmingly the most important human sexual organ is the *brain*.

So while we sapient beings *do* experience pleasures that have a significant sensual element, our pleasures are not for that reason to be identified with, or understood on the model of the pleasures of *merely* sentient beings. Even our sensuous pleasures are never *merely* sensuous. Our sapience penetrates them to their core. As William James said: “The trail of the human serpent is over all.” This is why no sophisticated defender of the life of pleasure as the good life for us ought to allow the identification of the pleasures in question with those that are displayed already in—as Aristotle puts it—the lives of grazing animals. Defending the life of pleasure does not require simply ignoring sapience in favor of sentience.

In fact, the distinction bears on our understanding of the life of pleasure in another way as well. For among the pleasures of sapient beings are to be found some that seem to owe little if anything to our sentience: distinctively *intellectual* pleasures. They are experienced in answering questions, satisfying curiosity, solving puzzles, unraveling mysteries, producing explanations, constructing theories, and in general achieving various kinds of *understanding*. Throwing pleasures of this sort into the mix motivates a famous line of thought—originating already in Aristotle, but perhaps most prominently defended by John Stuart Mill—that seeks to appeal to intellectual pleasures to undermine the distinction between a life of pleasure and a life of intellectual contemplation. The claim is that the pursuit of wisdom is not *not* a life of pleasure—it is just a life aiming at the *purely* sapient intellectual pleasures of *understanding*, rather than the hybrid sapient-sentient sensuous pleasures of *feeling*. If we then ask which of these sorts of pleasure is *better*—hence, which of the life of intellectual pleasure and that of sensual pleasure *ought* to be preferred—the thing to do is to look to the testimony of those who have thoroughly experienced *both*. And what one will find, the claim is, is that the *only* ones

who doubt the superiority of the intellectual pleasures to the sensual are those who have only experienced the sensual, and know nothing of the joys of intellectual understanding. If and insofar as that empirical claim is right, it supports the conclusion that the intellectual pleasures are *experienced as* better than the sensual ones, in much the same sense that sensual pleasure is experienced as better than pain. In that sense, then intellectual pleasures are *intrinsically*, that is, *as experiences*, better than sensual ones. And this is a reason to classify the pleasures of understanding as *higher* pleasures, and the pleasures of the senses as *lower* ones, without relying on the suspect identification of our sensual pleasures with those of the ‘lower’, i.e. non-sapient, animals.

There is certainly something to this celebrated line of thought—though the crucial empirical premise has been hotly contested by some. But it *not* the way I am going to argue in defense of the philosophical life. The argument I will offer turns on features of *sapience* that are independent of its relation to sentience.

We’ve seen how focusing on ourselves as sentient can provide raw materials that can serve as inputs to the metaphysical strategy for justifying normative assessments—including those that bear on the goodness of a form of life (though I’ve not attempted a comparison of forms of life along this dimension). For some sentient states are *felt as* good or bad. Indeed, we could use the terms ‘pleasure’ and ‘pain’ in very broad senses, as generic for *whatever* sentient states exhibit that sort of intrinsic positive or negative normative character, just *as* feelings—for *whatever feels good* or *feels bad*. So we can ask: Does the fact that we are *sapient*s provide any corresponding prospects for employing the metaphysical strategy for underwriting normative

judgments about better and worse lives for us? Of course, the answer depends on how one unpacks the notion of sapience. I'll consider three ways of doing that, following out in more contemporary terms philosophical ideas we owe to Hume, Kant, and Hegel.

3. The first may be called the *instrumental* model of normativity. According to it, what is in the most explanatorily basic sense *good* is getting what you *want*: satisfying desires and fulfilling intentions. What is *bad* is the frustration of desires and the failure of intentions. The metaphysical basis for normative assessments appealed to here is that intentional states such as desire and intention come with conditions of satisfaction, fulfillment, or success. Desires and intentions intrinsically, as the kind of sapient states they are, say how things *ought*, according to them, to be.

It is the *conceptual content* of sapient states of desire, intention, and also belief that determine what *counts* as success or satisfaction. If I desire that the ball go through the hoop, or intend that the international monetary fund is reformed, my desire is satisfied and my intention fulfilled just in case the ball goes through the hoop and international monetary system is reformed—and those facts can be the intentional contents of my beliefs about those matters.

What makes the content determining these conditions of satisfaction *conceptual* content, and so qualifies the states exhibiting it as *sapient* states and distinguishes them from merely sentient states such as pleasure and pain, which are devoid of specifically conceptual content is the way desires, intentions, and beliefs interdigitate in practical *reasoning*. To be conceptually

contentful is in the most basic sense to be the sort of thing that can serve as or stand in need of *reasons*—that is, to be able to serve as premise or conclusion in an *inference*. In the paradigmatic case of practical reasoning, beliefs and desires together serve as *premises* providing reasons for an intention, which serves as *conclusion*. A sample bit of practical reasoning might go like this:

I want to stay dry. [Desire]

Only opening my umbrella will keep me dry. [Belief]

So:

I shall open my umbrella. [Intention]

The primitively *good* case, in this instrumental sense, is where I *succeed* in opening the umbrella, *fulfilling* the intention and that *does* keep me dry, *satisfying* the desire. The primitive instrumental normative *bad* is failure to fulfill the intention or frustration of the desire. The conceptual contents of the intentional sapient states are what make the beliefs, desires, and intentions fit together *rationally*, in the sense that beliefs and desires can provide *reasons* for intentions.

On the instrumental conception, rationality is intelligence in the sense of a generalized capacity for getting what one wants. The most sophisticated contemporary way of working out the instrumental picture of rationality and sapience is rational choice theory, based on the mathematical formulations of decision theory (in the one agent case) and game theory (in the multiple agent case). It is one of the dominant conceptual frameworks of contemporary social

science—not just economics (which is in some sense its home), but also in such other disciplines as political theory and even sociology.

Whatever the merits of this framework may be when put to work in a social-scientific context, I do not think it will do as a way of understanding the sort of normativity that is most fundamental for rational (that is, sapient) creatures as such. For it takes for granted at the outset intentional states understood as conceptually contentful, as part of the explanatory raw materials from which is to be elaborated a notion of rationality as effectiveness at satisfying desires and fulfilling intentions—or, in the full-blown rational choice version, maximizing probabilistically expected utility (where utility is the measure of preference). And I think that one needs to appeal to the role of intentional states in *inference*, hence in reasoning, in order to see them as conceptually contentful at all.³ If that is right, the normativity distinctive of reasoning must come into the explanatory story already in understanding the conceptual contents of sapient states, and is not itself to be explained later in terms of them, as on the instrumental model. But I'm not going to try to argue for that claim here.⁴ Instead, I want to sketch a different approach.

4. Sapient creatures are knowers and agents. They make judgments and perform intentional actions. Perhaps Kant's most basic idea is that what distinguishes judgments and intentional actions from the responsive behavior of merely sentient creatures is that judgments and actions

³ This point is developed further in Chapter Seven.

⁴ *Making It Explicit* [Harvard University Press, 1994] is an extended argument for that claim. More compact arguments for the conclusion that one cannot underwrite conceptual content in purely instrumental terms can be found in "Unsuccessful Semantics" (*Analysis*, Vol 54 No 3, July 1994, pp. 175-178), and "When Philosophy Paints its Blue on Grey" (*boundary 2* Vol 29 No 2, Summer 2002, pp. 1-28). A more focused critique of rational choice theory is offered in "What Do Expressions of Preference Express?" in *Practical Rationality and Preference: Essays for David Gauthier*, Christopher Morris and Arthur Ripstein (eds.), Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 11-36.

are things that we are in a distinctive sense *responsible* for. They express *commitments* of ours; they are exercises of *authority*, stands we authorize. Responsibility, commitment, authority—these are all *normative* statuses. We sapient beings are at base *normative* beings.

Further, Kant understands the *contents* of our normatively significant sapient states to be *rules* that determine *what* we have made ourselves responsible for, *what* we have committed ourselves to, *what* we have authorized. And his name for those content-articulating rules is ‘*concepts*’. So he understands what one is doing in judging as applying a concept: a concept that determines how one is *taking* things to be, how one is committing oneself to things being, how they must be if the commitment one has authorized and made oneself responsible for is to count as *correct*. And he understands what one is doing in acting intentionally also as applying a concept: a concept that in the case of this sort of act determines how one is committing oneself to *make* things be, how they must turn out if the practical commitment one has authorized and made oneself responsible for is to count as *successful*. In a strict sense, *all* kantian sapient beings can do *as such* is to apply concepts, in judgment and action. Understanding concepts as rules that determine what we have committed ourselves to by applying them is a radically *non-psychological* concept of concepts. For Kant, what matters is not our grip on concepts—how well or clearly we understand them—but their grip on us, how they bind us by articulating our commitments and responsibilities.

Part of what one is committing oneself to, part of what one is responsible for, in applying a concept is having *reasons* for doing so. Indeed, the way concepts settle *what* one is committing oneself to by applying them in judgment or action is by articulating what is a *reason*

for what: what follows from applying the concept and what is a reason for or against applying it. Conceptual content is *rational* content, in the sense that it determines the *role in reasoning*—whether theoretical, in judgment, or practical, in agency—of concept-applications. So where on the instrumental model of sapience one appeals to a notion of conceptual content as an explanatory primitive, and then builds out of it notions of instrumental rationality and normative appraisal of satisfaction and success, on the kantian model of sapience, normative notions of rationally articulated commitment and responsibility are appealed to at the ground level, to explain what it is to be conceptually contentful.

Sapient beings are beings that are sensitive to conceptual norms, which is to say beings that can act for *reasons*. Being sensitive to the normative force of the better reason—the phenomenon that so puzzled and fascinated the ancient Greek philosophers—is what kantian *freedom* consists in. Understood in this way, freedom is the capacity constitutive of sapience: the capacity to undertake conceptually articulated responsibilities, to make commitments, the capacity to respond not just to *natural properties*, but to *normative proprieties*. Real freedom comes not from the *absence* of an externally imposed *cause*, but from the *presence* of an internally endorsed *reason*. Becoming the subject of normative statuses such as responsibility, commitment, and authority is, for Kant, moving from being a *denizen* of the *realm of nature* to being a *citizen* of the *realm of freedom*.

Kant's conception of the freedom that consists in the capacity to *bind* oneself by conceptual norms, to undertake responsibility, to make commitments, to exercise and acknowledge authority was a radically original one. The tradition had thought of freedom as

negative freedom: freedom *from* constraints of various sorts. Kant focuses instead on *positive* freedom: freedom *to* do something. It is the freedom *to* act for *reasons*. Freedom in that sense is freedom *to* bind or constrain oneself by norms, to commit oneself, to make oneself responsible. For sapient beings, the relevant and essential contrast between freedom and unfreedom is not that between lack of constraint and constraint, but between *normative* and merely *natural* constraint—the difference between constraint by *reasons* and by *causes*. This constellation of ideas about normativity in the form of responsibility and commitment, reasons and concepts, and a positive conception of freedom is what Heidegger is talking about when he refers to “the dignity and spiritual greatness of German Idealism.”⁵

These Kantian ideas are deep and important ones. One way to see that is to think about the significance of this way of thinking about the essential metaphysics of sapience for assessing the two strands of irrationalism whose twentieth-century advocates are Foucault and Derrida. The first develops ideas championed already by Nietzsche in the second half of the nineteenth century. It sees the practice of giving and asking for *reasons* as just the distinctively modern form of *power*. Instead of controlling people by threatening them with violence, one systematically manipulates the language they use to understand and interpret themselves and their world. And the thought is that that is *all* reason is. (At the end of his life, even Foucault admitted that doing it that way at least represented an improvement over threatening to hurt or kill people, but he still insisted that the concept of rational persuasion—moving someone by the special normative force of reasons—was a mere ploy by the powerful.) The second line of thought has its roots in the Romanticism of the early nineteenth century. It claims that giving

⁵ Chapter One develops this line of thought more fully.

and asking for reasons is just *one* game one can play with words, and that only a self-serving conspiracy of philosophers and scientists has convinced people that it deserves any privilege at all over all the other playful and artistically creative things one can do with language.

It is natural and easy to respond to these challenges to what they denominate as the "hegemony" of reason simply by recoiling from their anti-intellectualism and irrationalism. But I would argue that these criticisms deserve to be taken seriously—and that they should then be contested on their own ground and in their own terms. Since the Enlightenment, reason has tended to be identified with science (*thought* with *scientific* thought). So in rejecting the intellectual hegemony of natural science, the Romantics tended to reject the claims of *reason* more generally. The importance of idealism was the disentangling of these two: the realization that the rejection of *scientism* need not be a form of *irrationalism*. If Kant is right, the practice of giving and asking for reasons is not just one, optional, strategy among others for controlling our fellow citizens, nor is it one optional game among others we can play with words. It is what makes it so much as possible for us to think and act, to entertain determinately contentful plans, to commit ourselves, to exercise authority, to undertake responsibility—in short, to be sapient *persons* at all. It provides the conceptual basis on which exercises of power and the playing of games rest, and cannot properly be understood in terms of those late-coming possibilities. The picture of us as creatures of our own rational commitments provides a positive response to the irrationalist challenges that are so characteristic of our times.

5. Hegel transforms these Kantian ideas by combining them with three others. First, he understands *normative* statuses such as responsibility, commitment, and authority, as essentially *social* statuses. There were no such normative statuses until people adopted practical normative

attitudes towards each other—that is, until they started *holding* each other responsible, *treating* each other as committed, *acknowledged* each other's authority. Adopting those attitudes towards one another is what he calls '*recognition*'. On his view, adopting normative statuses—being a free Kantian agent, able to judge and act intentionally—is in principle possible only in the context of a community. Those communities form the social substance in which we normative creatures live and move and have our being—what Hegel calls 'Geist', Spirit. Normative communities are synthesized by reciprocal recognition. Sapience is not a wholly individual achievement: it takes a village.

The second of Hegel's contributions is an *expressive* account of positive freedom. The aspect of sapient life exhibits the normative structure of Geist in its purest, clearest form is *language*—the ultimate medium of expression.⁶ Language is a social practice. Performing speech acts such as asserting, promising, and commanding should be understood as doing things that have the social significance of undertaking commitments, taking on responsibilities, exerting authority. Engaging in discursive practices is accordingly the paradigmatic exercise of Kantian positive freedom. In doing so, we bind ourselves by norms articulated by the contents of the concepts we apply. If I claim that the coin is copper, I have said something that, whether I know it or not, is *correct* only if the coin would melt at 1084° C., and would *not* melt at 1083° C.. If you promise to drive me to the airport at 3 tomorrow, it is not up to you what would count as fulfilling that promise. The positive freedom to adopt these normative statuses requires and partly consists in constraining oneself by conceptual norms.

⁶ As Hegel says: "Language is the Dasein of Geist." *Phenomenology of Spirit*, [A.W. Miller, (trans.), Oxford University Press] paragraph 652.

A classic, perennial, in some sense defining challenge of political philosophy has always been to explain how, and on what grounds, it could be *rational* for an individual to accept communal constraints on his will. What could *justify* the loss of negative freedom—the freedom *from* constraint—that conformity to the norms of a community or institution requires? Even if it can be justified from the point of view of the collective—which cannot exist without such constraints on individual behavior—can it also be understood as rationally justifiable from the point of view of the individual herself? The positive expressive freedom—the freedom *to* do something—that is obtainable only by constraining oneself by the conceptual norms implicit in *discursive* social practices provides an attractive affirmative answer to this challenge. Talking requires complying with a daunting variety of norms, rules, and standards—and here I don't just mean those that pertain to speaking or writing *well*, but the more basic ones that are involved in being intelligible at all. (This fact can fade so far into the background as to be well-nigh invisible for our home languages, but it is an obtrusive, unpleasant, and unavoidable feature of working in a language in which one is *not* at home.) What sort of positive freedom does one get in return for constraining oneself in these multifarious ways?

The astonishing empirical observation with which Chomsky inaugurated contemporary linguistic theory is that almost every sentence uttered by an adult native speaker is radically *novel*. That is, not only has that speaker never heard or uttered just that sequence of words before, but neither has anyone else—ever. “Have a nice day,” may get a lot of play, but any tolerably complex sentence is almost bound to be new. Quotations aside, it is for instance exceptionally unlikely that a sentence chosen at random from the story I've been telling has ever been used before. And this is not a special property of professor-speak. Surveys of large

corpora of actual utterances (collected and collated by indefatigable graduate students) have repeatedly confirmed this empirically, and it can be demonstrated on more fundamental grounds by looking at the number of sentences of, say, thirty words or less that a relatively simple grammar can construct using the extremely minimal 5000-word vocabulary of Basic English. (For comparison, you probably actively use 25,000 and understand 75,000—and any of your professors, many more.) There hasn't been time in human history for us to have used a substantial proportion of those sentences, even if every human there had ever been always spoke English and did nothing but chatter incessantly. Yet I have no trouble producing, and you have no trouble understanding, a sentence that (in spite of its ordinariness) it is quite unlikely anyone has happened to use before, such as:

We shouldn't leave for the picnic until we're sure that we've packed my old wool blanket, the thermos, and all the sandwiches we made this morning.

This capacity for *radical semantic novelty* fundamentally distinguishes sapient creatures from those who do not engage in linguistic practices. Because of it we can (and do, all the time) make claims, formulate desires, and entertain goals that no-one in the history of the world has ever before considered. This massive positive expressive freedom transforms the lives of sentient creatures who become sapient by constraining themselves with linguistic—which is to say conceptual—norms.

So in the conceptual normativity implicit in linguistic practice we have a model of a kind of constraint—loss of negative freedom—that is repaid many times over in a bonanza of positive freedom. Anyone who was in a position to consider the trade-off rationally would consider it a once-in-a-lifetime bargain. Of course, one need not be a creature like us. As Sellars says, one always could simply *not speak*—but only at the price of having nothing to say. And non-sapient

sentients are hardly in a position to weigh the pros and cons involved. But the fact remains that there *is* an argument that shows that at least *this* sort of normative constraint is rational—that it pays off by opening up a dimension of positive expressive freedom that is a pearl without price, available in no other way. Hegel’s idea is that this case provides the model that every other social or political institution that proposes to constrain our negative freedom should be compared to and measured against. The question always is: what new kind of expressive freedom, what new kinds of life-possibilities, what new kinds of commitment, responsibility, and authority are made possible by the institution? The strategy is to use an understanding of the basic metaphysical structure of sapience as such as the basis for normative assessment of lives and institutions.⁷

Hegel’s third idea is that sapient beings are the subjects of developmental processes that exhibit a distinctive structure. Sapience is a kind of consciousness. Concept users are beings things can in a distinctive sense be something *for*. And concept use allows a kind of *self*-consciousness not available to mere sentients: being something *for* oneself. (Since this is one of the payoffs of sapience, of being a concept-user, for Hegel it is fundamentally a *social* achievement.) The selves of self-conscious creatures exhibit a distinctive structure: what they *really* are, as Hegel says, what they are *in* themselves, depends on what they *take* themselves to be, in Hegel-speak, what they are *for* themselves. And that means that a self-conscious being can change what it is *in* itself by changing what it is *for* itself. Self-conscious creatures accordingly enjoy the possibility of a distinctive kind of *self-transformation*: *making* themselves be different by *taking* themselves to be different. Because what they are in themselves is at any

⁷ This line of thought is developed more fully in Chapter Two.

point the outcome of such a developmental process depending on their attitudes, essentially self-conscious beings don't have *natures*, they have *histories*.⁸ Or, put differently, it is their nature to have not just a *past*, but a *history*: a sequence of partially self-constituting self-transformations, mediated at every stage by their self-conceptions, and culminating in them being what they currently are. Understanding what they are requires looking retrospectively at the process of sequential reciprocal influences of what they at each stage were for themselves and what they at each stage were in themselves, by which they came to be what they now are. Rehearsing such a historical narrative (Hegel's 'Errinerung') is a distinctive way of understanding oneself *as* an essentially historical, because essentially self-conscious, sort of being.⁹ (The twentieth century existentialist slogan "Existence precedes essence," is an attempt to express a weak, watered-down version of this Hegelian conception.)

6. I want now to use the conceptual raw materials I've assembled so far to say something briefly about the life of political activity, and then about the philosophical life. The first thing to notice is that ways of thinking about what the good life consists in for creatures like us—rooted in ways of thinking about what kind of beings we are—come into play *twice* in thinking about the life of political activity. It is itself, of course, one of the forms of life to be assessed. But it is also true that one of the central *aims* of political activity is to *enable* and *promote* the freedom of one's fellow citizens (*our* freedom) to live the best lives possible. Here *enabling* is increasing *negative* freedom, freedom *from* constraints that hinder living normatively good lives, and *promoting* is increasing *positive* freedom, freedom *to* live those lives, by making available

⁸ Chapter Four opens by introducing this contrast between things that have natures and things that have histories.

⁹ Chapter Three develops this line of thought more fully.

resources that can be deployed in the service of living *well*, living *better*, and living the *best* lives possible. So devoting oneself to a life of political activity requires practically endorsing a view about how to address the normative question of what makes better lives for beings like us. Since that is a principal question that philosophers must address, the *content* of *political* life depends on the answer to a distinctively *philosophical* question.

What difference does it make for the understanding of the aims of political life which of the three metaphysical conceptions of us discussed above one adopts as the basis for this sort of normative assessment? The three are:

- a conception of us as essentially *sentient* beings whose good is *pleasure*,
- a conception of us as essentially *sapient* beings in the Humean-instrumental sense, whose good is satisfying our desires or maximizing utility, and
- a conception of us as essentially *sapient* beings in the Kantian sense as elaborated by Hegel: expressive beings whose good consists in exercising their capacity for self-conscious self-constitution and self-transformation.

My main concern, however, is with the last of these, since I think the metaphysical views of us that ground the first two are ultimately unsustainable. But I can here only gesture at the reasons.

One *can* lead a life of political activity premised on an understanding of us as essentially *sentients*, so of the good life for us as one of sensuous pleasure. Doing that is taking as one of one's principal aims enabling and promoting the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. I'm not going to say a lot about this. From the point of view of those of us who think what matters is not biology but sapience, discursivity, Hegelian Geist, this way of thinking about us is

too narrow. It is a kind of biological chauvinism—a morally objectionable parochialism. Sentience is merely a *medium*; the *message* lies in sapience. The point of *feeling* is not its mere *intensity*, positive or negative. It is that its modulations can articulate *thoughts*, which turn us from mere *animals* into *selves*.

But this biological way of picking *us* out is also too *wide*. Here the debate over whether embryos are *persons* is a good case in point. Here the question is: should moral respect go with *sapience* or with *biology*? Sentience-utilitarians such as Singer say the latter because they see *morality* as normatively driven by the intrinsic *sensuous* evaluation implicit in the phenomena of *pain* and *pleasure*. But we kantians see the normative basis of morality as derived from the *positive freedom* of giving and asking for *reasons*. Mammalian sensuousness, sentience, is at best a *necessary* condition of that, not a *sufficient* one. According to this line of thought, it is the capacity to engage in *conceptual* activity, being a subject of *sapience*, not of *sentience*, that is in the first instance *morally* significant. This does not, of course, *settle* it that we should not accord *respect* and *rights* to embryos, as *potential* moral persons, or for that matter, to non-human *animals*. But in each case the argument appeals to an *indirect* connection to the *primary* subjects of moral respect and (so) rights: discursive creatures. Kant certainly thought it was wrong to cause pain to animals for no reason—but that is not in the first instance because of what it does to *them*, but because of what doing that to *them* does to *us*.

In any case, since the political life itself is a life of sapient activity, there is something odd about devoting it to enabling and promoting *sensuous* self-indulgence on the part of one's

fellows—a vision of the politician as civic designated-driver, or as the only adult in a community of children.

By contrast, it certainly makes sense as a public political aim to enable and promote the pursuit of *happiness* by one's fellows, where happiness is thought of instrumentally, as a matter of their getting whatever it is that they privately want, of their succeeding in the pursuit of whatever projects they have taken on. But a devotee of the political life who consulted *this* philosopher would be told that the instrumental conception of the rationality that structures sapience is radically defective. I can't pursue here the reasons for this assessment, but I'll register one familiar source of discontent. At a practical level, this model of sapient rationality puts the endorsement of ends or goals ultimately beyond rational assessment, except as some serve as sub-goals to others. Reason is understood as *exclusively* concerned with means to already-adopted ends. But this seems wrong: the formation of preferences should also be subject to rational assessment.

What I do want to discuss are the relations between political and philosophical activity according to the richer, more interesting conception of sapience that Hegel develops out of Kant's insights. I've already indicated how thinking of us as *expressive*, self-constituting and self-transforming beings provides a linguistic model for the *political* justification of constraint by communal norms—how sufficient gains in the positive expressive freedom that is the good for sapients on this metaphysical understanding can justifiably be seen to compensate for a corresponding loss of negative freedom. That line of thought is one of the conceptual gifts the philosopher can give the politician. But on this line of thought, philosophers have a still more

important role to play. We sapient beings are self-constituting beings because what we are *for* ourselves is an essential element of what we are *in* ourselves. One of the central tasks of philosophy is to craft vocabularies we can use to interpret, understand, constitute, and ultimately transform ourselves. The production of potentially self- and community-transforming vocabularies is not, to be sure, the exclusive province of philosophers. For instance, film-makers and novelists (imagers and imaginers of lives and projects), poets (sculptors of language and linguistic images), and such hard-to-classify thinkers as Marx and Freud are all practitioners of this arcane, human-alchemical art.

But philosophers not only craft vocabularies rich with the possibility of re-describing, re-conceiving, and (so) re-constituting ourselves, they are also the ones whose province within the high culture it is to study and theorize *about* the vocabularies that enable and promote sapient self-development. It is the philosophers' job to come to *understand* the process by which expressive, self-interpreting, self-constituting historical creatures produce and consume those vocabularies so as to become what they (then) are. This is what the philosophers I have been talking about—Aristotle, Hume, Kant, and Hegel—do. They produce new vocabularies in which we can understand ourselves and each other, and they do that *by* thinking about the kinds of being we are, and about role of such vocabularies in instituting and constituting the conceptual normativity that is the medium in which beings like us live our lives. Specifically philosophical vocabularies are the principal organs of self-consciousness for expressive beings.

On the Hegelian conception of us, then, one of the great goods for us is the availability of an inexhaustible supply of new vocabularies in which to express, develop, constitute, and

transform ourselves and our institutions, and for understanding the process by which we do that. This is the great positive, expressive freedom that makes us what we are. As the part of the good for us, it is also a *telos* of political activity—that which those who take *our* good as *their* practical aim are thereby obliged to enable and promote. And that is to say that a central aim of a *political* life must be to enable and promote the living of specifically *philosophical* lives—as well as those of the other, less self-conscious, conceptual sculptors of vocabularies for self-redescription. That conclusion expresses the metaphysical basis of a division of labor between these two sorts of paradigmatically sapient forms of life.

7. What of the life of philosophical activity itself? I've taken what may have seemed a somewhat roundabout path to this question. But I've done that because the best way to see what goods are secured by philosophical activity is not to talk *about* it, but to *do* a bit of it. The ideas I've put on the table let us pick out distinctively *philosophical* activity by a series of nested characterizations. On the conception of us as sapience I have been suggesting, we are to be understood to begin with as *normative* creatures, hence as essentially *social* ones. Because those norms are *conceptual* norms, which is to say norms governing inferential practices of giving and asking for reasons, we are *rational, discursive* beings. Binding ourselves by conceptual norms that go beyond mere causal constraint makes possible the positive *expressive freedom* think new thoughts, make new claims, and to describe and understand ourselves and our recognitive communities in new ways, achieving a new sort of self-consciousness. With that expressive freedom and self-consciousness comes the possibility of *transforming* ourselves by adopting new vocabularies, redescribing and so reconstituting our selves and discursive institutions. While all

of us are in some sense *consumers* of such new vocabularies, it is the special calling of some to *produce* them. And among those producers some take the construction of unique, potentially transformative vocabularies as the project by commitment to which they understand and define themselves. Among that group, some seek to produce those new vocabularies precisely *by* trying to understand the phenomena of sapience, normativity, conceptuality, reason, freedom, expression, self-consciousness, self-constitution, and historical transformation by subversive, empowering vocabularies.¹⁰ Those are the philosophers. They are charged neither with simply understanding human nature (human history), nor with simply changing it, but with changing it *by* understanding it.

All the goods of sapient life flow from participation in the great human conversation. Producing the vocabularies that, as the medium in which that conversation is conducted, are the discursive, expressive organs of self-consciousness, self-constitution, and self-development for sapients is accordingly an especially important sort of contribution one can make to that conversation. And sculpting conceptual tools for *understanding* the nature, history, and potential for such self-conscious expressive self-transformation enables and promotes the deepest, grandest form of self-consciousness of which we are capable.

Doing that is exercising a unique kind of expressive freedom—the kind characteristic of the philosophical life. And the goods distinctive of that life flow from that sort of positive freedom. The philosopher is responsible for and committed to digesting the most profound thoughts and mastering the most intricate and powerful vocabularies that have been developed

¹⁰ That is pretty much the aim of this book.

for articulating our sapience, and for producing from them new such thoughts and vocabularies—new forms of self-consciousness—for our own times.

It does not go without saying that societies provide environmental and institutional niches within which those doing the sort of work I am talking about can flourish. That depends, after all, on the vision and abilities of the politicians who—I've urged—are specially charged with enabling and promoting it. For instance, Medieval Muslim culture provided ample institutional opportunities—and nourished many good and some great philosophers and other transformative thinkers—while contemporary Muslim culture has apparently so far provided only stony ground for such seeds. Courtly patronage from Renaissance Italy to the France of the *ancien régime* was one institution that made room for, and even supported philosophical work, even if fitfully and unevenly. But the principal institutional locus of environmental niches suitable for philosophical lives in the modern world is the *university*. In its contemporary form, as independent of the Church, it is largely a nineteenth century development—owing a surprisingly extensive debt to the intellectual vision of Hegel and the institutional genius of Humboldt. Even in developed Western countries, its role as a haven for the most abstract sort of speculation and vocabulary construction—as opposed to an engine for applied technological progress—is always fragile and often threatened.

But in that favored environment, academic philosophers enjoy to an unusual extent the peculiar individual positive freedom of the intellectual. Prime among these is control over one's own time and problems. Almost anyone who can do this work could make lots more money doing something else; this is what we've gotten in return for foregoing that. What we think

about and work on is wholly up to us: the *only* consideration is what we find most interesting and promising, what we think we can use, can make something important of. Equally smart and well-educated people in other professions—think of law, medicine, business, politics—are almost exclusively obliged to think about problems and issues that are important to *other* people, that are made pressing by the passing demands of events or institutions over which they have little control. The resources at our command are not massive; we don't supervise large teams of eager subordinates, can't bring to bear large capital investments. But we are free to deploy our own time and efforts as we see fit—free to waste them if we make bad judgments. Though one is always uncomfortably aware of the ultimately weightier judgments of one's work that will eventually be made by colleagues as yet unborn, on a day-to-day and year-to-year basis, academics are free to work on what *they* care about.

Almost uniquely, academics are also granted the positive freedom to take whatever time, invest whatever energy, they deem necessary for the task to which they are committed: paradigmatically, digesting or producing a text, a contribution to the great Conversation in which one is but a link connecting the mighty dead to the mighty to come. If one asks capable and committed people across modern culture generally what they find most objectionable about their professional situations, a great number will say that it is that their institutions do not, for one reason or another, allow them to do their work properly—to take the time to get it right. Everything is a rush, a compromise, a make-do solution that could be vastly improved were one only allowed to. We are allowed and even encouraged to agonize, to hone, to polish—to take the time and make the effort to make the work the best it can be. I spent eighteen years writing my big book *Making It Explicit*, for instance—though that was not *all* I was doing, it was my

principal project. And I've been at my nearly-finished (I think) Hegel book for more than twentyfive. I'm not working under journalistic constraints—the remarkable thing is that it can be done at all. Our projects are ones that can be undertaken without depending on the acquiescence or co-operation of others. (Compare the frustration of an architect with a compelling idea who is not allowed even to work it out in detail, never mind to see it constructed, until and unless a client can be persuaded to pay for it.) And how good our products turn out to be is wholly a matter of how good *we* make them. There is no-one else on whom to blame flaws of conception or execution. (Compare the frustration of a film-writer or director, whose vision must be distorted in many ways in order to be implemented, since it depends in so many ways on the efforts of so many other people.) Of course, having no excuses can be difficult, too. As Nietzsche said “Hard is it to be alone with one's own judge and executioner.” But having the positive freedom to find out what one is really capable of—in a way that the journalist, architect, or director may never be able to—is still a substantial satisfaction.

These forms of the public freedom of the philosopher are institutional reflections of a kind of private freedom that is harder to characterize: the freedom of thought itself, the medium in which we sapients live and move and have our being. It is the freedom exercised by the theoretical mathematician. When she says “Let y be a function of x ,” God and all his angels cannot say “Let's not.” It may be a foolish, pointless, or fruitless stipulation, it may lead to any number of difficulties. But the capacity to bind oneself by that sort of discursive commitment, to explore its consequences (what one has thereby made oneself responsible for) and possible ways of justifying it (what authority one could claim for it) is the normative, discursive freedom

constitutive of thought itself. That realm of freedom is our ownmost domain. And it is the philosophers who are most self-consciously and explicitly at home in that freedom.

8. I started my story with the question of how one might ground normative characterizations and comparative assessments of different forms of life. The answer that comes down to us from Plato and Aristotle is what I called the “metaphysical strategy”: start with an account of the kind of beings we most deeply are. Focusing on consciousness or awareness in the broadest possible sense as what is characteristic of us, I then distinguished two fundamentally different dimensions of mindedness: sentience and sapience. Identifying ourselves as sentient valorizes a life of sensuous pleasure. I then marked out three ways in which we can instead describe and demarcate ourselves in terms of the sapience that distinguishes us from the beasts of forest and field.

- With Hume, we can think of ourselves as choosing, goal-pursuing beings, whose good consists in satisfying conceptually contentful desires and preferences. Reason, which articulated concepts, is understood as *practical*, instrumental intelligence—the capacity to deploy means deliberately and successfully to achieve ends. This sort of self-description underwrites a life primarily devoted, not to procuring more or less fleeting episodes of sensual pleasure, but to enjoying longer term states of *satisfaction* of articulated, consciously endorsed desires, plans, and projects.
- Kant offers a still richer picture of sapience as a *normative* achievement—the positive ability to commit oneself, to take on responsibilities, to acknowledge and exercise authority. The conceptual contents of those commitments and entitlements are a matter of what counts

as good *reasons* for adopting them—on a much broader conception of reason than the Humean-instrumental.

- The third, most sophisticated conception of sapience is Hegel’s account of us as creatures of our positive expressive freedom—beings whose essence it is to have no essence, no nature, but only a history structured and driven by the description of ourselves that we endorse at each stage in our development—hence self-creating beings, who can change what we are *in* ourselves by changing what we are *for* ourselves, by identifying with new descriptions of ourselves, by adopting new vocabularies.

Each of these metaphysical meta-vocabularies for describing ourselves—as sentient, and as sapient thought of the three different ways I’ve sketched, offers a different view of the kind of flourishing that we should seek, and that it should be a principal aim of the political life to enable and promote. It is up to the philosopher, however, to assess the merits of the competing claims of these ways of thinking about ourselves. According to the metaphysical strategy, that requires deciding which is the best metaphysical vocabulary to use in describing us. It is *true* of us that that we are sentient, and that we are sapient in all three of the senses considered: Humean, Kantian, and Hegelian. But which best characterizes what is *essential* about us—which makes us *us*? Note that the Hegelian offers a special kind of answer to this question: there is no once-and-for-all, matter-of-factual answer to that question, privileging one of the vocabularies for describing us. For what we really, essentially, are, *in* ourselves, depends on what we are *for* ourselves. It depends on which vocabulary for self-description we adopt, endorse, interpret ourselves in terms of, and so identify with. Fans of sentience, Hume, Kant, and Hegel himself have done their philosophical work well, and offered us candidate vocabularies whose adoption

makes us into different sorts of being. The lesson we should learn from studying their efforts is *not* a decision about who is *right*, but one concerning the importance of coming up with new, ever-more-interesting such vocabularies as candidates to identify with, as expressive tools allowing us to *take* ourselves to be new kinds of being, and so to *make* ourselves into something new and different, preserving and accumulating previously disclosed possibilities and projects, while transforming and adding to them. That is the job of the philosophers. As Henry James said on behalf of all those who devote themselves to this sort of meta-sapient labor:

“We do what we can. We give what we have. We work in the dark. Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art.”