

**Anti-philosophy Philosophy or Just Anti-philosophy?
A Last Hurrah in the Spirit, but not in Accordance with the Text,
of Logical Positivism**

Kai Nielsen

I

Ludwig Wittgenstein concerning philosophy was very un-Isaiah Berlin-ish as Berlin was very un-Wittgensteinian. Wittgenstein thought and powerfully argued that philosophy, quite against philosophers' intentions, was tangled up into nonsense (Wittgenstein 1953, p. 51). That that is so, he argues, is usually, indeed almost always, hidden from philosophers. Its actual nonsense is disguised. It is not seen as nonsense by them, a few anti-philosophy philosophers aside. He is not speaking of intellectuals such as the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan who simply rejected philosophy outright and as arguably did Marx and Freud but of therapeutic philosophers who use philosophy to reject philosophy wishing to engender the charge of performative contradiction—a charge I shall be concerned to give sound reasons for rejecting. But when Wittgenstein was clearly consistent his philosophical investigations, as he called them, took a therapeutic course and were purely negative resulting in grammatical remarks, as he called them, intended to be liberating from the duress of philosophy. He told us 'Don't look for the meaning; look (usually) for the use'. Our misunderstandings of the uses of our language generated philosophy and still generates it; our correct understanding leads us out of philosophy. But that can be difficult, particularly when a certain picture of language obsesses us. When we are in such an entanglement these matters can become agonizing psychologically as well as intellectually as was often the case for Wittgenstein. It is hard to break their spell, a spell that leads us to view the world wrongly—

indeed actually nonsensically. By coming to understand the workings of our language in the area or areas where we become philosophically perplexed, we can break our perplexities in a certain context or contexts. Sometimes when we have been through this several times we can break the hold of philosophical perplexities for us across the board. But sometimes not. Conceptual therapy, like therapy for neuroses, can be a chancy matter.

Where it is a particular perplexity in a certain context the perplexity can be broken when we come to recognize correct language use there. Achieving this recognition in a particular context, as a bit of conceptual therapy, we can break such an obsession. We will have then experienced a specific philosophical defogment when we have repeated in case after case having our philosophical enchantments defogged and when it, if it comes to be very extensive, we *may* be freed *tout court* of philosophy. We will no longer need to philosophize, making claims which bring themselves repeatedly into question.

This points to why Wittgenstein and other such therapeutic philosophers are not caught in performative contradictions. There is no philosophy that is needed to replace the philosophy we have been freed from. There are no philosophical propositions being appealed to or philosophical associations or assumptions in the background. We need only the assemblage of grammatical remarks that show that philosophical propositions misuse language and in doing so will, if undetected, generate nonsense. But these assemblages are not themselves philosophical propositions. They do not require a philosophical position. They rather remind us, for example, that there can—logically can—be no unutterable utterances or unsayable sayings or unsayables to be said or unanswerable questions. If something were unanswerable it would not be questioned. There can, logically can, be no unutterable sayings, unanswerable questions, unspeakable crimes just as there can be no four-sided triangles. These are not empirical claims but conceptual claims, logical truths or, if you will, informal logic. Formal logic need not be a pleonasm. Our so-called philosophical claims like the negative ones are such grammatical remarks, not metaphysical

danglers. We just see by carefully reflecting on our language that the unutterable cannot be uttered and that there cannot be an unsayable something. Unspeakables are moralistic metaphors. We come to rest with grammatical remarks rather than with deep obscure philosophical claims—indeed often with rather obvious grammatical remarks. This is what his conceptual therapizing can do for us. It reveals the *ersatz* depth of philosophy and in doing so unbuckles us from philosophy.

Wittgenstein's methodological lesson concerning philosophy was that it was on the site of misunderstanding of the workings of our language that gave rise to philosophy and fixated some people on philosophy. Note that it is the failure of an illusion but hopefully the failure of an escape from philosophical illusions. The way to escape such entanglements is to *on the site of our perplexity* gain a clear view of the workings of our language. That does not mean, to repeat, that we will come to have a clear view of the whole of our language. Such a complete clarity, even if it could be had, is not necessary to break philosophical perplexity. It is not necessary to free ourselves from philosophy and leave it completely to have such complete clarity. It is enough to understand where we were once philosophically perplexed that our philosophical perplexity resulted from a failure to understand the workings of our language in a particular context and to understand that is the way, when it carried extensively through, that we will become philosophically defoggable and eventually philosophically defogged. Our philosophical foggage rests on a failure to understand the workings of our language. It may take time and tough-minded reflection for that to take hold. But if it does, there are no remaining alleged philosophical truths up for discovery. That there could be is just a dream. But we are not the worse for that escape.

There may well be *particular* contexts where we will continue to be drawn to philosophize. That is true as well about some neuroses even after successful psychoanalysis. That just goes with a therapeutic turn concerning philosophy. It is a conceptual therapy with psychological effects and that is an effect of a turn following Wittgenstein. What gives rise to our philosophical blocks is our misunderstanding at some particular place of the functioning of our language. It is that which is

causing us to philosophize. Correcting our understanding of that part of our language is what we need here. We usually correct such matters piecemeal, one philosophical puzzle after another, knowing that each entanglement is linguistic and that conceptual therapy is the only reasonable way out of this perplexity.

Where we are in the thrall of philosophy we will be in denial of this. Complete clarity, however, is impossible. But it is also unnecessary as well as being impossible. There is no reforming of language or the creating of an 'ideal language' that will do the work, settling everything once and for all. But we can in case after case so defog ourselves in particular contexts by coming to understand how and why we misunderstand the functions of our language and what a correct understanding comes to, and all of that without philosophy. In this way we make it less plausible that we are entangled in illusion. And for this defogging no philosophical doctrines are required or needed or even indeed actually understood or in reality understandable. We will, if we stick to this, need no flight from the empirical or in reality an attempted flight from contingency and we will have avoided creating new idols to replace the old.

It is by adopting such a method—not a philosophical method—following Wittgenstein that we break philosophy's hold on us. He has it that it is only by gaining a clear view of the workings of our language *where it is causing our philosophical perplexity* that we will escape philosophical entanglements. That, he well recognized, does not mean that we will come to have a clear view of the workings of the whole of our language. That is unnecessary and indeed probably impossible. But we can defog ourselves in the places where we are blocked because of a failure of understanding how our language works there without attaining that complete understanding, that Austinian ideal of understanding. However, after several of such defoggings we may reasonably come to believe, and perhaps correctly, that there can be no philosophical perplexities that are not illusions. Of course, there is no demonstration of this but there can be an establishment that this is what it is reasonable to believe. Most establishments fall short of demonstration.

II

That is what it comes to with a therapeutic turn concerning philosophy. It is a conceptual therapy usually and, quite naturally, with psychological effects but not necessarily so. It is a turn, largely following Wittgenstein, or at least my understanding of him, that I take *somewhat* ambivalently. To see why I remain ambivalent we should reflect on whether Wittgenstein's account is the only account of what causes philosophical perplexity or befogment. However, without taking back anything of what I have said concerning philosophy, consider the following.

By looking at philosophy—or at least some philosophy—historically there comes easily to thought that we need seriously to ask here whether I have claimed something too extreme concerning the nonsensibility of philosophy for it to be credible. Can it really be true that philosophy, all philosophy, is just disguised entangled nonsense? Perhaps the philosophical puzzles that Wittgenstein concerned himself with are. But is that true of all philosophy and all philosophical problems and concerns?

Here is where my initial reference to Isaiah Berlin becomes relevant. He *in effect may* be a good corrective here. He was historically oriented toward thought, including philosophy, even after he had abandoned what he thought was philosophy for cultural and intellectual history. He was concerned with that in a way Wittgenstein was not. Such Berlinish-type reflections and the investigations were in varying degrees and varying ways part of the work of Aristotle, Montaigne, Spinoza, Hobbes, Hume, J. S. Mill, Nietzsche, G. E. Moore, Santayana, Dewey, Stevenson, Foot, Rawls, Hampshire, Austin, Davidson and Parfit. They wrote reflectively, though with various understandings and varying emphases and often in somewhat varying degrees of clarity, but never with utter (or even nearly so) unclarity. And they never were knuckleheads. It is plain that, at least in many philosophical things, they were not entangled in disguised nonsense or any nonsense, or at least not centrally or even usually. But their beliefs were not all compatible. And they often,

sometimes deeply, disagreed with each other. Even where they did not clearly disagree their orientations and interests were very different and sometimes they contradicted each other. Somebody must have been mistaken. But often they were instead just different, sometimes very different. Contrast Nietzsche and G. E. Moore for example. Still, as I just remarked, in some ways some of them must have been mistaken. Perhaps, very perhaps, all of them were in some ways mistaken. And no doubt none achieved what many philosophers utterly unrealistically dream of, namely in some comprehensive way telling it all like it is. But it is implausible to say that all the philosophers mentioned above, or perhaps even any of them, in all their philosophical tellings were saying things that were nonsensical, disguised or not, and things that need therapizing away. But none of them in every respect got things exactly right. No doubt, all their philosophical views in one way or another were disputable with little hope that many of their disputes will be resolved. But to say that is one thing and to say that what they said or are saying is nonsense or even knuckleheaded is another. It is not implausible to believe there are some things, often very different things and sometimes conflicting things, that we can learn from all of them. *If* we have the usual philosophical urges we will long for a way to put everything together, to get the one correct view of everything. But if we can be the least bit tough-minded we will realize that this is impossible—indeed fancifully so—and take this to heart. This is not skepticism, to say nothing of nihilism, but fallibilism. It is to have a non-evasive realistic view of the world.

However, on Wittgenstein's side, as well as Austin's, if we look at things across the board there has been a lot of philosophy around that has been and still is nonsense up for therapeutic dissolution. My above list has been deliberately selective. I have left many philosophers off the list. That was deliberate but I hope not arbitrarily without a point that I have not been too cozy with fallibilism. I have never had much time of day for, let alone fascination with or attraction to, Descartes or even Kant or, for our time, Alvin Plantinga. Am I being arbitrary or idiosyncratic?

I do not list Marx or for that matter Freud on that list of philosophers or any alternative philosophical list that I would make, though I have a very high regard for Marx and, though not quite as high, regard for Freud. But I do not take either to be a *philosopher* or someone who does philosophy, as we now say. I think they were both better than philosophers and indeed usefully so. They both had some philosophical dangles that can and should be set aside or ignored as useless appendages. Marx's Hegelian dialectical doctrine should be set aside as befogging. His dialectical materialism, that is, should go into the dustbin of history but not his historical materialism which is crucial, particularly as J. A. Cohen read and explicated it.

In the few times Marx explicitly does philosophy he does it badly. Even when he just makes philosophical assumptions, they are usually unfortunate. What he does do and powerfully is what we would now call social science. He, along with Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, was a founder of the social sciences, though they in their particular social science endeavors were importantly different from each other. But all three of their endeavors were recognizable social science ones and distinct from what Hume, Kant or Hegel did. I have said that Marx was not a philosopher but better than a philosopher for I think his social science work, which was also an historically and economically oriented social science, was an emancipatory social science with a revolutionary potential. When I said rather ironically and provokingly to my students (principally graduate students) that what Marx was doing was better than anything any philosopher ever did, I was no doubt challenging them and quite seriously. Marx was both what we would now call an emancipatory social scientist *and* a political activist, a scholar and a revolutionary—what Alain Badiou would regard as a genuine resistance person (Badiou 2012). But unlike Badiou himself or Žižek, Marx was not a philosopher and typically did not do philosophy. He sometimes, and usually unfortunately, made philosophical remarks most particularly in his early work and they were very problematic and are better set aside except for the occasional moral insight when he criticized taking the moral point of view and of taking any philosophical point of view or being moralistic.

That occurred more forcefully in his mature work. Remember when in *The German Ideology* he and Engels were very anti-philosophical. They said there that philosophy was to science what onanism was to sexual intercourse. But they were not scientific.

When what Marx was doing is sometimes philosophical it is very different from Wittgenstein's work. But it is quite possible, and indeed a good thing, to hold both of Marx and Engels in esteem, though for very different reasons than we hold Wittgenstein in esteem. But my claim here is that we should not take Marx to be a philosopher any more than we should take Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Rolf Dahrendorf, Talcott Parsons, Thorsten Veblen or David Riesman to be philosophers, though they all, rather incidentally, had some philosophical views. But that is not what makes them important.

What is important to have in mind is that philosophy is often very different as my above list of philosophers only partly indicates and Wittgenstein's account radically obscures. Berlin, when he was still doing what he regarded quite correctly as philosophy, did rather standard Oxford philosophy, for the time. Later, when he set aside what he regarded as philosophy and did cultural or intellectual history, he discussed philosophers and other thinkers and politicians of a great range including Marx, whom he took to be a philosopher along with Hegel, and also the Romantics whom he discussed incisively and who were paradigms of obscurity. But he dug out some things of considerable interest that most analytical philosophers, sometimes themselves of different orientations, did not have the time of day for. Imagine Wittgenstein, Austin or Carnap studying the Romantics. The same held true as well for what were standardly regarded as paradigmatic philosophers up until the 20th century, e.g. Kant, Sidgwick and Bradley, but not Nietzsche or Kierkegaard who were regarded in the 1950s as anything but recognized secure cases of philosophers or even philosophers at all by some. I recall a philosopher from Cambridge who had migrated to Duke and was of the old pre-analytic sort telling a talented student reading a paper in his class about Kierkegaard that though it was interesting, there wasn't a word of philosophy in it.

Berlin shows, again and again, in a considerable variety of cases that there are in thinkers that many, perhaps most, philosophers, and particularly analytic philosophers, would put aside that were, as there were in the Romantics, of distinctive value—even of philosophical value—though it usually required some digging out to see it. With such ‘errant’ philosophers we have some nonsense but not nonsense, full stop. There are things to be learned from them. Think of Kant’s robust opponent Johann Georg Harmann.

There are indeed, and not only with the Romantics, philosophical utterances that are nonsensical and there are other remarks that yield something to be taken seriously, though they take some digging out. A good historian of ideas such as Berlin will sort them out. It is easy to turn Hegel into a dunce, as philosophers as different and important as Russell and Kierkegaard both did, but that misses a lot in Hegel. However, I am not condoning the way Hegel wrote or the way that too many of us on the contemporary Left do. Most striking if we are philosophers, and to illustrate vividly how bad it is getting in that respect, compare Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, two much lauded pillars of obscurity. Badiou is a wonderful paradigm. His philosophy doesn’t even make it to disguised nonsense. But his politics when free from his philosophy is another matter. The same thing in both respects, but not quite so excessively, is true of Žižek both for a thumb’s down and a thumb’s up for his politics where it is free from philosophy. I hate to say this for I admire their attempt to put communism back on the agenda. I think we on the Left and people generally should be very grateful for this but their *philosophical* obscure dancing is, to put it mildly, very off putting and damaging to the prospects for the Left. Both have very good politics but terrible philosophy. Even if we are anti-philosophical, as I am, we see their *philosophical* endeavors as particularly awful.

We must not be too easy on the obscure ones and not at all on the obscurantist ones, though it is not always easy to ascertain which is which is which. Some obscure matters for some, say Austin or Peirce, who want to be clearheaded as possible, may well pass over in silence. Some

metaphysicians (say, Whitehead), Hegelians and Romantics are skilled artisans in obscurity and some are even obscurantists. Where the last claim is so they can and should just be ignored but not so with the former. Berlin shows us that sometimes they have significant things to say. Rorty, if his interpretations of them are arguably on the mark, does the same thing for Heidegger and Derrida and some other writers who write in that outrageously obscure way. He makes them sound interesting but one can wonder if what we get is pretty much Rorty's creation.

I do not say that all of the 'obscure ones' never write things that, if properly treated, reveal things that are significant. However, there are at least three problems here that are worrisome. (1) Do not some of them really sometimes, indeed frequently, write nonsense? This is particularly worrisome concerning Hegel, Schelling, Heidegger, Derrida, Jaspers and Badiou. (2) Even if with a lot of interpretive work we can construct readings of their at least seemingly nonsensical writings that are both non-nonsensical and revealing, cannot that which is significant be stated more straightforwardly? Why go in for such a circus? Why engage in such reconstructive work when we can get something with the same cognitive significance more straightforwardly? (3) Suppose these texts resist this clarification. Why, in a world when there plainly are so many humanly urgent matters where questions concerning them are well or reasonably well understood or even sometimes not so well understood, should these matters not grab our attention rather than these philosophical obscurities, particularly when they are matters that show any sign of urgently requiring our attention? To say that for some it is good fun is no answer. But where it is done as something like Berlin does it is of some historical value. We need to understand how our culture is formed. But this is something that is less urgent. The Hegelians, Heideggerians, Jasperians, Derridians and Badiouians of the world need to show how the obscure matters they concern themselves with are needed as guides to life or for emancipation or enlightenment, for a better understanding of how we are to get on in the world or for how the world should be ordered. Only if some reason can be given that some of the problems of life need some such philosophical attention

in a world where there are many things that urgently do and insightful people may be able to contribute to them in some way should we give our attention to such obscure matters. Isn't it fiddling out of tune while Rome burns? Is this an intellectual vulgarization to say so? If it is, then long live such vulgarization.

Hegel and many of his contemporaries are paradigm obscurantists. Even the English Hegelians in some ways fit the bill though not quite as obscurely but even more fantastically unrealistically than their Continental cousins; McTaggart more so, Bradley less. The Continental Hegelians and philosophers such as Schelling and Fichte are real paradigms of obscurity. The Continental Hegelians were more genuine heirs of Hegel than were the English Hegelians for they were more historically oriented, more historicist than their English counterparts. But before we think that all that is Continental is both out of touch and obscure, remember not only Foucault and Gramsci but their precursors, Marx, Lenin and Durkheim, as well. Perhaps Lenin should not have engaged in philosophizing for which he had little talent, but on often more important matters he was right on the mark and importantly so.

Not all is dross here. In particular some of Hegel is of interest. His *Phenomenology of Spirit* and his writings on history are important but not the *Greater Logic* or any of his writings on what he called logic. Poor Hegel didn't understand the difference between contraries and contradictions. But very little, if anything, of McTaggart is of interest. He is by now just an historical curiosity, though strangely C. D. Broad and G. E. Moore, who were not obscure or partisans of the obscure, paid careful critical attention to him. That leaves me baffled. Perhaps it was because McTaggart wasn't as obscure as was Hegel or Schelling but had a penchant for asking metaphysical questions that had absolutely no point. Why pay attention to him then? But they did. And so did David Lewis who was not of the idealist crowd and who captured the attention of many analytical contemporaries, including Quine and Brandon, but never mine. Perhaps I am unfair to David Lewis. He was not unclear and captured the interest of Quine but he considered matters that were almost

as pointless and arcane as those that McTaggart was concerned with. Strenuous intellectual exercise, but still more fiddling. David Lewis brought out the Wittgensteinianism and pragmatism in me.

To return to central historical strands of philosophy, it was not only Plato and Platonists and Hegel and Hegelians who at crucial points wrote nonsense but Berkeley as well. But his nonsense was very clear nonsense or, at least viewed superficially, clear nonsense and not the allegedly deep hidden nonsense favored by Hegel, Heidegger, Derrida and Vattimo. Moreover, 'clear nonsense' is not an oxymoron, e.g., 'My cat speaks English' is an exemplification, though of course, not of philosophical interest as is 'The world is my idea' or 'There are no facts, not even interpretive facts, but only interpretations'. But also both Leibnitz and Kant wrote reasonably clearly not infrequently what was not nonsense, but they sometimes wrote nonsense as well. Talk of the thing in itself, the best of all possible worlds, a transcendental point of view, noumena, for example. Still, it was nothing like the plain nonsense of Heidegger or Jaspers and sometimes of Žižek, Badiou and Derrida. Even Vattimo, admired by Rorty, sometimes wrote nonsense and some of his followers excelled in it. But, *pace* Wittgenstein, it may not be an inevitability for people who do philosophy as Wittgenstein believed and argued. But did Hampshire or Searle, however mistaken, write nonsense when they philosophized? Still, philosophers often have a penchant for the nonsensical. But not all of them morph into it or get bewitched by it. Kant uttered *some* nonsensical things but not always or even usually. He certainly was not a patron saint of nonsense or of obscurity.

Twentieth-century Continental philosophers were adroit expert nonsensicalists who unfortunately succeeded in instilling in many reflectively and intellectually inchoate people the belief that there was profit, and usefully so, in the work of these philosophers and that there is sometimes some deep but hard to understand profundity that we can learn to see as through a glass darkly; matters that would also remain for us a profound mystery but something we should stick

with. But actually this was a pseudo profundity; something that some people are much attracted to and attuned to. That seems to me a good reason to be wary. There is philosophizing where clarity is not *much* of an issue and there are places where it very much is but sometimes where it is not much of an issue but triviality is. But to de-couple the problems of life takes it away from something that has always been at issue but has not the time come for the changing of hands from philosophy to history, anthropology, investigative journalism and the like?

To return finally on this issue to a more familiar ground, Plato and Berkeley are classical philosophical superstars and both are also classic nonsense producers, not nearly as grossly as Parmenides and Paracelsus or in our time to Heidegger and Derrida, but they produced nonsense all the same. Indeed, Berkeley had the virtue of producing it clearly and not grossly and unclearly as did Mary Baker Eddy who was not a philosopher but made what were metaphysical claims. Perhaps she thought she was philosophically inspired? We have with her and Heidegger, as well as with Berkeley, nonsense producers *par excellence*. If the comparison of Parmenides and Paracelsus is judged in some way untoward, compare Plato and Berkeley with Fichte and Schelling. Nonsense or obscurity and even obscurantism are not hard to find specimens in philosophy and indeed in theology as well. We can understand and appreciate Austin's scorn for those asking 'Is clarity enough?' and his response 'We will be able to know this only after we have a little more clarity than we have now'. Still, he should not rest content with clarity alone for clever sillies even in the philosophical world abound. Robert Nozick arguably is perhaps a striking example. Or am I being *parti pris* with an animus toward his what would now be called extreme neo-liberalism with a libertarian capitalist orientation? I am firmly set against it but does this dull my mind?

It is understandable in Austria and Germany, and in Scandinavia as well, particularly in Sweden, Finland and Denmark, as well produced logical positivism or something like it. In all these cultures, the pervasive culture prior to the very late Nineteenth Century generated among their elites and particularly among philosophers and theologians, except for Kant and Schopenhauer and

earlier Spinoza, an *ersatz* profundity parading as both inescapable and humanly necessary but also necessarily obscure. Its tangled alleged transcendentalism was thought to be necessary to gain the requisite profundity to sustain a cultured society. From the beginning the younger generation of intellectuals (and principally philosophers something like logical positivists) scorned the traditional elitist intelligentsia. Carl Hempel was the very opposite of Karl Jaspers, Jürgen Habermas (no paradigm of clarity himself) and Theodore Adorno. Axel Hägerström, Arne Naess (in her none too clear way) and Georg von Wright set themselves against the mainly Hegelian inspired or religious inspired. The times they were a-changing and in what may be called a generally positivist direction. Logic replaced what Hegel called logic and a knowledge of science replaced a knowledge of theology or a religious commitment.

III

Hegelian, Heideggerian, Derridian and Badiouian philosophical talk that bewitches some and puts off others (including me) is in company with Adorno talk which is also obscure and in some instances arguably obscurantist. Obscurity among such philosophers is pervasive and, as we have seen, it leads to muck-ups. But not only to philosophical muck-ups; in our cultures, at least, it leads to cultural and political ones as well. But philosophy contributes, as does religion and spirituality more widely, even if perhaps as far as philosophy is concerned in a minor way, to our non-enlightenment. They all impede enlightenment even where earlier it has gained little foothold. Such philosophy in particular impedes and befogs us and even clarifying philosophy, where clarifying is most needed, does little to enlighten us and to help us change the world in a desirable way and to help us (as Badiou rightly wishes but makes no *philosophical* contribution in spite of his devotion to it) see the world (the world including ourselves) like it is. Is it impossible to see it like it is or even to approximate that? To think so is one of many philosophical befogments.

But it is not because of philosophical muck-ups that enlightenment does not come or that there is not some movement toward it. It only plays a bit part in it. It is by no means the main causal factor. Even if Wittgenstein's therapeutic *via negativa* became thoroughly entrenched and effectively and widely practiced there would be no ground for thinking that we would move much of the way toward enlightened living or toward an emancipated world or even toward a few more emancipated societies. We would only get rid of philosophical ghosts, the ridding of which might help a bit in the unburdening of a few of our irrational beliefs. We might gain some more emancipatory or enlightenment beliefs and *perhaps* many religious beliefs would wither away. But the de-mythologizing of religious beliefs might lead us to be even more distraught and further from emancipation. It might not help our political emancipation at all. The United Kingdom is less religious now than it was in the 1950s and 1960s but less, at least arguably, enlightened and less emancipated and certainly not moving in the direction of a better world than it was in those decades. And that is true of the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, France and Italy as well. It may even be true of Scandinavia.

Why do I speak of what I have been writing in this essay as being in accordance with the spirit but not with the text of logical positivism? First for the *text* portion. It does not have the verification principle. It takes for granted that testability is very crucial and is frequently used. But it does not assert that a substantive proposition is not intelligible or cognitively intelligible if and only if it is at least verifiable in principle. It does not have the verification principle or even the testability proposal as proposed by Carnap and Hempel or their 'ideal language' orientation. There is no such thing as an empiricist or empirical ideal language or indeed language period, and particularly not a language that is logically independent of any natural language. And there is no rational or reasonable point of trying to appeal to one for that would be just searching for a future of an illusion whether dependent or independent.

For a long time in our contemporary philosophical culture we have recognized that the verifiability principle is self-refuting. It claims that for a proposition to be intelligible it must either be verifiable or analytic (logically true, true in virtue of its meaning alone). But that very principle—the verification principle—itself is neither verifiable nor analytic so that the verifiability principle is self-refuting. But Carnap and Hempel avoid this by taking this verifiability criterion to be the *proposal* that we treat all and only propositions that at least in principle are testable propositions as materially substantive. Proposals are another thing than principles and as such they are not self-refuting. But there are a lot of proposals about criteria for substantivity floating around. Why accept this one? There seem at least to be no non-question begging reasons for doing so. It at least seems that Carnap and Hempel's way does not have the force that the original positivist formulation purported to have had. There is no compelling justification for taking their proposal as the criterion for such intelligibility. From principle to proposal is quite a downgrading. We have nothing here like the sole grounding principle or the most fundamental grounding principle for material intelligibility. The text of logical positivism is a thing of the past.

What about being in the *spirit* of logical positivism? I think in that spirit Berlin stresses it, and should utilize it, as an empirical orientation which is just a bit, an important bit, of a commendable commonsensism. It is not a Humean empirical epistemology or an anti-metaphysical or anti-philosophical doctrine or a pro-philosophical doctrine or an ideal language attempt, nor is it a scientific doctrine or a materialist or physicalist doctrine or a non-physicalist one. It is an empirical orientation without an assumption of metaphysics, anti-metaphysics, some epistemology, idealism, pragmatism or a hermeneutical position or any philosophical doctrine. Berlin does not state this but it is in his practice. It is just a sturdy commonsense empiricism. His practice exemplifies it. I shall call it a commonsense non-philosophical empiricism, though he might not like such a packaging.

However, it is important to note that he does not have a Humean epistemology, a Carnapian formalism, a Peircean critical commonsensism, or any philosophical position or orientation, but he does have a commonsense empirical attitude that travels philosophically light. It does not lead us to reject or to adopt a distinct philosophical attitude, stand or overall position or theory or, for that matter, an anti-philosophy or anti-philosophical philosophy or rely on any one either. It does, however, in a good history of ideas fashion explain some philosophical positions and sometimes makes argued criticisms of them, all with the mandate of a proper history of ideas.

Berlin was not a philosophical empiricist in the way that Hume, Russell, Schlick or A. J. Ayer were or in any other way. But in a reasonable way Berlin rests easy with everyday empirical beliefs without trying to tie down or ground his commonsensical non-philosophical empirical orientation that I have characterized. Staying loose here is something that befits an historian of ideas.

Stuart Hampshire and Bernard Williams, sympathetic allies but not followers of Berlin, were mistaken in asserting that Berlin never left philosophy but only his mistaken conception of what philosophy was. Berlin, unlike Ryle, Strawson, Waismann and Austin, did not have a philosophy. Instead, as an historian of ideas, he discussed philosophers and even criticized some of their views or defended some of their views without taking an overall philosophical stance or becoming a philosopher or having a philosophy. He need not as an historian of ideas reject or adopt a distinct philosophical attitude: a Cartesian or Spinozist position or a philosophical empiricist position (such as Hume, A. J. Ayer or Schlick took) or a Hegelian worldview or an absolute idealism or physicalist worldview. Berlin's views do not rely on any such things or presuppose anything like that. Sometimes in doing the history of ideas Berlin makes what would generally be regarded as a philosophical argument and criticism of the people that he is discussing that is not like staking out a whole philosophical position or even a part of a philosophical position. Rather, he often rests easy relying on commonsense empirical beliefs without trying to back them up by a wholesale philosophical position such as defending physicalism or dualism.

IV

I will now call attention to three examples—crucial examples—where Berlin does the history of ideas in an exemplary manner. In two of them he shows the powerful rationale of religious ideas in political and normative positions. He makes it perfectly clear that he is fundamentally opposed to them, both politically and secularly. And he is in no doubt that he is justified. He thinks rightly that that is perfectly evident by now. But that is not what he is concerned with when he writes about them. He seeks instead to establish that in their particular historical settings and times they had compelling political and normative beliefs that deserve attention and respect.

The first one I shall mention is about Joseph de Maistre, as Berlin wrote in his masterful “Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Facism.”¹ The second one is in his “Hume and the Sources of German Anti-Rationalism.”² The third one is an adept bit of the history of ideas but instead on contemporary philosophers in his “Austin and the Early Beginnings of Oxford Philosophy.”³ Berlin there gives us a lively account of the early Austin (1935-37) and his way of doing philosophy and his starting of regular meetings of a group of young teachers of philosophy like himself and of some graduate students to discuss philosophy. He kept it a small group. The philosophers included A. J. Ayer and Berlin. The oldest person in the group was 27 years old. Berlin tells us that between 1935 and 1937 they had no settled philosophical position, no philosophical doctrine to import. He would in the meetings simply seize on some current topic of the day (I assume Berlin means some philosophical topic) or some proposition made by a writer or lecturer and cut it into smaller and smaller pieces with a degree of skill and concentration which, Berlin says, “I never met in no one else until I listened to G. E. Moore” (Berlin 2). Berlin remarks a page later that Austin told him that he regretted he had spent so much time on the classics instead of learning to be an engineer or architect. However, he added that it was too late for that now. Austin, at that early age, was

resigned to remain a theorist. Berlin tells us that Austin had “a passion for accurate, factual information, rigorous analysis, testable conclusions, ability to put things together and then take them to pieces again. He detested vagueness, absurdity, abstraction, evasion of issues, escape into jargon or rhetoric or metaphysical fantasy. He was from the beginning determined to try to reduce whatever could be to plain prose” (Berlin 2-3). This remained with Austin all of his life. Later in his life, after the Second World War, Austin’s philosophical views became more formed. Think of *Sense and Sensibilia* or *How To Do Things With Words* and his later articles. Think, of the striking example of his “Ifs and Cans” which ran against the main compatibilist stream. But in all his writings he remained critical of his own work as well as that of others. He continued to remain critical searching out relentlessly inordinateness in his own thought as well as that of others. He was marvelous even when he did not convince, as he never did convince me, about “Ifs and Cans”. He was a marvelous example of what a good philosophy teacher should be. He became the dominant influence at Oxford as Wittgenstein did at Cambridge, though Wittgenstein’s influence was more long lasting than Austin’s. Strangely enough, though they are studied carefully, they never seriously studied each other carefully. They were deeply out of tune with each other.

Austin, as did Wittgenstein as well, influenced many young philosophers and they both turned off their elders. Here we run into a period of deep change in philosophy, most particularly in the places I have mentioned but not exclusively there. At Oxford, but not solely there, the young philosophers were mounting a “revolt against the entire tradition as a source of knowledge about the universe” (Berlin 2-3). A. J. Ayer, Gilbert Ryle and John Wisdom, all young philosophers then, were part of this. As Berlin puts it, a sweeping anti-metaphysical orientation was gaining converts rapidly. The old traditional philosophy professors were in a full bitter retreat of what we should be doing when we do philosophy. These old chaps generally regarded the ‘young philosophical revolutionaries’ with disdain. They regarded them as temporary upstart aberrations. Soon, they thought, philosophy would return to sanity—the revolt was an irrationality that would die down.

The revolutionary zeal, as well as logical positivism, soon did die down but the linguistic turn or, if you will, the so-called linguistic turn continued to have its effect. It even had a journal in Nigeria named after it and another in the United Kingdom called *Analysis* and yet another in Italy called *Methodos*. Eventually analytic philosophy converged into something less polemical but still containing its analytic orientation in rather diverse but less controversial forms. It established itself as the dominant philosophical orientation in Anglo-Saxon countries and in Scandinavian ones but with a much wider and diverse base than the Vienna Circle. It included in these countries philosophers as diverse as Wittgenstein, Carnap, Quine, Davidson, Naess, Hägerström, von Wright, Strawson, Toulmin and Austin. They all distanced themselves from traditional philosophy but did not share the revolutionary stance of the logical positivists, though in distinct ways they shared some of it with Hägerström and Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's attack on philosophy was the deepest, but in many non-philosophical ways he was a *quietist*. However, properly understood there was no conflict there. He was very different from Neurath or Reichenbach.

Berlin aptly described how it played out in Oxford from 1935 to around 1965. How there and in many other places, sometimes deviating from Oxford, it moved away from traditional philosophy to analytic philosophy. But he also shows how parochial and insider-ish it was at that time in Oxford, even somewhat distancing itself from Cambridge and even more from the Vienna Circle, the Berlin Circle and even analytic circles in the United States and Australia. All that aside, Berlin admired, and rightly, Austin's intense drive for clarity and integrity and he was in accord with Austin's view of the educational value of philosophy, particularly when it was done as Austin practiced it.

We are indebted to Berlin for his important articles on de Maistre and Hamann, as well as his detailed accounts of Herder and Vico and his writings on the Romantics, Machiavelli, Montesquieu and Herzen. But here we have a history of ideas, not philosophy, though it is often acutely relevant to what philosophers are doing without itself being philosophy. Berlin was

clearheaded when he left philosophy for the history of ideas. He was not engaging in another way of doing philosophy as Wittgenstein did when he moved from how he did philosophy in the *Tractatus* to how he did philosophy in *Philosophical Investigations*.

Berlin's historical work will often be useful to philosophers doing meta-philosophy, moral philosophy, political philosophy or the philosophy of the social sciences but it is hardly what Austin, Quine, Davidson, Reichenbach or Kripke were thinking about history. Moreover, for intellectuals trying to find our places in the world, it is of considerable value. It was of value to me in searching how and why to go anti-philosophical. Berlin himself had a modest commitment to clarity but not Austin's stringent commitment. He was not an Austinian and had none of either Austin's or Wittgenstein's austerity. He agreed, of course, that it was important to overcome knuckheadedness as much as we can, but in doing so he thought, and again I think rightly, that we could never scrape the board utterly clean (as Wittgenstein came to believe as well), even among the intelligentsia or the philosophers among them, no matter how analytic. No doubt, Austin would have regarded de Maistre and Hamann as knuckleheads and just ignored them. They were certainly obscure and had irrational doctrines to which they were deeply committed. But unlike most analytic philosophers and indeed many traditional philosophers Berlin did not just ignore or scorn them and determinedly set them aside. He realized there were valuable lessons to be learned from them and *perhaps* even lessons not to be learned elsewhere. Berlin was determined to dig them out and he set out to show they were worth digging out and that that was not just a pedantic exercise on his part. He also made it evident that there were crucial views and methods of theirs that should be firmly opposed. However, Berlin stuck to his view about the value of both digging them out and the value of relentlessly opposing them. It is important to recognize that this did not lead to, as Hampshire and Williams asserted, Berlin abandoning what he mistakenly thought was constitutive of philosophy but not philosophy. His doing of the history of ideas was not to stake out a philosophical position and did not involve him assuming or presupposing one. He makes there

what, at least by now, are commonsense empirical assumptions without making or trying to make out of them or starting from them or relying on an empiricist theory or presupposing one. Nothing philosophical like that was going on.

I do not say that Berlin was always true to that. He surely was not in his “Two Concepts of Liberty” or, more widely expressed, in his *Four Essays on Liberty* (writings that philosophers have fastened on). But even these are very different from his self-acknowledged philosophical papers collected in his *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays* or, to be exact, the first four essays in it which were written before his self-proclaimed departure from what he took to be philosophy for intellectual history or the history of ideas. The bulk of his books and papers all along the line are on the history of ideas. He often discusses philosophers, including most often philosophers who were also public intellectuals, and sometimes public intellectuals or other intellectuals who were not philosophers and sometimes heads of states or important figures in the state apparatus. Many of the philosophers and other public intellectuals he discusses were anything but paradigms of clarity. But Berlin characterizes them in ways that make them intelligible and interesting, and sometimes shows in some respects how they could be compelling for some people or at least challenging. Sometimes in discussing philosophers he uses philosophical arguments but never for assuming or otherwise taking some overall philosophical position. He does not set out to refute the philosophers he discusses or to make them adjuncts of a philosophical position that Berlin presupposes or assumes.

Unlike Ryle or the mature Austin, Berlin does not have or seek to have a philosophical position. Berlin *sans* philosophy just has a sturdy commonsense empirical attitude and a set of beliefs as a political realist might have. He may well be too much a captive of liberalism but that is a political and ethical matter and need not be philosophical at all. Berlin takes instead what I call a commonsensical non-philosophical, non-doctrinaire, everyday empirical outlook and not a philosophical or anti-philosophical attitude such as Wittgenstein and John Wisdom had. Nor does

he seek to establish or even assume a plain anti-philosophical stance such as Jacques Lacan sometimes defended and badly asserted. He had Scheffler's attitude about philosophers battling around ideas for millennia but to little avail. But he did not try to make an anti-philosophical doctrine out of it.

None of these things is entailed or required by Berlin's commonsensical empirical but non-philosophical views. They are philosophically neutral. Berlin usually sticks to a non-philosophical stance by sticking to doing the history of ideas—something which does not need to have any philosophical commitment and, if practiced in its purity, can have none.

Berlin sets out in good history of ideas fashion, following its methodological constraints, perceptions of Herzen, Marx, Montesquieu, Herder, Vico, Bakunin, Weismann, de Maistre, Burke, Campanella, Carlyle, Condillac, Condorcet, Constant, Grice, Fichte, Gibbon, Freud, Hamaan, Helvétius, Hölderin, Lenin, Luxemburg, Manderville, Montaign, Newman, Nietzsche, Rousseau, Turgenev, J. S. Mill, and de Saint Simon, among others. His scholarship here is remarkable. As an historian of ideas his commitment is to set out their ideas accurately and perceptively and to relate them to an understanding of their times and their relation to each other and to their distinctive culture, including their social and political orders and, perhaps, their relation to ours. His effort is to achieve understanding, a critical understanding, but not refutation or to establish that he had a superior philosophy to Kant or Mill or anybody else. Critique has a role but the main commitment is to an accurate and perceptive understanding. Berlin's principal effort is not, for example, to refute Tolstoy's view of history but to show what it was and its role in the life of Russia at the time and afterwards. He seeks to bring out, or try to, its strengths and weaknesses, but the central aim is understanding. It is not like Nozick writing a critique of Rawls or G. A. Cohen critiquing Rawls or Rawls critiquing utilitarianism. What Nozick, Cohen or Rawls were doing is to do philosophy, not just the history of ideas. They wanted to get at the philosophical truth of some of our most basic things. But where they talked about philosophers and other intellectuals, as they frequently did,

they made a contribution to philosophy as well. Philosophers need not do that. But in the case of doing philosophy, the doing of the history of ideas is ancillary. Berlin, unlike Ryle or the mature Austin, does not set out a philosophy that he is out to defend or a philosophy period. He seeks rather to give a clear, accurate and perceptive account of what others said and why, and its relation to their times and beyond. He did not, as some of his detractors claim, *schmaltz* things up.

His own stance toward the world is a clear-eyed commonsense empirical view and attitude. That is something to be prized and cultivated. It is something that is not a philosophy but where philosophy is engaged in it should go with philosophy. But having these attitudes has not made Berlin a philosopher, though someone could have his attitudes and be a philosopher. But it is not enough to make them a philosophy or justify them in being a philosophy. And Berlin did well in saying goodbye to philosophy.

Notes

¹ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*. New York: Alfred A. Knoff, 1991.

² Berlin, *Against the Current*. New York: Viking Press, 1980.

³ G. J. Warnock, ed., *Essays on J. L. Austin*. London: Oxford University Press, 1973, pp. 1-16.