The Value of Being Disagreeable

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Philosophy concerns those necessities we cannot, being human, fail to know. Except that nothing is more human than to deny them.
—Stanley Cavell, “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy”

There are many disagreements in the humanities today, especially with respect to the contested status of Theory. In the past twenty years contestations of Theory have been tightly focused in cinema studies, thus achieving a kind of clarity often absent or clouded in other domains of the humanities.¹ But rather than focusing on arguments over theory, philosophy, epistemology, and interpretation in cinema studies, I want to track back out to a wider image and to comment more generally on two tendencies prevalent in the contested fields of the humanities today.

The first tendency relates to the diminishment of the humanities with respect to the social sciences and, concomitantly, the increasing prestige within the humanities of methods and approaches committed to scientism, as seen most prominently in the influence of cognitive and evolutionary psychology. P. M. S. Hacker coined the term scientism to describe inappropriate extensions of the methods and forms of explanation of the natural sciences to domains of humanistic inquiry.² (As such, scientism may be a fault of social science methods as well.) This relatively new force in the humanities runs parallel to, or perhaps is an aftershock from, one of


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the most pervasive currents in the history of twentieth-century Anglo-
phone philosophy, which under the influence of logical positivism and
later variants in analytic philosophy sought to abandon questions of ethics,
aesthetics, and interpretation as irresolvable in a context where appeals to
scientific method held sway. Paradoxically, Bertrand Russell, for example,
sought the annihilation of philosophy or, rather, its disappearance into sci-
ence. In 1914 Russell insisted that philosophy is “essentially one with science,
differing from the special sciences merely by the generality of its problems . . . .
The new philosophy conceives that all knowledge is scientific knowledge,
to be ascertained and proved by the methods of science.” 3 In turn, Moritz
Schlick suggested that the turning of philosophy is also its end, or the ends of
philosophy require its disappearance. Philosophy reaches its end when it
makes logical problems of theory resolvable, and since, apart from the sci-
ences, philosophy has no independent object, the disappearance of its prob-
lems means the disappearance of philosophy itself. 4

My primary theme here may be yet more controversial: that philosophy
will only return to itself through the humanities, and, that in a degraded
environment of scientism and instrumental rationality, the humanities
may revalue itself in seeking elements or guidelines for a philosophy of the
humanities. This leads to a second tendency in the humanities, which is to
understand philosophy as somehow distinct from Theory.

Does this mean relinquishing the commitment to Theory in the hu-
manities? The humanities and philosophy may find new common ground in
reframing, reasserting, or revaluing philosophy’s primordial concern
with ethics or, rather, with theoria as a practice of philosophy driven by
ethical dissatisfaction and existential crisis. 5 In its most ancient and fund-
damental forms, philosophical expression not only is discursive but also

3. Bertrand Russell, “Philosophy in the Twentieth Century,” Sceptical Essays (New York,

Georg Henrik von Wright, “Logic and Philosophy in the Twentieth Century,” “The Tree of
Knowledge” and Other Essays (New York, 1993), pp. 7–24.

5. This is one of the principle themes of my book An Elegy for Theory (forthcoming). My
thinking here is deeply influenced by the work of Pierre Hadot, especially his fascinating book
account of Hadot’s arguments, see Arnold I. Davidson, “Spiritual Exercises and Ancient

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finds itself crafted as a life in a process that is open ended and unfinished. *Philosophopoein* asks of the novitiate a conversion of being driven by the desire to be and to live in a new way in tune with a changed conception of the world. Therefore, philosophy is lived or presents itself in a life before it is spoken or written. Or, rather, it cannot be spoken or written in the absence of a desire for change and the on-going execution of an existential choice. Call this the perfectionist strain of philosophy, so important to Stanley Cavell’s later writings, which—as discourse and existential choice, both in a state of change fueled by dissatisfaction with one’s self and the world—reaches for a state of knowledge that can never be fully attained. (The primacy of ethics in this conception of philosophy and the humanities is shared by many unlikely allies. The later philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and his work with Félix Guattari is close to the perfectionist conception of ethics best exemplified by Cavell. For both philosophers the ethical relation is inseparable from our relationship to thought. For how we think, and whether we sustain a relation to thought or not, is bound up with our choices of a mode of existence and our relations with others and to the world.)

Philosophy and the humanities have not found much common ground for conversation in theory. From the analytic and cognitivist point of view, Theory stands accused of epistemological atheism and is wrested from the Continent to be returned semantically to the shores of science and the terrain of British and American analytic philosophy. And then there is another strain of philosophy, influenced by the later Ludwig Wittgenstein, that distinguishes philosophy from science by renouncing theory or leaving it to science. However, I believe that the late Wittgenstein takes this argument in a similar but different direction, one that also questions theory but as a way of restoring a dialogue between philosophy and the humanities. I read Wittgenstein as less concerned with the epistemological perfectability of philosophical language than with reclaiming philosophy’s ancient task of *theoria*. To recover a sense of the specificity of philosophy, both with respect to theory and to the reasoning protocols of the natural sciences, Wittgenstein proposed a philosophical anthropology located in the sui generis character of human understanding. In the recent history of philosophy important figures, though few in number, have called implicitly or explicitly for such a dialogue between philosophy and the humanities, the most forceful examples being Georg Henrik von Wright, Hacker,


7. See Rodowick, “An Elegy for Theory” for a discussion of the debate on theory from the point of view of competing epistemological stakes.
Charles Taylor, Richard Rorty, and Cavell. Each of these thinkers takes inspiration from the ways Wittgenstein recast his late *Philosophical Investigations* as a kind of philosophical anthropology, thus relinquishing the quest for certainty, so characteristic of the history of analytic philosophy, to rethink or reframe philosophy in the context of ethics.\(^8\)

To suggest the need for a philosophy of the humanities sounds fairly strange or, worse, quaint. Is not Theory in some sense our philosophy for the humanities? Or, alternatively, what to make of the argument that philosophy and theory should remain distinct, if not exactly in the way called for by analytic philosophy? And what might a philosophy of the humanities look like in the context of an age of Theory defined by a philosophical antihumanism and postmodern appeals to the posthuman?\(^8\)

In its classical formulation, the frontier between the sciences and the humanities is drawn by distinguishing practices of scientific explanation from hermeneutics, or interpretive understanding, or, in another framework, by establishing causes through the accumulation of data of which we have no prior knowledge, as distinct from giving and defending reasons from within commonly accessible repertoires of cultural knowledge. No doubt, the cultural value of the humanities has been diminished by the now near global acceptance of an ideology of scientism, whose powers are amplified to the extent to which it is entirely commensurate with the logic and value of neoliberalism. My goal, however, is not to return to and reinvigorate arguments defending the power of humanistic understanding with respect to scientific explanation and so to preserve a small island for the humanities within the university. Rather, in asking for a philosophy of the humanities, I want to claim that there is no philosophy that is not *ab initio* and *de jure* already a philosophy of the humanities, and indeed that there is no form of explanation, no matter how data driven and causally determined, that is free of subjective interpretation and value assessment.

In its purest form, scientism is committed to a methodological monism where a theory is only considered legitimate to the extent that it conforms to explanations that are primarily causal and subsumable to general or covering laws. Methodological monism insists on the unity of scientific method as a theory type, universally applicable as a standard of rational investigation, regardless of the research domain to which it is applied.\(^9\) Another way of characterizing scientism is to describe its commitment to what David Bordwell calls “naturalizing epistemologies” and causal rea-

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soning.\textsuperscript{10} In this view, a theory becomes more epistemologically secure the more it focuses on cross-cultural regularities that are grounded in the body or brain, and in automatic processes that are impervious to introspection and belief. A naturalizing epistemology demands that the more a process is involuntary—that is, open to causal explanation—and closed to introspection, the more it gains epistemological value. Alternatively, what needs to be clarified and defended in a philosophy of the humanities are forms of reason whose practices are founded, conversely, on the very quality of being open to introspection. All that is asked for here is that human agents be capable of intentional reflexive acts and, through these acts, be capable of undergoing change.

The criterion of human openness to introspection is a key component for defining and defending what Hacker calls the autonomy of human understanding.\textsuperscript{11} But before moving deeper into this account, the category of the human in Wittgenstein’s philosophical anthropology needs to be clarified and qualified.

Similar to Immanuel Kant’s dialectical critique, Wittgenstein finds we lose our way, or are misdirected in our reasons, through the unfounded migration of concepts and expressions beyond their legitimate contexts. Wittgenstein’s most mordant critiques are aimed at the inappropriate use of psychological concepts for logical explanations of human actions and meaning. Foremost among these concepts is the ascription of the first-person pronoun to a self-identical and self-present Cartesian ego that seems both to inhabit the body and to remain distinct from it, as well as the belief that such ascriptions are immune to misidentification and reference failure. Here the ego is always identical to itself as the site of rationality. Consequently, Wittgenstein was equally critical of the inclination to think of the mind as an inalienably possessed private domain of subjective experience to which the subject has privileged access and self-knowledge, as well as the tendency to confuse knowledge of objects with knowledge of persons and experience.

Wittgenstein’s critique of the misapplication of psychological concepts hopefully derails a misunderstanding that certainly arises here: what does


it mean to speak of the human in the humanities? The enterprise of Theory has been identified with a philosophical antihumanism for the last fifty years. But it should be said that the idea of defending the autonomy of human understanding does not necessarily include returning to older concepts of humanism, as is clear in the very different approaches to Wittgenstein offered by Rorty, Donald Davidson, and Taylor. To defend the humanities as the critical investigation and evaluation of what is distinctively human about cultural creation and interpretation implies no conceptual commitments either to an ideal of man as a freely acting and fully self-conscious agent or to the cogito as the source and origin of meaning. No one was more aware than Wittgenstein of the limits of human understanding and potential failures of meaning, interpretation, and sense or how our own quotidian practices of expression and interpretation often remain opaque to us. There are several reasons for this. In a Wittgensteinian framework, agents need not be considered as being completely transparent to themselves in terms of reasons. Frameworks of knowing can also be intuitive, unacknowledged, and incompletely accounted for. Reasoning may falter and agents may not be in full self-possession of their claims to reason nor fully in possession of self-knowledge or capable of achieving such a state. The important criteria here involve, first, acknowledging that acts of reason-giving and justification are human capabilities or potentials and, second, insisting on the criterion of openness to introspection as defining the logical space of human understanding and self-understanding.

To say that reason-giving is agential, although complexly and contradictorily so, is also to say that it is intentional in ways foreign to the search for previously unknown data and causes characteristic of causal explanations: Hacker eloquently observes that the space of reasons is also a cultural space. Human behavior and cultural activity stand in need of understanding and interpretation rather than explanation. Where causes operate in the domain of automatic, physical, natural, or subnormative processes, intentional acts operate in the realm of reasons and choices. Intentional acts thus lead to questions of purpose, and appropriate responses will take the form of giving reasons for what one intended as a form of accounting for one’s self (and for understanding one’s self). The grammar of reason-giving—for example, justification, forward-looking reasons, desirability characterizations in terms of the schemes and values of the culture of the agent, backward-looking reasons, description or redescription of the intended act—is thus clearly distinguishable from causal explanation. Reason-giving is an expression of self-understanding and thus representative of how agents themselves comprehend (whether well or poorly) their intentions and actions. At the same time, while expression involves
performing meaningful and intentional acts, these acts are also variegated, multilayered, and perhaps intentionally or unintentionally ambiguous or even contradictory, and thus human expressive activities must refer to social conventions and institutions that vary culturally and historically and that are irreducible to causal or subnormative functions. Therefore, the cultural practices and behaviors of human communities are time dependent in the sense that understanding the mutually imbricated horizons of intents and reasons, expressions and interpretations, require acknowledgement of appropriate contexts and attention to the surrounding and antecedent histories of these activities.

For all these reasons, the description and interpretation of expressive acts and cultural practices require concepts different in kind from those that best serve the natural sciences—hence Hacker’s insistence on a commitment to the autonomy of human understanding and cultural practices. Autonomy now indicates that agents have the capacity for authoritative self-examination and self-justification, no matter how incomplete. A key difference between scientific and philosophical enquiry is that science tests its hypotheses against external phenomena, that is, the natural world. But philosophy admits only to internal or self-investigation. This is less a question of truth and error than judgments concerning the approximate “rightness” of a proposition tested against prior experience and knowledge in contexts both historical and contingent. Humanistic accounts are also evaluative in ways that causal explanations cannot be. Understanding the thoughts, expressions, and actions of others requires imagination and empathy, both an intuitive grasp of others’ reasons and the possibility of projecting oneself into their perspectives and contexts and adapting one’s mode of existence to that context. In other words, interpretation and evaluation have strong ethical components.12

12. My emphasis here on concepts of interpretation and evaluation for a philosophy of the humanities should not be understood only in a post-Wittgensteinian framework. I was first drawn to these arguments through Gilles Deleuze’s account of interpretation and evaluation as key components of Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy. “To interpret,” Deleuze writes in Nietzsche and Philosophy, “is to determine the force which gives sense to a thing. To evaluate is to determine the will to power which gives value to a thing” (Gilles Deleuze, Nietzsche and Philosophy, trans. Hugh Tomlinson [New York, 1983], p. 54). Interpretation would relate here to Deleuze’s theory of signs in its various forms, from his work on Marcel Proust, to Logic of Sense and A Thousand Plateaus, and finally to his film semiotics, where interpretation accounts for the logical relations between sets and wholes and to the question of noosigns and spiritual automata. In turn, evaluation is central to the ethical project of Deleuze’s cinema books and also to his last book with Guattari, What Is Philosophy? What philosophy must evaluate in any expression, including aesthetic expression, are its possibilities for life and experimentation in life. To evaluate is to ask what mode of existence is willed in a given expression. I should also note here that despite all the superficial differences one could name, a strong genealogical relation to Kant informs the Wittgensteinian line no less than a Deleuzian one, though with
To assert that interpretation and evaluation have strong ethical components means that these activities are directed not only at individual acts but also to our current and anticipated forms of life or modes of existence. In addition, connecting intentional expression to forms of life means that our cultural activities and expressiveness are always practiced in two dimensions, as it were—both collective and individual, global and local, impersonal and personal, and public and anonymous—such that accounts of a particular expression must refer equally to the cultural context in which they are embedded. This is often referred to as Wittgenstein’s holistic conception of meaning. Therefore, the potential for deployments of practice, both successful or unsuccessful, and opportunities for understanding and misinterpretation, as well as invention or innovation within practice, are framed by culture and the history of collective or social use. To express is to perform a singular and intentional act but also to evoke an entire social and collective framework of experience. All expression is public and social in some sense, and thus meaning and interpretation can never be constrained by or reduced to individual intents. In a similar way, misunderstanding and disagreement occur not only because of friction between cultural or idiosyncratic contexts but also because of the impossibility of fully accounting for the norms connecting statements to “states” of meaning. Expression as an intentional cultural activity is therefore both an action and a state, a singular subjective and active performance whose meaning and interpretability are also embedded in a cultural and impersonal grammatical context, open to innovation and historical change. (This sense of expression is closely related to how Deleuze and Guattari evoke the multiple senses of the French verb *agencer*: to make happen, to combine or construct, to organize or arrange. In like manner, Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of *agencement* seems to operate simultaneously as an intransitive and transitive verb, a strange combination of activity and passivity, where creative acts or expressions both presume a singular subject but also connect this subject to a collective space or framework that conditions these acts and expressions.) Expression, then, must be thought of simultaneously as an action verb as in “to state or express” but also as a historical condition or fact of existence, that is, as a framework circumscribing po-

tentialities of sense or meaning. Whatever senses or meanings we attribute to expression are no longer “subjective” meanings or the properties of individual enunciators but rather are constitutive of complex intersubjective social matrices that frame or condition prospects for public communication no less powerfully than they do for the potential for misunderstanding and disagreement.

To be understood or to fail to understand, and to reach agreement or not, occurs through “grammatical” missteps of various kinds: a lack of clarity in concept or expression, the mapping or projection of concepts into domains where they do not apply; or the intentional or unintentional disconnection from contexts in which they could be better understood. To return to clarity, to interpret efficiently, or to reach agreement thus entails grammatical descriptions that draw out the multiple and varied relationships that connect and reconnect a singular expression or action to its ever-evolving collective and cultural environment or context.

The logical frameworks of cognitivism and evolutionary psychology, on the one hand, and the strain of analytic philosophy of science proximate to and critical of the humanities, on the other, overreach in projecting their particular view of rationality as a single standard of explanation and of theory as necessarily methodologically monistic. In fact, we are not dealing here with a conflict between rational and irrational explanation or even domains of truthful explanation that could be placed on a scale of rationality and thus tested through fallibility and dialectical correction. Perhaps judgments of truth-value in explanations are less applicable here than reasonableness or, rather, how we assess the value and quality of reasons given and received and how those reasons can be built into local and contingent consensus. Von Wright thus suggests that we entertain a distinction between the rational and the reasonable. For example, an argument can be rational but its premises and conclusions may be unreasonable. Rationality is goal oriented and has to do primarily with formal correctness of reasoning, efficiency of means to an end, and the confirmation and testing of beliefs. Judgments of reasonableness, however, are value oriented and aimed at qualitative assessments of our modes of existence. “The reasonable is, of course, also rational—,” von Wright explains, “but the ‘merely rational’ is not always reasonable.”

This is von Wright’s way of rebalancing the split between epistemology and ethics or between logical and moral reasoning in twentieth-century philosophy. Perhaps one could call this the search for agreement in an

13. Von Wright, “Images of Science and Forms of Rationality,” “The Tree of Knowledge” and Other Essays, p. 173.
inherently disagreeable world rather than the quest for certainty, which so obsessed Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore. To reach tacit agreement, one may certainly start by passing through a series of disagreements, and agreement does not have to be complete. Reason-giving is messy, conflictual, contentious, and contingent—in short, disagreeable. According to concept and context, individuals (or theories) may have conflicting accounts or justifications for the same actions, behaviors, or interpretations. And these conflicts may be in part or in whole reasonable within their own contexts and frameworks for justification. Moreover, because all human activity is historically open and conflicts of interpretation are always generated by discrepant or discordant contexts, no final consensus can be hoped for. Even the most amiable and productive debates will find that their potential for broadening and deepening understanding may be based in their disagreeableness.

The key question here is to ask what counts as knowing—whether or not there is a single standard of knowledge, applicable in all cases, or whether there are justifiable forms of knowledge that are both contingent and context dependent and that are to be valued for their contingency and context dependency. Such an appeal is not a defense of either perspectivalism or relativism. It is, however, meant as a strong critique of scientism in the humanities, where the particular form of the will to truth expressed by methodological monism not only excludes a priori ways of knowing and interpreting that may be of great value but also willfully tries to make the humanities disappear behind the mask of science. The line of thought that descends from the later Wittgenstein through the work of von Wright, Hacker, Cavell, Rorty, and Taylor can be understood as motivated, then, by the desire to protect and preserve a domain of knowledge and form of understanding from erosion and distortion by an instrumental and technological reason. To assert and defend the autonomy of humanistic investigation and understanding is also to protest the illegitimate encroachment of the natural sciences into domains where they do not and should not apply.

At the same time, Wittgenstein’s struggle to define the conceptual activities of philosophical investigation is not systematic, synthetic, or prescriptive. No methods or solutions are offered here. A critical and humanistic philosophy should be attentive, rather, to the open, experimental, and exploratory nature of Wittgenstein’s writings while preserving their sense of struggle and internal conflict, of not getting one’s conceptual bearings or direction quite right, and of remaining open to new paths that the investigation may eventually clear. What elements of Wittgenstein’s
later philosophy point, then, towards the possibility of a conception of philosophy built on the autonomy of humanistic understanding?

In the years following his disappointment with the *Tractatus* and his slow construction of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein’s investigations into the limits of language no longer shied away from value talk as untouchable but rather insisted that understanding the grammar of ethical or aesthetic expressions requires attention to their distinctive contexts and the roles they play in given forms of life. Philosophical investigation differs from the logical quest for certainty and, in turn, as von Wright later wrote, “the phenomena which the humanities study have features of their own which distinguish them logically from the typical objects of study in the natural sciences. A primary task of a philosophy of the humanities is to try to capture and do justice to those features.” To those who want truth from philosophy, or at least the proper conditions for truth-telling, this turn in philosophy is scandalous for at least two reasons. Here the quest to enlarge our powers of reasoning takes place less through adding progressively to our knowledge of the external world than in examining the capacities and limits of human reason itself as expressed in its forms of communication and cultural practices, whose failures are as compelling as their successes. And, further, strategies for enlarging our capacity to interpret and to understand necessarily require a reflexive turn as acts of self-interpretation where problems of knowing are inextricably intertwined with questions of import and value.

Analogous arguments are closely associated with Taylor’s innovative work on interpretation and his definition of humans as self-interpreting animals. More than any other philosopher since Wittgenstein, Taylor has consistently worked through the implications of defining the sui generis character of humanistic understanding. Humans are characteristically self-interpreting because, from a scientific or theoretical perspective, they are not just objects among other objects immersed in webs of causal relations, nor can one separate the knowledge of the subject from the object she or he investigates. In other words, there is no such thing as a structure of meaning for subjects that is independent of their interpretive and self-interpretive activities. One is woven into the other. At the same time, the will to interpret and acts of interpretation always occur within frameworks of import ascription, which are ethical in nature.

It is impossible to do justice to the full range and complexity of Taylor’s arguments here, especially with respect to the important role that the ar-

ticulation and interpretation of emotions plays in his definition of human beings as self-interpreting animals. What I would like to do is to open out and clarify some potential meanings for interpretation in the humanities in relation to the ascription of value, and thus to better comprehend the distinction between understanding and explanation. Taylor adopts from Heidegger the idea that Verstehen is a Seinsmodus; or, in other words, understanding and self-understanding are inseparable as ways of fashioning a form of life where the quest for meaning is intertwined inextricably with assessments of value. But this assertion also raises the question, what forms of knowledge or reason are appropriate when human beings take themselves and their cultural practices as “objects” of investigation?

Here two difficulties are confronted. One is a version of epistemology, which in aspiring to clarity, objectivity, and certainty must effectively exclude the human and the subjective from its realm of investigation or, conversely, reduce the human to properties or qualities of objects and subnormative functions or operations. The second difficulty, though Taylor does not pose it as such, is to know how and under what conditions the subject may investigate itself subjectively qua subject within this framework as a function of understanding. No doubt, this is the key question that any possible philosophy of the humanities must address. To confront these difficulties, the conventional epistemological distinction between primary and secondary qualities, or the objective and subjective, must be overturned or undermined in order to comprehend that our knowledge of reality and the reality of our selves are inseparable from our experience of reality in terms of both knowledge and value and of what we value in our ways of knowing ourselves and the modes of existence we construct and inhabit.

The open question here is whether a strict distinction between objective and subjective knowledge can really be made. Or to put it another way, since all knowledge arises from human practices and social contexts, the desire to produce a kind of transsubjective or asubjective knowledge (to which structuralism, for example, aspired, no less than G. W. F. Hegel) is illusory, such that the pursuit of knowledge, in whatever context or through whichever method, unavoidably involves interpretive activities. To pursue this line of thought is not only to demonstrate the overlapping and interpenetrating borders between the human and natural sciences but also to restore the maligned concept of interpretation as a central aspect of human and intentional activity in whatever domain.

Central to the activity of interpretation is the assignation of what Taylor calls import ascriptions. Explaining oneself, giving a reason, constructing and defending a concept, and describing a desire or emotion are all activ-
ities of justification that involve or make explicit a qualitative judgment concerning the objects under investigation of whatever sort. Such justifications equally involve the ascriptions of imports; or, as Taylor puts it, one provides a perspicuous description of the “way in which something can be relevant or of importance to the desires or purposes or aspirations or feelings of a subject; or otherwise put, a property of something whereby it is a matter of non-indifference to a subject.” Describing, justifying, or giving reasons involves making sense of the state of affairs so described or the actions so justified as well as accounting for the import of the act or situation as we experience it. Philosophically, such activities involve making explicit their import ascriptions, which is less the affirmation of a judgment than grasping the sense of the situation that incorporates or leads to the judgment. Such accounts are necessarily subjective in that they are experience dependent, but this experience is also cultural or, rather, depends on accounting for my experience of a culture or my social existence as a subject in solidarity or in conflict with other subjects. Import ascriptions are, therefore, also accounts of the values accepted or given within a form of life, for the expressive or semantic dimension of the ascription can only be explained in reference to a subject for whom these meanings have import, and, without such subjects, there would be neither import nor sense.

Subject-referring does not necessarily mean self-referring, however. The class of subject-referring imports is much broader than that of self-referring or self-regarding imports. This is so for two reasons. First, explanations of import ascriptions are usually not qualifiable by a single term but evoke rather a whole network of meanings for the subject. Secondly, even though subject-referring properties do not lend themselves to the logic of scientistic or objectivist accounts because they can only be explicated in experience-dependent terms, this does not mean that they are purely subjective. To make an import-ascription is to produce a judgment about a situation—its value and meaning—that cannot be simply reduced to how we feel about it. Producing and communicating an interpretation is also a public and social event open to conversation and debate, agreement and disagreement, which in turn may potentially transform the terms of debate, the language in which it is expressed, and the nature of the epistemological and axiological commitments that have been entered into. Another way of putting this is to say that we experience the world collectively before we experience it individually.

In this context, restoring the value of interpretation is more interesting than continuing to map the borders, no matter how porous, between the human and natural sciences. Moreover, seeking out knowledge of human beings, and of their cultures and creative practices, may not mean overcoming and transcending the dilemma of the hermeneutic circle but rather embracing it—not as a circle but rather as an ever-expanding skein of new conceptual vocabularies and connective relations. In one of the fragments collected in the *Zettel*, Wittgenstein remarks that there is no need for interpretation when one “feel[s] at home in the present picture.” The need or will to interpret, then, arrives when I am subject to disagreeable situations, when I am homeless or adrift, bereft of needed conceptual resources, or when I am faced with an obstacle to thought or lack signposts to move further in thought or understanding. To interpret, or perhaps to theorize, means acquiring or moving towards a new conceptual framework; or as Wittgenstein puts it, it means stepping from one level of thought to another.

Taylor’s several essays examining how humans are characteristically self-interpreting animals offer some landmarks for this *Gedankenweg*, as Wittgenstein put it—steps, levels, or passages wherein the acquiring of knowledge is both a self-examining and self-transforming process. These activities are all built upon Taylor’s intuition that all knowledge is in some respects subject-referring. One initial step involves a process that Taylor calls growing insight. Establishing the meaning, value, or sense of people, objects, events, or states of affairs are all activities shaped by complexes of subject-referring imports of which we may only be partially aware. To develop the capacity for identifying, presenting, and describing perspicuously deeply felt but inarticulate imports is to bring potential insight into our lives as subjects, giving sense and making sense of what is important to us qua subjects. Because these feelings are articulable and articulated, they are in a strong sense interpretations. To examine an object, event, or situation is to express both its sense and one’s feeling about it, and these expressions lead to or generate series of more expansive and finely tuned characterizations. Interpretive responses generate expression, and expression leads in turn to qualifications, extensions, and refinements in meaning and understanding. Insight is then amplified by further assessments that evaluate, weigh, and rank our import ascriptions through a process of qualitative discriminations in the context of the forms of life we inhabit, thus affirming or challenging them. Taylor calls this strong evaluation, which examines not just objects in the light of our desires but also the

desires themselves in a second-order evaluation that is inherently reflexive. Strong evaluations involve subject-referring imports, and, reciprocally, subject-referring feelings involve strong evaluations in a process of moral reasoning that is close to what Stanley Cavell calls moral perfectionism. “Implicit in this strong evaluation,” Taylor writes, “is thus a placing of our different motivations relative to each other, the drawing, as it were, of a moral map of ourselves” (“SIA,” p. 67; emphasis added). And the goal of this process is a becoming-other—the projection of a future self, or a coming community, to which we aspire.

The process of giving expression to our sense of things makes present to us the imports guiding our responses, defining and characterizing them, leading to further assessments and evaluations that are as much social and contextual as personal. These assessments ascribe a form to what matters to us, a logic of sense, and at the same time open us to the domain of what it is to be human. However, like all forms of reason, this activity is not completely free of disagreeable qualities of ambiguity, mischaracterization, uncertainty, or self-doubt, nor does strong evaluation necessarily lead to progressive improvement in morals or moral reasoning. For these feelings also, Taylor observes,

open the question whether this characterization is adequate, whether it is not incomplete or distortive. And so from the very fact of their being articulated, the question cannot but arise whether we have properly articulated our feelings, that is, whether we have properly explicated what the feeling gives us a sense of. In an important sense, this question once opened can never be closed. . . . The attempt to articulate further is potentially a life-time process. At each stage, what we feel is a function of what we have already articulated and evokes the puzzlement and perplexities which further understanding may unravel. But whether we want to take the challenge or not, whether we seek the truth or take refuge in illusion, our self-(mis)understandings shape what we feel. This is the sense in which man is a self-interpreting animal. [“SIA,” pp. 64–65]

In other words, interpretation and self-interpretation are interminable because our reasons and justifications are incomplete and persistently open to question. They prevent the interpretive circle from ever completing itself and thus fuel instead a hermeneutic spiral, whether virtuous or vicious.

Language shapes the reflexive experience of reasoning, assessment, and evaluation not only by giving expressive form to import ascriptions and reasons but also by providing new conceptual vocabularies and contexts.
for them. When different experiences, senses, or emotions are assessed or evaluated under different concepts they are experienced differently and potentially undergo a transvaluation. This process entails recognizing that vocabularies for describing and assessing imports themselves shape and extend or expand our assessments. One might add, they also change the sense of the experience itself.

Taylor attributes two kinds of conceptual revolution to this process of transvaluation: one in relation to a personal stance in need of transformation (what Cavell calls moral perfectionism) and one that recognizes the necessity of transformation under a new concept. The first kind of transformation involves a critical dialogue with one’s self and involves acquiring deeper insight into one’s import ascriptions. But the second kind of transformation and transvaluation involves another kind of confrontation wherein one’s self-understanding, and conceptual frameworks for self-understanding, are challenged in the encounter with other cultures, perspectives, and points of view. It is as if we come to understand the limits and confinements of our own conceptual vocabularies for self-assessment and self-understanding in comprehending that a number of different subject-referring accounts are equally possible and desirable. In addition, we are susceptible to the necessity of (self) transformation under a new concept because the open, incomplete, and fragmentary nature of our interpretations of self and of others means that our conceptual vocabularies can never be decisively fixed because they can never be fully described in objective terms. For these reasons, the reflexive process of interpretation, assessment, and evaluation, of making and remaking qualitative distinctions, can never be definitively closed.

There is another important dimension to the process of transformation under a new concept, one that deepens our sense of understanding of how the subject may investigate itself subjectively qua subject. In his essay “Theories of Meaning,” Taylor unfolds the consequences of what he terms the expressive account of meaning in contrast with designative and truth-conditional accounts of language, wherein language is considered a phenomenon of nature like all others, making of it a pliant and transparent instrument of thought. Meaning cannot be simply treated as representation, nor can we come to understand how meaning or interpretation work from the standpoint of monological and neutral observers. Taylor’s account characterizes expression not only as attempts at communication or the transmission of sense but also as acts of disclosure. Language in its broadest sense is thus defined as the site of three human activities: first,
making articulations, and thus putting before us and making us more aware of our import ascriptions, assessments, and conceptual commitments; second, putting this discourse in a public space and thereby constituting a social space for further evaluation and assessment; and, finally, discriminating, reworking, and refining values and concepts that are fundamental to human concerns and thus opening us reflexively to those concerns. If this is really to be an expansive, critical, and transformative process, then interpretations must not only be partial and open to critical investigation and debate, but they must also be crucially out of phase with their explananda. Interpretations thus involve confrontations—with recalcitrant objects and texts as well as competing conceptual frameworks for interpretation—that not only produce new conditions of sense but also new conditions for reassessing the sense of one’s self. This argument follows from Taylor’s claim that there are no such things as structures of meaning independent of our interpretations of them and thus that all meaning is experiential in the sense that every interpretation involves a degree of self-interpretation embedded in a stream of action. This domain of experiential meaning shifts interpretive activities in a new and interesting direction, for an interpretation must not only transform its object or give it a new sense. Interpretation does not simply restore sense or coherence to an expression. It also produces new forms or situations of coherence. Philosophy is also experimentation. And the struggle with language, so present in both Wittgenstein and Deleuze in their very different ways, is thus understood as the struggle to create or to give birth to sense in ways not yet anticipated on the terrain of thought. Moreover, to the extent that this is a new sense for the subject, and that the subject is embedded in the larger context of experiential meaning, the subject too is potentially transformed in interesting ways.

Taylor’s essay “Understanding and Ethnocentricity” offers his most replete account of what it might mean to undergo transformation under a new concept. His principal thesis is that interpretive theories, or ways of understanding the practices of humans as self-referring animals, must be distinguished from descriptions of theories in the natural sciences and thus that “understanding is inseparable from criticism, but this in turn is inseparable from self-criticism.” Ethnography offers an interesting case for exploring the ways in which efforts to understand another society—or, more broadly, intentional acts and practices that stand in need of interpretation because of a felt discontinuity with our sense of our selves and our

own forms of life—challenge us to criticize and remap our self-definitions. One cannot achieve an adequate explanatory account of alien languages, cultures, or experiences until their own self-definitions are understood, defined, and accepted, and, further, in their difference from our own forms of life or conceptual contexts, these encounters may encourage us to expand our own language of human possibilities.

The key question here is how to make sense of others and what happens to us when we feel compelled to make sense of others. Taylor frames his argument ethnographically or anthropologically: how do we understand and make sense of alien cultures and practices? But we might also feel compelled to interpret any action or activity, including an artful expression, that seems to resist our capacity to understand or interpret it.

Following out the consequences of our sympathetic responses to such alien encounters helps clarify the steps or stages guiding our will to interpret. First, to want or to be willing to interpret means accepting that an intentional act—even more so one we feel to be alien or disagreeable—must in principle be understandable in that it arises from common human capacities for expression and self-reference. The first move in such acts of interpretation is to try to arrive at how the agent, text, or expression may have wished to understand itself. This idea is commensurate with Donald Davidson’s principle of rational accommodation, sometimes called the Principle of Charity. Further, interpretive understanding does not simply arrive at meaning or come to a conclusion in finding or adopting the point of view of the subject or text that stands in need of interpretation, for simply recovering this self-description may shed no light whatsoever on the acts or make them more comprehensible. In other words, an interpretation does not complete itself simply in comprehending the agent’s self-descriptions. There are several reasons for this. The given explananda may not fully understand itself, or be subject to omission or contradiction, misinformation or illusion, or cannot or has not yet found the right language of self-characterization. Thus there is no need to frame our explanantia in the same language as the subject, nor should we do so.

Those who gravitate towards the natural sciences as a model for the social sciences or humanities will want to by-pass these self-descriptions altogether as subjective, for they cannot be intersubjectively validated in unproblematic ways; there is no hope of replicable findings. But this is to give up the game too quickly. One cannot avoid the subject-referring qualities of intentional acts or else we have renounced the human in the humanities. At the same time, we have not successfully interpreted by simply understanding the other’s point of view or by putting ourselves in their place. What Taylor calls the interpretive view is distinguishable from both
the natural scientific model and the false ally that misconceives interpretation as successfully concluded in adducing or adopting the *explanandum*’s viewpoint. Taylor criticizes this as the incorrigibility thesis, meaning that interpretation must take the agent’s self-account as absolutely authoritative. This view must be tempered, as I have already pointed out, by acknowledging that the agent might be mistaken or vulnerable to the variety of misfires of reason. We all are. This acknowledgment produces a new framework for what theory should do in relation to self-description and understanding. There are a multitude of reasons why our authoritative self-referring accounts might be incomplete or unreliable and that what passes for common sense or common knowledge may in fact be inadequate.

The incorrigibility thesis is attractive because it seems to safeguard against ethnocentrism and other forms of cultural prejudice or bias. But the interpretive view wishes both to avoid the false neutrality, objectivity, and universalism of scientism *and* to engage critically others’ forms of self-understanding with a view to potentially transforming them, if necessary. If this were not done, there would be no possibility of producing new interpretations or of undergoing a change in understanding and value. For in challenging the language of self-understanding in others, we may also be challenging our own language of self-understanding. There are many instances where such acts of interpretation are transformative on both sides. “In fact,” Taylor explains,

> it will almost always be the case that the adequate language in which we can understand another society is not our language of understanding, or theirs, but rather what one could call a language of perspicuous contrast. This would be a language in which we could formulate both their way of life and ours as alternative possibilities in relation to some human constants at work in both. It would be a language in which the possible human variations would be so formulated that both our form of life and theirs could be perspicuously described as alternative such variations. Such a language of contrast might show their language of understanding to be distorted or inadequate in some respects, or it might show ours to be so (in which case, we might find that understanding them leads to an alteration of our self-understanding, and hence our form of life—a far from unknown process in history); or it might show both to be so.

Taylor’s description of coming to terms in languages of perspicuous contrast is close in spirit and logic to Davidson’s concept of “passing theories” and to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s fusion of horizons. There is neither time nor space to follow out the implications of these comparisons here. What is important is to hold on to the idea that interpretation refers equally to questions of meaning and matter, that is, import. Conflicts in interpretation often arise because different cultures, in the broadest and most varied sense of the term, are defined by different import vocabularies, and even within a given culture people with different import vocabularies have very different experiences. Moreover, as Taylor points out, “conceptual mutations in human history can and frequently do produce conceptual webs which are incommensurable, that is, where the terms cannot be defined in relation to a common stratum of expressions.” When this happens, there is no way forward in understanding or in thought without the creation of new concepts and new strata of expression through the acknowledgment that our powers and means of expression are replete with possible extensions. However, Taylor’s main point, and the connective thread among all his various accounts of interpretation, is that understanding is inseparable from ethical evaluation and that both understanding and evaluation are potentially open to extensions, creative transformation, and transvaluation.

To claim to know is always to value certain ways of knowing, and to value is to project a world commensurate with the forms of reason one aspires to define and to develop in conceptual expression. The two critical tasks of philosophy of or for the humanities are, in my view, to interrogate the bases, grounds, and frameworks wherein reasons are given and defended, both to constrain them when they are unreasonable but also to expand and ramify them in the production of new frameworks, contexts, and concepts and, in turn, to evaluate the axiological commitments that frame or structure our forms of reason-giving. The role of philosophy is to examine and critique the conceptual structures that frame and inform human expressiveness and action. And these concepts inform everyday discourse and thinking no less than more exotic activities of analysis and interpretation.

I would like to end here with what might be taken as a strange epilogue. But the experiment is worth the risk. The value of being disagreeable, and the unavoidability of conflicts of sense, are themes that link Wittgenstein and Deleuze in interesting ways. No two philosophers could be farther apart in style. Yet there is a profound connection that runs between them

in an idea of restlessness and homelessness as the condition of thought and that what matters most to philosophy can only be shown or enacted, not possessed or expressed. And if it could be expressed, it is likely to be misunderstood. At the same time, what makes the other alien to me, or the world strange to me, also presents the possibility of what Taylor calls transforming myself under a new concept. Here Deleuze and Guattari emit a phrase that might have come equally from Wittgenstein or Taylor: “we speak the same language, and yet I do not understand you.” In turn, one of the characteristic philosophical acts is self-estrangement and also to invite one’s language to become infected or deflected and transformed by alien vocabularies. When philosophy takes on the appearance of nonsense, whether in Wittgenstein’s sense or Deleuze’s, this is often the sign of the emergence of a new style, syntax, or concept, which may be taken as unfathomable or perplexing.

What Is Philosophy? also presents another potentially Wittgensteinian theme: shame as a motive of or to philosophy. One version of philosophy is based on an ideal of universal agreement to fundamental principles, arrived at through communication and consensus. But in a global milieu dominated by capitalism, one imagines easily that such a conception of philosophy is easily and thoroughly territorialized by the logic and value of capitalism and the commodity form. Restoring an ethical or moral dimension to philosophy, then, is not based on the quest for consensus and communication as much as contestation and experimentation. At the same time, philosophy must begin its struggle for thought at the very point where we feel our humanness or lack of it most intensely, which is precisely where we experience the shame of being human. This shame is motivated by our lack of conviction, our paralysis or inaction with respect to life’s daily injuries as much as its moral cataclysms or our inability to sustain belief in this world and its powers of transformation. We experience the shame of being human not only in the extreme situations described by Primo Levi, Deleuze and Guattari argue, but also “in insignificant conditions, before the meanness and vulgarity of existence that haunts democracies, before the propagation of these modes of existence and of thought-for-the-market, and before the values, ideals, and opinions of our time. The ignominy of the possibilities of life that we are offered appears from within. We do not feel ourselves outside of our time but continue to undergo shameful compromises with it.”

The fact that we must continually and shamefully endure and respond

22. Ibid., pp. 107–8.
to dishonorable compromises with our terms of existence is a powerful Emersonian theme and thus an interesting bridge back to the Wittgensteinian line that leads to Cavell. And in this same gesture, Deleuze’s desire for philosophy is shown to share much with Wittgenstein’s or Cavell’s and thus a possible philosophy of the humanities as I have portrayed it. Humanity is not something that universally binds us, a quality we all share, but rather the widely shared experience of not living up to our best intentions or to have failed on a quotidian basis to have been human or to have acted in a responsibly human way. The conceptual problem of the posthuman or the Nietzschean superhuman is that the tragedy of being human is not to have fully understood or achieved our humanity. Deleuze’s philosophy is thus not a posthuman one. How can one transcend or leave behind something one has not yet achieved or become? And yet we must find strategies for becoming and for responding to daily failures of ethical response and sociability. Here our doubts and lack of conviction or belief may spur us to imagine a future self or a new mode of existence to which we may aspire. In any case, perhaps the basis or fundamental context for a philosophy of the humanities is this: not to be engaged in the discovery of new knowledge but rather in the creation or establishment of (experimentation in) novel modes of knowledge that place in new contexts both our possible knowledge of self and the self’s relations to a community of others. However, as both Cavell and Michel Foucault warn each in his different way, the creation of a new mode of knowledge may equally be that of a new mode of ignorance. The task of philosophical criticism is unending.