

VITAL CONCERNS AND VITAL ILLUSIONS

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'It is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.'

Fredric Jameson

ABSTRACT: A consumer society that has embraced global capitalism while striving to preserve all the comforts and conveniences provided by technoscience is arguably fatally ill. Much support for this gloomy diagnosis is provided by, among others, Hannah Arendt, Northrop Frye, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Their reflections on the health of a human culture point up the urgency of the need to rethink the idea of good reasoning that predominates in the West. However, they also indicate that a healthier, more life-enhancing conception of good reasoning will arise only when a concern for justice and wisdom displaces the traditional ideals of pure and certain knowledge or eternal truths. To this end, Nietzsche recommends that philosophy ought now to concentrate on producing 'cultural physicians' who would strive to fashion a philosophy of concern. This type of philosophical therapist requires a radically nonmodern approach to philosophy that must pivot on a vitalistic metaphysics capable of overcoming pervasive nihilistic ideologies which illustrate a globally spreading mythology of unconcern. Hence an effective and lasting cultural therapy will depend on the emergence of a general will/desire to broaden the conception of good reasoning beyond the narrow perspectives established by modern science. And this will depend in turn on the education of future educators who stress above all the importance of cultivating the mythopoeic imaginations of the young.

KEYWORDS: Arendt, Frye, Nietzsche, cultural health, education, emergence, imagination, justice, metaphysics, metaphor, myth, reason.

1. ON THE NEED TO STOP AND THINK ABOUT LIFE AND THOUGHT

A prerequisite for good thinking, says Hannah Arendt, is a complete letting go of one's fondest hopes and deepest beliefs; that is, those underpinnings of daily thought that determine what we take to be 'normal.' She herewith elicits the image of a responsible citizen as one who is always willing and ready to take literally the common locution: 'stop and think'; that is, prepared to withdraw from life's mundane preoccupations in order to look more closely at the ramifications of some unexpected turn of events. That this should now be seen as an urgent need is indicated by the constant stream of reports referring to the hitherto unimaginable consequences of 'climate change.' This looming eventuality promises to alter forever, if not end, what we take to be civilized life on this planet.

More specifically, it appears that this phrase ought to signal a critical moment in the history of the supposedly enlightened civilization of the West---which should perhaps have long since begun to wonder whether it had acquired a good understanding of the ideals and idea of reason. Such a doubt ought now, at any rate, to stand at the forefront of this society's concerns, although a widespread attitude of indifference to the implications of 'climate change' appears to testify to the opposite. This situation suggests that the celebrated civilization of the West has already become so mired in a virulent bad sense that it is unable to muster either the will or desire to rethink some of its fondest assumptions.

One of the most pernicious of these seems to be concealed within the popular mantra of 'progress.' In terms of the problems I am referring to, this word may signify a collective mentality that harbours a self-destructive neurosis, if not a fatal psychosis, since it seems to go hand in hand with a fear or hatred of the freedom inherent in thought. For not only does the idea of progress serve to distract thinkers from questioning the dominant conception of good reasoning, it may also prevent our intellectual and political leaders from taking seriously Friedrich Nietzsche's trenchant criticisms of his contemporaries, who he accused of dishonesty and self-deception. One of his justifications for this charge is that they promote the delusory belief that simple answers can be found to complex problems. This tendency encourages a blind faith in system and hence a systemic narrowing of perspectives, with the result that the moderns have instituted educational systems that teach a kind of stupidity.¹

Nietzsche's reflections on the dubious conception of good thinking endorsed by his contemporaries thus led him to the view that the problem of culture is one of the more urgent, complex, and difficult problems of his 'hard times.' That he was very

¹ I discuss this thought in a larger context in my *Process, Reality, and the Power of Symbols: Thinking with A. N. Whitehead* (Basingstoke, Eng.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), esp. Chapter 8.

close to identifying the chief problem of our own hard times has been borne out by the steady rise of a ruthless, imperialistic form of global capitalism that reflects a deep-seated contempt for both life and thought. That is, it operates under the aegis of the assumption that the West has achieved such a high degree of civilization that it has acquired the right to exploit 'lesser' ones. So all that appears to have changed since Nietzsche's hard times is that the moderns have since succeeded in subjecting the entire globe to a form of economic imperialism.

Hence one of the more pressing questions that Nietzsche prompts with his critique of a culture that has flourished through embracing narrow perspectives is whether its successes are owing to a perhaps invincible alliance between stupidity and cupidity. His gloomy diagnosis of a falsely rational civilization bent on covering the globe with a duplicitous bad sense prompts one to wonder anyway whether this dreadful duo signifies the final stages of a mortal disease. But without doubt the question of the nature of the sicknesses cultures are prone to succumb to is extremely complex. It is conceivable that the now popular mantra of globalization is not so much a symptom of a civilization mindlessly bent on self-destruction as a sign that it was bound, for one reason or another, to share the fate of all civilizations.

Or perhaps the very popularity of this mantra merely reflects the defining trait of earlier Eurocentric imperialisms which pursued a ruthless and relentlessly ambitious takeover of the wealth, resources and even the daily lives of the members of weaker cultures. These voracious empires may have merely morphed into the more faceless international corporations which serve the hegemonic ambitions of an economic imperialism. Everywhere huge international businesses gobble up smaller and weaker businesses in a relentless pursuit of monopolistic powers, thereby confirming that the watchword 'globalization' goes hand in hand with the deceptively positive mantras of 'growth' and 'progress.'

This situation bespeaks a sort of smug callousness that is curiously blind to the fact that unlimited growth is the chief characteristic of the most life-threatening cancers. On this count alone one might identify one of the principal and most pernicious features of global capitalism as unconcern. A certain mindlessness is also evidenced by an obsessive desire to accumulate ever more secular power and wealth. I say 'secular' because the moderns have even hi-jacked the notion of power whose full meaning, along with that of many other important ideas, has been reduced to a shadow of itself. For this little word arguably holds the key to the very quicknesses manifested by both Life and Thought.

That is to say, our dire situation warrants speaking of a fatal disease inasmuch as the culture is now unable to make a sustained effort to promote and protect such

powers. For without their vigorous application, it cannot hope to become or remain either healthy or truly civilized. Such powers are usually only noticed, ironically enough, by those moderns who acknowledge that spontaneous acts of creative thinking often lead scientists on occasion to introduce important novelties into scientific theories. Indeed, these moments of inspiration invest the notion of technoscientific 'progress' with a modicum of truth. But there is a deep chasm lying between the sort of 'progress' made by advances in technical understanding and that which is promised by the far more profound and general notion of enlightened understanding. Yet it is just this consideration that tends to be dismissed as irrelevant to the quest to understand good thinking.

Nearly a half century ago Northrop Frye, in a series of lectures published under the title *The Modern Century*, presciently outlined some of the long-term consequences for the health of this culture of the failure to recognize the need to frequently stop and think. It instead chose to invest all its faith in the promises conveyed by the mantra of 'progress.' This sort of faith, in other words, is a sure sign of a burgeoning bad sense that will eventually destroy democracy from within:

All the social nightmares of our day seem to focus on some unending and inescapable form of mob rule. The most permanent kind of mob rule is not anarchy, nor is it the dictatorship that regularizes anarchy, nor even the imposed police state depicted by Orwell. It is rather the self-policing state, the society incapable of formulating an articulate criticism of itself and of developing a will to act in its light. This is a condition we are closer to, on this continent, than we are to dictatorship. In such a society the conception of progress would reappear as a donkey's carrot, as the new freedom we shall have as soon as some regrettable temporary necessity is out of the way. No one would notice that the necessities never come to an end, because the communications media would have destroyed the memory.²

Indeed, the communications media have since provided ample evidence of the efficiency with which the avalanche of ingenious communication devices can postpone indefinitely the hard work of thinking. Thus Frye's warnings resonate strongly with critiques of modernity which focus on the tendency of a consumer society to starve the will/desire to think, an activity that Arendt suggests is a vital human need. But if this is so, it is a need that is easily side-lined. Consider the common tendency to defer to accredited 'experts,' such as Nobel prize-winning economists who preach the virtues of unlimited growth in a world of shrinking resources and growing populations. This example of a blind faith in the good sense of

² Northrop Frye, *The Modern Century* (Toronto, Ont.: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 45.

whoever happens to rise to the top of what seems to have already become a complacent self-policing state attests to a culture thoroughly infested with dead or moribund souls. For they typically pay lip service to the noblest of human ideals while continually acting in accordance with the basest of human motives.

Thus the false freedom that Frye refers to ensures a continual sacrifice of the powers manifested by Life and Thought to false gods, such as 'efficiency,' 'productivity,' 'growth,' and 'prosperity.' These false gods, however, would soon become impotent were it not for the steady supply of ingenious gadgets that feed an insatiable appetite for ever more comforts and conveniences. So it behooves one to ask whether the high-priests of technoscience ought to bear a good deal of the responsibility for our present plight. This quasi-religious institution, after all, both underwrites and promotes the hubristic belief that the human animal even has the right to design new forms of life while seeking to gain systematic control over the complex processes manifested by the quicknesses of life and thought. No doubt technoscience should be given a good deal of credit for inventing various means to ensure longer lives and healthier bodies, for there is no denying the efficacy of, for instance, modern surgical procedures. But the ever-expanding damage being done to the planet's rich variety of ecological systems ought to remind everyone that technoscience at this crucial moment in history can hardly be granted immunity from critical attention.

Indeed, it seems that a general reluctance to question the epistemic authority of the scientific priesthood has a good deal to do with all the confusion surrounding the question of how to think and act in the face of the threat of 'climate change.' This confusion not only bears out Nietzsche's very low opinion of established systems of education which do not address critically enough the question of the proper place of science in society. Yet the crisis threatened by 'climate change' is as much a challenge to the ways we have been taught to think as the ways in which we have learned to live. And the former may owe a good deal to scientific propagandists who often promote misinformation, half-truths, and clever lies in a manner not unlike capitalism's specialists in advertising and public relations.

In any case, our dire situation may owe a good deal to an entrained propensity to fear the freedom inherent in thought. It is therefore not incidental that one of Nietzsche's chief concerns involves the problem of how to encourage the birth and education of 'free spirits.' That they may provide the main hope for a cure for a sick collective mentality that is very receptive to self-policing is borne out by Arendt in her study of the conscience of one of the Nazi's most efficient and loyal servants, Adolf Eichmann. She was particularly struck by his inability to comprehend the nature of

his participation in a monstrous crime. He evidenced neither anti-Semitic prejudices, nor a deep-seated malevolence, much less an ignorance of ethical obligations. He was rather a typical product of a system of education which had sadly failed in its primary responsibility---to cultivate the imaginations of the young. For Eichmann was not alone in being unable to imagine the horrific consequences of maintaining an unquestioning loyalty to the degenerate powers he so diligently served. Hence Arendt was led in the end to coin the phrase 'banality of evil' as a more accurate descriptor of Nazi atrocities than 'radical evil.'

Briefly, then, if Eichmann, as Arendt suggests, was the product of a culture which actively discouraged a natural inclination to stop and think, his example may go a long way towards accounting for the alleged 'normality' of the rapacious managers and servants of globally ambitious international corporations. Their manifest lack of concern for anything except short-term gains bespeaks severely stunted imaginations. On the other hand, it is possible that the evils of global capitalism may merely reflect the sad fact that the human animal is prone to lapse into an unreflective complacency the more comfortable he becomes, as seems implicit in Arendt's summing up of the lesson she drew from the ascendancy of 20th century totalitarianism:

[t]he mass man whom Himmler organized for the greatest mass crimes ever committed in history bore the features of the philistine rather than of the mob man, and was the bourgeois who in the midst of the ruins of his world worried about nothing so much as his private security, was ready to sacrifice everything--belief, honor, dignity---on the slightest provocation. Nothing proved easier to destroy than the privacy and private morality of people who thought of nothing but safeguarding their private lives.³

She might have added that a culture infused with an insatiable desire for material possessions is also one haunted by a fear of losing them. Such a fear appears amply illustrated by the haste with which formerly cherished high ideals can be jettisoned.⁴ The 'mass man's' desire to protect above all else his security, comforts, and conveniences perhaps even explains the curious lack of response to the threat of climate change. Any proposed remedy that cannot guarantee the continuation of comfortable material conveniences--which the 'mass man' now tends to regard as entitlements---may simply be unthinkable.

In any case, it is surely far too simplistic to attribute the evils of global capitalism

³ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1996), p. 338.

⁴ Consider the fate in the USA of the rule of law, which many hold to be the cornerstone of civilization. The current president, who (one would have thought) should be the first to leap to the defence of the Constitution, has recently endorsed the radical undermining of the rule of law that was begun by his predecessor who blithely appealed to 'national security' to justify his act of vandalism.

to the selfishness and greed of an elite few. It is therefore worth noting that, as Arendt maintains, every totalitarian state is completely dependent on the complicity of the 'mass man.' It is moreover not insignificant that Frye chooses the image of a carrot to elicit the idea of a self-policing mentality that has eagerly welcomed communication devices which not only contribute to the ease and reach of personal contacts. Such devices have already proven their worth as efficient means of thought-control. It seems our political leaders desire nothing so much as control over all means of communication. Thus a very modern (i.e., globalized) form of totalitarianism appears to be taking root, one that is highly skilled in the silent manipulation of all the lures that encourage self-policing.⁵

It may therefore be much easier to imagine the end of the world than the demise of global capitalism. The latter is of course conceivable in at least the sense that parasites tend in the long run to undermine the health of, if not actually kill, their indispensable hosts. There is in any event no lack of evidence that there are subtle forces and covert pressures which steadily undermine the collective will to think freely and critically. One need consider only the widespread acceptance of that infamous and obviously false declaration that there is no such thing as a society. If the term 'society' is understood to refer to an integrated community of mutually caring or concerned souls, there may soon be no society left anywhere on earth.

2. ON THE HEGEMONY OF A MYOPIC UNCONCERNED REASON

The champions of a culture of unconcern, in short, bear witness to an entrenched collective mentality that has willingly embraced nihilistic doctrines and destructive practices. This point returns us to Nietzsche's persistent concern about what role philosophy should play in the 'enculturation' of a healthy culture. For his charge of a systematic betrayal of thought (and hence of life) by alleged specialists in good thinking indicates not only that modern philosophy has not given nearly enough thought to the 'large' question of what it means to be able to think. It has perhaps also helped to undermine a potentially vital collective will with a plurality of effete, self-policing wills. So inasmuch as a healthy culture depends for its continuing vitality on being able to educate 'free spirits,' it may be essential to try to estimate the importance of this vague but highly evocative notion. Indeed, both Nietzsche and Arendt appear to be saying that such spirits cannot possibly thrive if systems of

⁵ See Sheldon Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008) wherein he defines 'inverted totalitarianism' as a new form of fascistic political organization whereby unelected, anti-democratic corporate managers seek total control over important cultural institutions (in the domains of the media, finance, education, etc.).

education do not make concerted efforts to cultivate the powers of imagination in the young. For what could a 'free spirit' signify if not a free will that is always ready to activate a free imagination?

The many faceted problem of culture that Nietzsche sketches thus brings us face to face not only with the question of *how* to engender a better system of education but also with the question whether it is even possible to fashion a philosophical therapy that might help alleviate our present situation. In calling for philosophy to attempt to educate 'cultural physicians' who would work 'for the benefit of a time to come,' Nietzsche expresses however a certain optimism. But at the same time he is broaching the possibility that modern philosophy is not in a fit state to produce the sort of physician he has in mind.

So a short digression may be in order. Let us consider the conception of good thinking promoted in the Anglophone world where apprentice philosophers are taught that logical rigour in argumentation holds the key to good reasoning. The situation has been described by John Cottingham thus:

Philosophy is among the fastest-growing A-level subjects in Britain. This suggests that despite the pressure from governments to increase the teaching of technical, career oriented subjects, a lot of sixth-formers have a stubborn interest in more traditional enquiries about the meaning of life. Also near the top of the list of fast-growing subjects is Religious Studies; and this again seems to confound the experts. Notwithstanding constant announcements that religion in educated Western Europe is "on the way out", many intelligent young people seem to have a keen desire to learn about traditional spiritual frameworks of human understanding. But frustration often ensues as the aspiring philosophy student climbs higher. The university study of philosophy in the anglophone world now offers little by way of a grand synoptic vision of human life and our place in the scheme of things. Instead, the subject has fragmented into a host of highly technical specialisms, whose practitioners increasingly model themselves on the methods of the natural sciences. By the time they reach graduate studies, most students will be resigned to working within intricate, introverted "research" programmes, whose wider significance they might be hard pressed to explain to anyone outside their special area.⁶

Cottingham's account of the arid climate of thought in anglophone philosophy, which induces him to conclude that philosophy urgently needs 'to find a more humane voice,' lends weight to Nietzsche's complaint that modern philosophers have not done much to help the general public learn how to think with a good conscience.

⁶ John Cottingham, *Philosophy as Confession*, March, 2011, <http://www.standpointmag.co.uk> (my italics). The title of this article refers to Stanley Cavell's latest book.

Indeed, Cottingham can be read as alluding to the serious spiritual damage that can be done by attempts to suppress the 'large' questions of traditional philosophy, such as 'What is Good Thinking?' (which seems tightly bound up with, among others, 'What is Good Living?'). For not only the intellectual health of students of philosophy is put into jeopardy when they are obliged, on pain of expulsion from what amounts to an elite club, to learn how to compete in esoteric competitions wherein the winners are those who can invent the most clever technical solutions to artificially constructed problems. It is as though the perennial problem of how to live well is of minor concern to serious thinkers. Just the opposite may be the case, for any kind of teaching that promotes the teaching of narrow perspectives can be charged with helping to encase souls in strait-jackets.⁷

Put another way, the situation in anglophone philosophy prompts one to wonder whether it mirrors the sad fact that the collective mentality of the anglophone world, which appears to be the headquarters of an especially callous form of global capitalism, has rendered itself incapable of nurturing the sort of concerned soul that the idea of cultural physician elicits. The current econo-political climate as well as the intellectual climate indicates anyway how hard it will be for modern philosophers to develop a more humane conception of philosophy's social responsibilities. Nietzsche can therefore be praised at least for bringing into the open a burning question, although it is far from clear how to go on from where he left off. Indeed, a good many moderns may simply object that philosophy has no need for a radical cultural therapy since the West has already evolved an enlightened mode of thought. However, the celebrated scientific revolution of the 17th century does not unproblematically refer to a turning point in the history of thought---when the quest for good sense finally became modern and left behind the irrational superstitions of the premoderns. The contrary seems to be closer to the truth. Although the evolution of thought in this culture may at one time have promised a triumphant reason capable of continually enhancing a dominion of good sense, it is now undeniable that the evolution of consciousness does not necessarily refer to a positive or 'upward' climb towards a wiser and deeper sensibility. Indeed, it seems that at this celebrated historical juncture in the development of the collective mentality of the West, leading intellectual and political thinkers chose a fatally wrong turning, since the path they selected to follow has arguably led to a false conception of rationality which has made reason itself into

⁷ For an account of how philosophy has fared similarly in Australian universities, see the article 'I'm smart, therefore I am,' by Stephen Buckle, *The Australian*, August 06, 2008 (<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/>). I am grateful to Arran Gare for this reference and the preceding one in the above note.

a victim.⁸

Hence the common word 'modern' ought to bring us to a complete halt in order to think long and hard about what this adjective signifies, for it appears to cover over a great many hypocrisies, if not convenient lies. As I have already noted, this is partly evidenced in the way in which the meanings of important ideas have come to be interpreted by modern self-styled 'rationalists.' Putting into question what appears to be a culturally endorsed, systematic inversion of meanings, Bruno Latour argues that the moderns never really did become modern.⁹ That is, they never did honestly strive to do full justice all at once to the three overlapping domains of serious inquiry---nature, culture, and discourse. For how can one speak justly about some aspect of nature without enlisting the culturally endorsed resources of some common means of expression; that is, those extant systems of symbolism that the culture happens to have privileged? Or again, how is it possible to defend the intelligibility and propriety, never mind the rationality, of one's symbolically expressed interpretations of selected events in Nature without at the same time presupposing one has at hand a just way to link these symbolisms to 'truth' or 'reality'?

Thus if one grants that any attempt at rational thought must involve an aim to take into account all at once the intimate, intricate, and probably dynamic relationships (assuming we live in an evolutionary world) that closely tie these three resources together, it is surely high time for philosophy to adopt a truly modern, or nonmodern, mode of reasoning. The foregoing remarks indicate that this must involve attempts to do justice above all to Nature; or better, the hither side of nature-culture, since there is, strictly speaking, no such thing as Nature pure and simple. As for what 'doing justice' might mean, the anomalies elicited by the little word 'modern,' not to mention the extreme vagueness of the idea of Nature, indicate that one might well begin all over again by reflecting on the puzzle of why and where things began to go askew in the evolution of thought in this culture.

Consider, for instance, the highly influential Descartes, who famously described himself as a 'thinking thing.' Since one of his chief concerns was to find a way to demonstrate that the secret of good reasoning lies in precise mathematical methods, he can be cited as a salutary example of how not to begin to think about good thinking. For he indirectly demonstrates that the truly modern philosopher must begin by acknowledging at once that a philosopher is only a linguistically competent

⁸ See Arran Gare, 'Reviving the Radical Enlightenment: Process Philosophy and the Struggle for Democracy' in *Researching with Whitehead: System and Adventure*, ed. Fanz Riffert and Hans-Joachim Sander (Frieburg/Munich: Verlag Karl Alber, 2008).

⁹ Bruno Latour (1991), *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

`perplexed self' who happens to be inclined, if only at times, to wonder what might be the best way to order and arrange all the `things' that can be thought about. Such a project cannot help but identify a host of possibly relevant factors, if only to dismiss the bulk of them. These include not only a great variety of non-thinking `things' that provide the furniture of thought (such as ideas, images, symbols, and so on) but also the thoughts of other `thinking things.' Yet all that is clear is that thinking cannot take into account everything at once---which is not a mere truism since it brings the themes of interest and importance to the forefront of the quest to understand understanding.

This convoluted situation indicates, in short, that the more seriously one pursues the `large' question that chiefly concerns Descartes, `What is a rational thinking Self?,' the more one is bound to watch this notion recede into a fog of vague word-symbols. So if one happens to be unfashionably inclined to insist on asking that *ur*-question of philosophy, `What is good thinking?,' it is necessary to take up at once its close companion: `What is good living?,' as well as indeterminate number of other, intimately related but inevitably vague, `large' questions.

No wonder so many professional philosophers are reluctant to entertain the really `large' ones, such as `What is Mind?' without immediately turning for help to science. Yet there are few ideas that seem more elusive than mind, unless it is matter. No doubt this is why a good deal of energy has been spent on finding ways to avoid facing up to this consideration. Much effort has been expended, for instance, on attempts to eliminate vagueness and ambiguity from serious discourse. Yet these alleged enemies of clear thinking are manifestly characteristics of all natural languages. They may even be of great philosophical significance inasmuch as once they are acknowledged as perfectly in order, they force into the open the question what role imagination actually plays in good thinking.

In fact the ubiquity of vagueness seems fully in accord with the idea of evolution. It renders dubious, to say the least, the rationality of the quest for precise and complete solutions to specially selected problems. There appear to be no verbal expressions that do not need to deploy debatable assemblages of word-symbols whose meanings cannot be made either definite or fixed---except by fiat. This is hardly surprising if meanings can evolve along with everything else in a thoroughly evolutionary world. In any case, once it is agreed that it is senseless to attack those erstwhile presumed enemies of clear thinking, vagueness and ambiguity, why not just go on to acknowledge that `thinking things' are first and foremost embodied, warm-blooded, creatures of Nature who happen to be inventive symbol-users and symbol-makers?

Thus apart from recognizing that we live in a world shot through with created symbolisms of many kinds, the only clarity immediately available to a truly honest 'thinking thing' appears to be that the activity of thinking is not unlike that of breathing and so is bound to share some of the mystery of life itself. Hence, once one alludes to the topic of Nature in a context of thinking hard about Life and Thought, one is perhaps face-to-face with a profound mystery.

Be that as it may, we must surely admit that the 'quicknesses' exhibited by all forms of life that bear witness to some sort of capacity to think (and which forms of life do not?) indicate that a self-policing mentality is the last thing this culture needs. There appears to be little hope that justice can be done to Nature without acknowledging that Life and Thought are elements of Nature. That is to say, the word 'Nature' can be viewed as a kind of shorthand for a constellation of salient characteristics among which certain vital activities stand out which bear witness to an inherent sentience in Nature. Thus the intrepid philosophical inquirer into the meaning of good thinking, or good sense, cannot avoid plunging immediately into the middle of a maelstrom of profound puzzles related to the genesis and function of the privileged symbolisms that pertain to the expression of those aspects of experiencing that are deemed relevant. But then does one not arrive at that most unignorable question of all philosophical questions: 'What is Experience?'

In other words, the above discussion points up the urgent need to recognize the truth of another of Frye's observations (on the first page of the first chapter of *The Educated Imagination*): 'the simplest questions are not only the hardest to answer, but the most important to ask.' This elementary truth not only indicates the centrality of imagination in trying to frame the task of philosophy, it brings out the central importance of the frequently ignored themes of interest and importance, thus raising the especially poignant question of how best to *begin* to examine all the above-mentioned themes in a context that *might* be able to do a little justice to the fundamental notion of experience.

Thus whenever beginning students of philosophy are discouraged from asking 'What is Life?', 'What is Thought?', 'What is Morality?' and so on, they are not only being cheated of a proper philosophical education; that is, assuming this has everything to do with learning how to think. That their very souls may be being placed in jeopardy is indicated in so far as logicistic or analytic thinkers prevent them from even asking what role imagination actually plays in philosophical attempts to become clear about fundamental ideas. For there is no warrant whatsoever for banning 'large' questions on the spurious ground that they encourage fanciful flirtations with vague ideas or anarchic 'soft' reasonings. On the contrary it is just at

the point where the topic of imagination begins to rear its fearsome head that the really profound and difficult problems of philosophy arise. Their suppression thus compounds the suspicion that proponents of the ideal of rigour are infused with a neurotic fear of the powers inherent in the capacity to think. For what else could prompt self-consciously rational thinkers to retreat behind high protective walls that are continually being reinforced by the champions of scientific 'progress'? Indeed, this mantra appears to draw most of its obfuscating power from what I have elsewhere called the Grand Myth of Scientific Superrationality---the acritical presumption that the best of human reasoning is that which models itself on scientific methods.¹⁰

3. ON TRYING TO IMAGINE A HEALTHY CULTURE

I am suggesting that one of the biggest obstacles in the way of a radical reform in the perverted conception of reason endorsed by the allegedly enlightened West may be a toxic set of myths which precludes recognizing that the topic of myth may itself be highly relevant to the quest to understand rationality. Such a view informs anyway Nietzsche's diagnosis of a sick collective mentality shot through with self-deception and dishonesty. For the core of his diagnosis of a sick culture is not that it has adopted a form of reasoning that has failed to free itself from all illusions. On the contrary, he holds that a healthy culture is one that is informed by 'vital illusions.' He thus brings out into the open the consideration that in order to define a healthy culture it is necessary to confront the ghosts that live beneath the surface of the collective consciousness.

Without doubt Nietzsche outlines a difficult task, since what moves and has its being in these lower depths can only be inferred from surface ripples, such as the 'common sense' beliefs that guide thought in the culture. So with this in mind, it is worth reflecting on Frye's claim that every ideology bears witness to a hidden mythology, which is a thought-grounding set of usually unremarked, very general beliefs that reflect that society's chief concerns. But since such concerns are neither fixed nor easy to identify, he suggests a mythology might better be described as a 'reservoir of possible beliefs.'¹¹ Hence by thus alluding indirectly to processes of selection and valuation of mere possibilities whose realizations will ultimately determine the peculiar character of the culture, Frye also indicates that the topic of imagination is closely bound up with the problem of how to define a healthy culture.

More specifically, might one then say that those ideologies that happen to

¹⁰ A more detailed discussion can be found in my *Myths of Reason: Vagueness, Rationality, and the Lure of Logic* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1995).

¹¹ *The Modern Century*, p. 115.

predominate in the collective consciousness of a given culture bear witness to products of an only more or less well-cultivated collective imagination? If an ideology can be conceived as an applied mythology, as Frye holds, and if regnant ideologies are the chief directors of the evolving (or devolving) character (or soul) of that culture, the cultural physician is facing here a perhaps unresolvable problem. It is hardly a simple matter anyway to decide where and how to begin a cultural therapy if this involves the need to imaginatively tap into a hidden reservoir of flexible (perhaps evolving) and only potentially life-enhancing beliefs. For even if perchance the overall effect of some form of cultural therapy turns out to be positive, one may still be left to wonder whether this is really the result of a new infusion of the sort of 'vital illusions' which Nietzsche says no healthy culture can do without.

A fruitful way forward is perhaps indicated in Frye's interpretation of the role of myths in processes of enculturation. His idea of good myths can be likened to Nietzsche's 'vital illusions' inasmuch as both contribute, as Frye puts it, to 'life in more abundance.' To this end, he usefully distinguishes between primary and secondary myths which reflect parallel running concerns. Primary concerns are vital in the sense that they are directly related to the basic needs of all its members---such as sufficient food, adequate shelter, freedom of movement and of thought, and so on. Secondary concerns are more peripheral to the long-term health of a culture since they may absorb or dissipate both the energies and the will needed to satisfy primary concerns. The quality of any regnant mythology, in short, may be inferred from the sort of concerns that appear to inform dominant ideologies and hence the collective mentality of the culture. For as Frye sums up the matter, the mythology, good or bad, underwrites the ideology, good or bad.

It does not appear hard to illustrate his point. Consider the current state of the collective mentality of the USA. Having once escaped an imperialistic tyranny in order to stand proudly and independently as a beacon of hope for all those who dream of a liberated and enlightened society, the USA has since become hostage to a mutually reinforcing set of bad secondary myths. Upholding the rectitude of crass materialistic values while at the same time preaching the superiority of Christian values, its leaders exemplify a shameless penchant for double-speak and hypocrisy. They have not so much learned a bad sense as how to give the impression of a deep respect for good sense (e.g., with frequent professions of a love for freedom, openness in political decision-making, respect for the rule of law, etc.). Ostensibly a democracy, it manifests a polity that is effectively controlled by an unelected corporatocracy. Its foreign relations are determined by a military-industrial complex that dreams of establishing a global hegemony over land, sea, air, and space, regardless of the cost.

While constantly advertizing itself as a lover of peace, it is a culture that allows itself to be swayed by constant assurances of the necessity of permanent war. This is continually reinforced by constant references to an obviously false myth---of exceptionalism---which is perpetuated by an uncritical media that sustains a general fear of the evil designs of phantom enemies who can be conveniently replaced overnight.

The 'American way of life,' in short, evokes the figure of a giant, half-blind super-rogue state that has entrenched a great many secondary myths, which leads it to masquerade as a divinely appointed enemy of all rogue states. Mindlessly bent on global hegemony, its leaders manifest a lack of genuine concern for anything but the state's own material well-being, which is usually expressed in terms of 'national interest.' Hence this one example indicates that the first question one needs to ask is not 'What is to be done?' but rather '*Can* anything be done?' Perhaps there is a point of no return in the degeneration of a collective mentality at which the very idea of recovery becomes otiose.

We seem to have here, at any rate, a prime example of a culture hopelessly mired in a mythology of unconcern. On the other hand, all may not be lost if Nietzsche is right and philosophy is capable of assisting in the recovery of a sick culture through creating a philosophy of concern. For his line of thought is clearly and unequivocally on the side of Life. That is, he seems to suggest that it might be possible to instill in the collective mind-set a re-vitalizing mythology with the power to foster truly 'vital illusions.' These would provide the germs of a new collective consciousness guided by healthier ideologies.

I have however indicated that the more pressing question facing a would-be cultural physician is not just how but whether it is even possible to overcome the hegemony of a nihilistic mythology of unconcern. Or to put this crucial point another way, it is far from clear whether, never mind how, a re-vitalizing mythology of concern could emerge under the aegis of a far from humble reason which promotes and protects narrow perspectives that militate against the growth of a general will/desire for radical change. Perhaps the line of thought I am pursuing betrays an unreasonable and empirically unwarranted faith in an as-yet untapped, potential human wisdom---one that the main currents of modern thought have done much to undermine.

I have already alluded to the impoverished state of education in the West. But it is perhaps worth noting a few more of the unpropitious developments that have taken place in the some of the more prestigious institutions of higher learning. Apparently swayed by the Grand Myth, not to mention the sort of socio-economic myopia

perpetuated by the clever proponents of global capitalism, many of the best universities of the West may be accused of betraying their primary responsibility--which is simply to educate; that is, to encourage learning of a kind that is not governed solely by practical calculations. Yet it seems that a good many universities have been taken over by efficiency-minded managers who make quantity rather than quality the primary measure of value, so that the task of judging the contributions of the faculty has become degraded to a weighing of dry abstractions. For the industrial ideals of efficiency, productivity, and profitability appear to have become the measures of worth even in the humanities where academic achievement is frequently judged in terms of utility---that is, its 'impact' on society.¹²

So if the primary responsibility of a university is to assist any therapeutic project that might have a positive effect on the health of the enveloping culture, the extant institutions of higher education afford little reason for optimism. If their major concern ought to be how to go about strengthening any department of the humanities that can contribute to the cultivation of the imaginations of its students, it is no small thing that just the opposite appears to be taking place. For the humanities are now under constant attack by single-minded philistines whose limited visions may owe as much to a self-policing will as to deeply entrenched toxic myths that 'legitimize' this will.

Briefly, then, a reform movement whose aim was to engender a truly enlightened society informed by a vital mythology of concern may require at the very least that the bulk of energies and resources available to educators everywhere be switched to the humanities, at least for the time being. This eventuality does not seem very likely, however, for it is not only philosophy that controls the dominant conception of good thinking in the West. It seems that a much stronger support for a self-policing collective mentality is provided by the neo-Darwinian interpretation of evolution.

4. ON THE INJUSTICE DONE TO THE IDEA OF EVOLUTION BY THE MODERNS

Assuming that the notion of evolution refers to a well-evidenced 'fact' of Nature (although not, I am suggesting, a well-understood one), it is first worth noting that evolution is an extremely vague notion. This should not be surprising, since it is essentially a metaphysical one. That is to say, it refers to an especially salient, very

¹² This development invites, in short, a serious charge of treason inasmuch as academia has joined the company of self-serving politicians and corporate managers who are waging the modern 'war on society.' See, e.g., Henry A. Giroux, "Militarized Conservatism and the End(s) of Higher Education," *Truthout*, April 5, 2011 (www.Truthout.org).

general, characteristic of Nature. So the next thing to note is that the Darwinian approach to evolution is, like many another modern scientific theory, overtly hostile to metaphysics even as it covertly appeals to the metaphysics of mechanistic materialism. Thus affording another example of the obfuscating power of the Grand Myth, it is no accident that the Darwinian theory of evolution also supplies the main support for a culture enamoured of a *laissez-faire* ideology that promotes the virtues of individualistic utilitarian values. This symbiotic relationship between highly influential representatives of both science and society thus draws a great deal of support from an essentially nihilistic approach to the study of life and thought.

Yet the only sure thing one can say about the idea of evolution is that it holds that new forms of both mental and physical organization can emerge from old forms. Hence the extreme vagueness of the idea of evolution carries over to the key idea of emergence. So nothing really precludes thinking that the ongoing emergence in Nature of an increasingly complex network of interacting organisms betokens a mysterious 'directedness'---which does not necessarily evoke an omniscient 'external' Grand Designer. For the bulk of the evidence for evolution only supports the claim that Nature is an ongoing process, or better, a process of processes that do not necessarily move in an 'upward' direction. Nonetheless, it is a Nature that is conceivably infused with a teleological dimension.

In other words, the notion of emergence can be conceived in terms of 'inner' processes like those that inform the productions of an imaginative artist whose spontaneous decisions are made on the fly, as it were, yet give the impression of a certain 'directedness' of creative intention. However, most artists do not claim to know exactly what they are trying to produce before they have actually produced it. The point is that the key Darwinian idea of 'the survival of the fittest' may refer only to the emergence of locally viable novel forms of organization that may be just as 'unplanned' as many, if not all, works of art. For artists can be said to be inventing their problems even as they provide solutions for them. It is therefore not that hard to think that some of Nature's more ingenious 'adaptations' to the challenges presented by constantly changing exigencies as creative solutions to the problems inevitably posed by a restlessly evolving world.

One may thus suspect that neo-Darwinian theory of evolution, which trumpets the explanatory sufficiency of the two simple principles of Chance and Natural Selection, is primarily bent on avoiding at all costs the most profound question of natural philosophy---whether Nature is essentially sentient and self-creative, and if so to what end it might be striving. The orthodox theory may simply be perpetrating a gross injustice in the form of a perhaps invincible form of nihilism. For any

naturalistic theory which ultimately appeals to a mechanistic metaphysics for support effectively robs existence of both meaning and value---since whatever is deemed to be composed of an essentially insentient and inert 'stuff' does not really matter in any broad sense of the word.

In any case, just to the extent that a re-thinking of the fundamental notion of evolution calls for a rethinking of the fundamental metaphysical idea of matter, a would-be cultural physician is surely obliged to stop and think about the suitability or adequacy of the regnant metaphysics. For it is only on the planks of whatever is chosen to float a probably intrinsically unsteady boat that one may be able to do a little justice to those peculiarly human quickenings that characterize human life and thought. Especially when one comes to try to account for the existence of those ephemeral concerns that appear to distinguish human life from that of 'lesser' animals. For what stands out in human experiencing are moral/ethical and/or aesthetic concerns---not to mention even more primitive feelings of importance or interest. As for the question of the significance of yearnings for justice, it is very hard to believe that these feelings have emerged in human beings from accidents that somehow contribute an adaptive advantage to this evolving organism. It seems far easier to believe that when one moves up the spectrum of orderly forms of existence---from primitive organisms to the more sophisticated forms of human life---the more advanced become the relevant sensibilities the more they exhibit differences in kind in respect to vital capacities as well as differences in degree in respect to modes of physical organization.

But since there is no possibility of proving (or disproving) such claims as the above, the only course of action open to the natural philosopher is to attempt to become clearer about the meaning of good thinking. So let us briefly consider those investigations of mind---or better minding, since we are speaking here of a dynamic activity, not a static entity---that are pursued by that large company of allegedly rational scientists who believe it is possible to trace our wonderfully complicated streams of consciousness to purely physical events or functionings in material organs, or brains. It surely requires a good deal of faith in the ideology of scientism to believe that an examination of, for example, the pictures generated by various imaging devices (which record traces of physical events in brains) can tell us much about those invisible signs of 'quickness' that are usually referred to as 'insights' or 'intuitions.' Furthermore, if Nietzsche is right and a more just conception of rationality must recognize the existence of rational instincts, it is also necessary to take into account the possibility that instincts *tout court* refer to intertwined physical and mental entities which may be always evolving. That is, emergence perhaps ultimately

refers at bottom to self-guided if not planned realizations of novel possibilities which must be inherent in Nature---a situation that leads still further to tricky questions about what sort of creative agency(s) might be involved in such realizations. To cling to the orthodox Darwinian approach is, in short, merely to remain content with reductive 'explanations' that simply dismiss a good deal of what makes life and thought interesting.

So without needing to pursue the matter much further, one might begin to wonder at this point that the matter requires bringing in not only rational but aesthetic and moral/ethical instincts, not to mention an instinct for right judging. Indeed, the latter would seem to supervene over all the others. And what else but the word 'instinct' could form the kernel of an adequate response to Nietzsche's central question of philosophy: '[W]here could a means of implanting the power of judgement be found?' Were it not for the tyrannical gate-keeper of Darwinism, it might generally be recognized that one of the more astounding facts of human existence is that Nature has evolved an organism with potentially creative-critical world-altering powers of minding that cry out for a nuanced story centered not on adaptation for the sake of survival but rather on every organism's capacity for judging its own peculiar situation rightly. And indeed with the help of marvellously astute, albeit fitful, insights, at least in the case of the human organism. For the undoubted complexity of human existence would surely have long since overwhelmed this complex animal were it not for its remarkable capacity to balance justly a shifting plurality of competing as well as cooperating concerns.

In respect to learning how to live, then, it seems that each infant brings into the world a compendium of potential capacities which may contain the seeds of future concerns, seeds that are fated to remain dormant in the absence of proper cultivation. The most important of these seeds, I have suggested, are the latent powers of imagination that may well be indispensable for a proper cultivation of the powers of judgement. For this reason alone, the human animal surely deserves to be distinguished in kind from the so-called 'lower' animals (since each type of animal life manifests its own peculiar concerns). In which case, it would be merely arbitrary to deny out of hand that the complexity of human life calls for a special philosophy of concern. The real difficulty in framing such a philosophy may thus revolve about how to educate the 'free spirits' whose chief philosophical goal would no longer be conceived in the terms of the traditional philosophical quest for pure, self-subsistent knowledge or truth---since it appears that the idea of 'truth' ought now to be rethought so as to leave plenty of room for the intervention of the powers of

imagination and judgement.¹³

5. HOW MIGHT ONE THINK JUSTLY ABOUT NATURE?

So let us make one further attempt to sketch a picture of Nature, one that depicts a great variety of sentient organisms immersed in a complex, dynamic flux of interacting concerns. Each organism that exhibits any sort of quickness can be conceived as forever in process of attempting to dynamically and justly balance all the various influences that stream into it and away from it in every direction, as it were. Thus the idea of Nature, far from eliciting a dead or insentient 'something,' elicits the image of a living, breathing, vulnerable mortal being. It is in respect to such a cosmic image that one can speak intelligibly about the emergence of an intermittently just, frequently perverse, often fraudulently rational homo sapiens. Our dire situation, in other words, may simply represent the last act of a tragedy that seems bound to end in something more dreadful than tears, at least if those who either deny or ignore the warnings implicit in the notion of climate change, not to mention the avalanche of environmental degradations perpetrated by rational 'man,' continue to uphold the nihilistic attitudes which both Nietzsche and history tell us are endemic to the thinking of the moderns.

On the other hand, since the rough picture sketched above evokes an ongoing drama populated by more or less artful dancers who move and have their being in only more or less harmonious and justly balanced networks of interlocking concerns, hope is not futile. Whatever might promise a radical readjustment of 'normal' modes of living and thinking can also encourage movements of genuine reform. For each dancer can be viewed as a sentient, independent individual who is free to exercise his/her own peculiar complement of latent powers. Thus while it may no longer be possible to speak unqualifiedly of a pre-determined order of nature, this idea is not entirely vacuous. But it may refer at bottom only to temporary reconciliations in processes of world-making that could be just as prone to going wrong as right.¹⁴

That is, evolution in this view is conceivably just as capable of regression as progression, so it might be helpful to pause and survey some of the more salient aspects of the nihilism (or regressive forces) in which we now find ourselves immersed. It is first worth noting that what stands out for Nietzsche is also that which strikes

¹³ '[T]ruth...has its roots in justice.' *Untimely Meditations*, p. 89. And so does reality, one can argue, since the notion of justice is elicited by the general problem of how to conceive the integration of the products of the operations of all the faculties involved in the actual processes of making sense. See Chapter 7 of my *Process, Reality, and the Power of Symbols*.

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion of this image of the cosmos, see my *Process, Reality, and the Power of Symbols*.

Arendt as especially significant, for he notes the haste with which 'everyone [is] in flight from himself,' thereby suggesting that most of us fear nothing so much as having the 'leisure to stop and think.'¹⁵ But Nietzsche also lends support to Arendt's optimistic hint that thinking can reasonably hope to be called good if it stops long enough to awaken the dormant moral and/or ethical instincts which every human being is borne with. She thus indicates that by reflecting hard and deeply enough on the provenance of instincts one might also learn how to develop more humane ways of thinking and living.

This problem being also one of Nietzsche's chief concerns, he can be understood as maintaining that to become more humane does not mean learning how to become more in tune with what other human beings take to be normal. More profoundly, he suggests that if the human animal is first viewed as part and parcel of a Nature which is always in process of becoming, the human being must also be viewed as in a continual state of becoming. That is to say, what motivates human becomings must be so conceived as to accord with the larger process of world-becoming. Which means that to become a humane human being is to become more than just the superior animal in a position of dominance over all other animals; it is to acknowledge that one must accept a certain specifically human responsibility in what Nietzsche calls a 'project of becoming.'

The point is an invitation to ponder more deeply the implications of Nietzsche's belief that philosophy can help engender cultural physicians who can show the way to a better future. That is, it is essential to pause to ask what 'better' could possibly mean. Why, one might ask, has Nature gone to so much trouble to create all kinds of marvellous, embodied forms of sentience if not for the sake of some grand cosmic project which is reflected in the evolution of increasingly subtle forms of sensibility. Nietzsche in fact evokes a cosmic Will to Power that is responsible for at least spawning the vast array of different embodied little 'wills to power' that manifest themselves in a great variety of quicknesses in the world. It is thus not inconceivable that all forms of life and thought can be endowed with a certain cosmic significance inasmuch as no little will to power can be effective in making sense of its um-Welt unless its own world-making powers illustrate an instinctive need to develop its relevant potentialities.

The situation, in short, underscores at the very least the need for an in-depth metaphysical account of what is actually going on in a world that is continually renewing itself while evolving ever more sophisticated forms of sentience. Such an

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge Un. Press, 1997), p. 158.

inquiry must surely include a story about what it means to become human, a process that I am suggesting may reflect the above mentioned teleological dimension of the naturing of Nature. Indeed, Nietzsche when explicitly speaks of Nature's 'redeeming project'---thereby suggesting a non-trivial reason for evolution---life is herewith decoupled from the simplistic modern line of thought that reduces the meaning of life to the mere preservation of life for its own sake. That is to say, Nature may have created in the human being much more than (to adapt King Lear) a materially unaccommodated 'bare, forked creature' for it has also been endowed by Nature with a number of latent capacities or faculties that bear witness to a great variety of impractical concerns. Indeed, Nature is pressing towards a 'final and supreme becoming-human,' Nietzsche suggests, in order to counter its coldness, cruelty, and indifference to Life. Perhaps he himself can be instanced as a prime example of a truly concerned human organism that has cultivated its latent faculties to the point of being able to engage effectively in a cosmic 'project of redemption'---by taking up arms against nihilistic doctrines that in one way or another put into question not only the value of life but also the meaning of existence.¹⁶

Be this as it may, Nietzsche's reflections on the 'man of redemption' bring out the need for a viable natural philosophy that might be able to do justice to the perennial and highly controversial question of the true nature of the relations that evidently obtain between minds and Nature. Or better mindings and nature-culture. For it may well be one of the more tragic aspects of the moderns' treatment of these fundamental relations that their elucidation has been handed over to self-styled naturalists who are the least disposed of modern philosophers to ask the *ur*-question, 'What is Nature?' They prefer to either dismiss metaphysical speculations *tout court* as irrational, if not nonsense; or to make science itself into a metaphysics. But the moderns, I am claiming, have only succeeded in showing that scientists do not in general (with some notable exceptions) make good metaphysicians.

So let us grant for the moment that there are good reasons to think metaphysics is as unavoidable as the need to accept the nonmodern epistemological dictum that no sharp boundary can be drawn between the material and the immaterial, the physical and the mental, the conscious and the unconscious, etc. Beginning thus in the intersection of the natural and the cultural, a primary concern of the nonmodern (or truly modern) 'naturalist' is how best to rethink all these fundamental themes without creating artificial divisions separating them. I have suggested that Nietzsche has contributed importantly to the project of the framing of thoroughgoing nonmodern naturalism. Others can of course be cited in this particular regard. A. N. Whitehead,

¹⁶ See "Schopenhauer as Educator," *Untimely Meditations*, pp. 157-79.

for instance, stands out as having constructed an essentially nonmodern, comprehensive process-oriented metaphysics that depicts a self-creative Nature in which concern can be cited as playing a key if usually silent role.¹⁷ But Whitehead's current invisibility in main-stream philosophy also shows that it may be a long while before the moderns escape from the strictures of orthodox scientific naturalists who have suppressed the necessity of metaphysical speculations on account of the allegedly superior rationality of systematic science. They therefore accord more importance to the dead structures of abstract thought than to the deliverances of actual or concrete experiencing, whereas it is the latter that we want to know most about.¹⁸

The trouble is that a full recovery from the modern choke-hold on how we think about life and thought would seem to require nothing less than the birth of a global will/desire for justice. For I am not saying that modern scientists have failed to provide natural philosophers with important knowledge of Nature. It is just that so many leading scientists are prone to adopt a self-serving, if not completely impoverished, concept of metaphysical reasoning. The irony is that they thereby do an injustice to their own notable achievements, for scientific expertise *tout court* bears witness to a special knack for conducting detailed investigations under certain specified conditions.¹⁹

In other words, scientists can be likened to patient and conscientious detectives who assiduously search for clues (for they know not exactly what) within circumscribed crime scenes. This circumstance no doubt accounts in part for the understandable uncertainty of the laity in respect to many scientific pronouncements, for these can be as weird, far-fetched, and counter-intuitive as they tend to be confidently promulgated as highly rational. Hence perhaps an instinctive reluctance to take to heart the multifarious unproven implications of 'climate change,' which affect not only what we take to be normal in living but also what we take to be common sense in thinking. Yet every claim for the 'truth' or 'reasonableness' of some scientifically established phenomenon must be grounded in some way---and what means could be more trustworthy than a careful balancing of an immense body of selected forms of evidence that have been slowly accumulated from many different

¹⁷ It is thus highly pertinent to this discussion that Whitehead refers to his 'philosophy of organism' in some places as a 'philosophy of concern,' a consideration that has in fact influenced much of the above discussion.

¹⁸ The modern, semi-mystical preference for highly mathematized cosmological stories, such as the Big Bang theory, is a prime example of this tendency to privilege high abstractions; indeed, it seems the higher the better.

¹⁹ Thus Darwin himself is justly praised for his detailed studies in biology which helped establish evolution as a virtual certainty.

areas of specialized inquiry?

6. SO WHAT MIGHT A VITALISTIC PHILOSOPHY OF CONCERN LOOK LIKE?

All the above considerations point up one tentative answer to the question raised at the outset---whether the moderns are in a fit state to educate the sort of cultural physicians that Nietzsche calls for. His musings indicate that a viable, globally effective, philosophy of concern needs to be first grounded in a vitalistic metaphysics which must be essentially nonmodern. So hope for immediate improvement is inescapably fragile, if only because of the tendency of the moderns to persist in misconstruing the meaning of metaphysics.

To surmount the tyrannical strictures of a self-policing collective mentality, I am claiming, nothing less than a complete overhaul of the mythological underpinnings of this benighted culture is needed. This may conceivably open up a space for the birth of a mythology of concern, for this is unlikely to spring spontaneously and phoenix-like from the ashes of a self-immolating one. As Frye puts the point, `spontaneous generation is no more credible in culture than it is in biology.²⁰ On the other hand, if emergence cannot be understood without eliciting the unpredictable intervention of some sort of creative agency(s), this consideration may recede under a closer look at the damage done by the neo-Darwinian theory of evolution to the collective consciousness. Once this theory is finally deprived of its coercive powers, it is possible that a space will open up for free spirits to entertain a new and healthier mythology which may emerge just as `spontaneously' as any other aspect of an evolving nature-culture. After all, if consciousness once gradually emerged from unconsciousness, and thus began its long and tortuous ascent to self-consciousness, it is not that hard to think that new, more just ways of reconciling the material and the immaterial sides thinking may even now be in process of emerging, if only here and there.²¹

But such a mythology is unlikely to take firm root unless a fertile ground has already been prepared for it. There are, in short, many reasons to think this is unlikely to happen overnight. Nietzsche provides a list of some of them; a list which is just as, if not even more, applicable to our own hard times:

The sciences, pursued without any restraint and in a spirit of the blindest *laissez-faire*, are shattering and dissolving all firmly held belief; the educated classes and

²⁰*The Modern Century*, p. 26.

²¹ There are in fact some hopeful signs of a positive development in the spontaneous rebellion that is usually referred to as the OWS movement, which has echoes in many other countries in the sense that all of them are notable not for any political demand but rather for a general concern for justice.

states are being swept along by a hugely contemptible money economy. The world has never been more worldly, never poorer in love and goodness. The educated classes are no longer lighthouses or refuges in the midst of this turmoil of secularization; they themselves grow daily more restless, thoughtless and loveless. Everything, contemporary art and science included, serves the coming barbarism. The cultured man has degenerated to the greatest enemy of culture, for he wants lyingly to deny the existence of the universal sickness and thus obstructs the physicians.²²

But by lending support to all those who believe that it is possible to distinguish human animality from mere animality, Nietzsche not only indicates the falsity of the Darwinian dogma, that Nature is 'red in tooth and claw.' He helps open up a space not only for rational but also moral, ethical, and aesthetic instincts. But it will be no simple task to shift dominant modes of thought onto this new plane of concerns. To this end, Nietzsche only proffers a few very important hints. He calls in particular for a renunciation of the 'conceptual idolatry' that prevails throughout a good deal of modern philosophy. Here he perhaps puts his finger on what perhaps ought to be the primary epistemological concern of anyone who thinks that the modern tendency to believe that modern science is capable of doing justice to the quest to understand the roots of good thinking is simply wrong. For these roots may lie in a hidden region of awareness that can only be reached indirectly with the help of a suitable imagery.

More specifically, when Nietzsche surveys the long history of the search for truth and wisdom in philosophy he sees only '[a] movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms.' He thereby indicates that the most primordial acts of thinking take place not in the realm of the conceptual but rather in the realm of the imaginal. The implication for imaging the task of philosophy itself is thus immense, since the guarantor of a proper philosophical dialectic turns out to be not logic but rather a hidden capacity in human minding which is usually referred to as intuitive. Or should one say a more or less well-developed faculty of imagination that may on occasion produce the insights that are the real rewards for stopping to think?

One must in any event first abandon the reductive view that good reasoning in philosophy refers to rigorous and/or systematic method for achieving clear and definite understandings. There will never be found a means to establish a secure, systematic dialectic freed from debatable choices of word-symbols. The real difficulty in doing philosophy turns out to be how to choose an appropriate figurative language that might be able to do justice to human experiencing *tout court*. Such a language must be conducive, I have in effect been arguing, to a form of non-systematic

²² Ibid. pp.148-9.

reasoning capable of taking seriously some very large questions; such as 'What is a Good Metaphysics?'---a question that, as Nietzsche indicates, includes, if it does not translate into, 'What is a Good Metaphorics? The point is that not any sort of figurative language will do if the overall aim of philosophical reasoning is to achieve the greatest justice possible under current exigencies, for it is not as though philosophy has arrived at a point where it can abandon the notion of truth entirely.

7. PHILOSOPHY AS CLOSE KIN TO POETRY

The great difficulty in addressing that *ur*-question of philosophy, 'What is a Good Metaphysics?' can perhaps be most clearly seen in the swarm of questions that hover about the problem of how to give a just account of how sense is actually made. This consideration alone indicates that 'experimentation' or 'exploration' ought to be the watchwords of a truly modern (or nonmodern) philosophy. Acutely aware of this crucial consideration, Gilles Deleuze elicits an image of the philosopher as an intrepid explorer in a vast domain which might be called the 'problematic of sense.'²³ Since ever trickier questions keep springing out of the ground at the very feet of the explorer---like rhizomes, to use one of his favorite metaphors---he/she cannot even be sure how best to enter what might be called (to borrow from Latour) the 'Middle Kingdom' of problems and questions.²⁴

But since controversy is bound to forever haunt philosophical discourse, it is not too surprising that Deleuze describes a philosopher as a kind of guerilla fighter who is always at war---especially with himself. For even the most cautious thinker is prone to err not only on account of being susceptible to what he calls the three common 'misadventures of thought'---the 'terrible Trinity' of madness, malevolence, and stupidity. Nor can the most conscientious thinker confidently claim to be possessed of a pure good will and an upright thought.

All told, then, Deleuze indicates that good reasoning requires a certain artfulness---which involves acquiring a certain expertise in identifying problems and framing questions. He thus points up the centrality of the problem of learning in philosophy. In his view, an apprentice philosopher is obliged to engage at once with the problem of learning how to learn, which is hardly a simple matter since according to him good learning takes place in the unconscious. If this is true (and every new-born infant

²³ Gilles Deleuze (1968), *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). '[T]he use of the word 'problematic' as a substantive seems to us an indispensable neologism' (p. 323).

²⁴ The 'field of nonmodern worlds is the Middle Kingdom, as vast as China and as little known.' *We Have Never Been Modern*, p. 48.

bears witness to its universality) he herewith brings to the forefront of the concerns of nonmodern philosophy the question whether or not any given approach is actually conducive to good learning. That this is not the case with a good deal of modern philosophy follows if it has indeed propagated, as Deleuze holds, a 'dogmatic image of thought' that effectively 'crushes' the essence of thought---which is freedom of movement. This dogmatic image accounts in his view for the modern tendency to confine serious thinking to the static 'world of representation'---where the creative powers of minding are stifled by what amounts to an anti-rational orthodoxy.

Hence if Nietzsche is right and the truly 'free spirits' of philosophy are those who have learned how to move freely in the realm of the imaginal, to the extent that modern philosophers have submitted to the dogmatic image of thought they actually promote anti-philosophy. The plain and simple truth is that any problem that is deemed of interest and/or importance cannot decide upon its own worth. Since this includes the problem of how best to image the task of philosophy itself, there is nothing to prevent anyone from pursuing Nietzsche's view that philosophy is mainly concerned with a 'movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms.' Indeed, Deleuze bears this out since he shows in effect that the task of philosophy cannot even be described without enlisting some appropriate trope.

At the moment, however, it must suffice to note that, if only on account of the vast extent of the problematic of sense, there is no way to settle this matter conclusively. So let us just presuppose that philosophy is both doable and worth doing. Furthermore, to assume that it exemplifies 'a movable feast' of imaginative insights, perspicacious images, and astute intuitions is to assume that at least some of them have the capacity to enliven our understandings. But how could such re-vitalizing movements of thought occur, let alone retain a foothold in thought, without some reliable means of confirmation? And what else could these be if not (as in the domain of art) feelings of rightness? The trouble is that to acknowledge this much is to find oneself facing the question of how to include such ephemera in a viable metaphysics of concern. There seems, in short, no possibility whatever of delimiting the boundaries of philosophical inquiry. If this is so, philosophy needs to be viewed as close kin to any other literary endeavor which involves delicate and crucial decisions in respect to the suitability of the imagery or figurative language that is chosen for illuminating the matter at hand.

To do philosophy, in other words, is to engage in the production of a literary form that bears a close affinity to the freely imagined but affectively controlled creations of fictional or poetic writers. It is thus highly significant that, as Frye observes, all literary forms are constructs of the imagination. The importance of this consideration for understanding philosophy's role in the making of culture is that literary creations 'tell

us things about human life that we don't get in any other way.¹²⁵ So it must be with good philosophy, even if it is obliged to remain prosaically discursive in its actual presentations. Thus there is not such a great distance between philosophy and poetry as logically rigorous reasoners would like us to think. While poets are free to write in any way that they feel can do justice to whatever has commanded their immediate attention, philosophers are more constrained in their quest for justice. Nonetheless, if philosophy is but one among many literary forms, and if every literary form is, as Frye holds, 'descended from and related to other literary forms,' the persistent positivistic dream of divorcing philosophy completely from poetry is an anti-philosophical delusion.

In sum, then, if good philosophy presupposes a good metaphysics (or better, metaphors), the choice of an appropriate figurative language is crucial since it is what ultimately provides for consistency and coherence. The upshot is that if a philosopher is really serious about acquiring a better understanding of understanding itself, he/she cannot help but invest a certain faith in the cognitive powers of word-symbols. Such a faith does not in fact pose a problem for avid readers of 'great' books who are not seeking merely for entertainment. Nietzsche can thus be read as advising the apprentice philosopher to begin his/her studies in the world of art. Indeed, here one can perhaps best see how the philosopher's yearning for truth (or better justice) is close kin to the artist-poet's hope to find just the right sort of expressions of 'togetherness' that a good imagery shows it can provide when it induces the impression of connecting the hitherto unconnected.

It follows that another of Deleuze's proposed images for the task of philosophy is especially apt. He likens the history of philosophy to a kind of *collage* in painting. This implies that the doing of philosophy is like trying to contribute something of artistic value to a vast collage of ideas and images---whose provenance does not lie solely in the writings of other philosophers. Or to borrow Nietzsche's language, philosophy *tout court* bespeaks an adventurous willingness to sample widely from a movable feast---comprised of images, insights, and intuitions. Which involves keeping in mind of course that some apparently enticing tidbits can be poisonous. The upshot is that a good philosophical education, as Nietzsche confirms, can only be one that is able to balance a thinker's creative-critical powers which are always in need of further development.

But since the sweep of great art, and especially great literature, is immense, the philosopher in search of good sense can only decide in the end on the value of the treasures he/she might find in the Middle Kingdom using an artful (i.e.,

²⁵ Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Concord, Ont.: House of Anansi Press, 1993), p. 53.

creative/critical) dialectic. Here the final test of `truth' must be `whatever quickens the heart.'²⁶ Which is hardly surprising if philosophy can only ever be a temporary and provisional, ideally just and health producing, mythopoeic form of story-telling.²⁷ So although venturing into the Middle Kingdom with the aim of bringing back treasures is far from being a pastime for idle intellectuals, it is as risky a business as it is adventurous. Hence the would-be philosopher-therapist can only hope to assist in the engendering of a collective will/desire to stave off collapse into mob rule. For in the end there is nothing anyone can do, as Frye observes, except `to try to educate a minority that will stand out against it.'²⁸

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²⁶ The phrase is borrowed from a response of Chris Marker's to the question of what guided his editing of the vast quantity of film he exposed in making his documentaries.

²⁷ As Frye puts it, a mythology `forms a body of major premises which is superior in authority to scholarship and art.' See *The Modern Century*, p. 117.

²⁸ *The Educated Imagination*, p. 55.