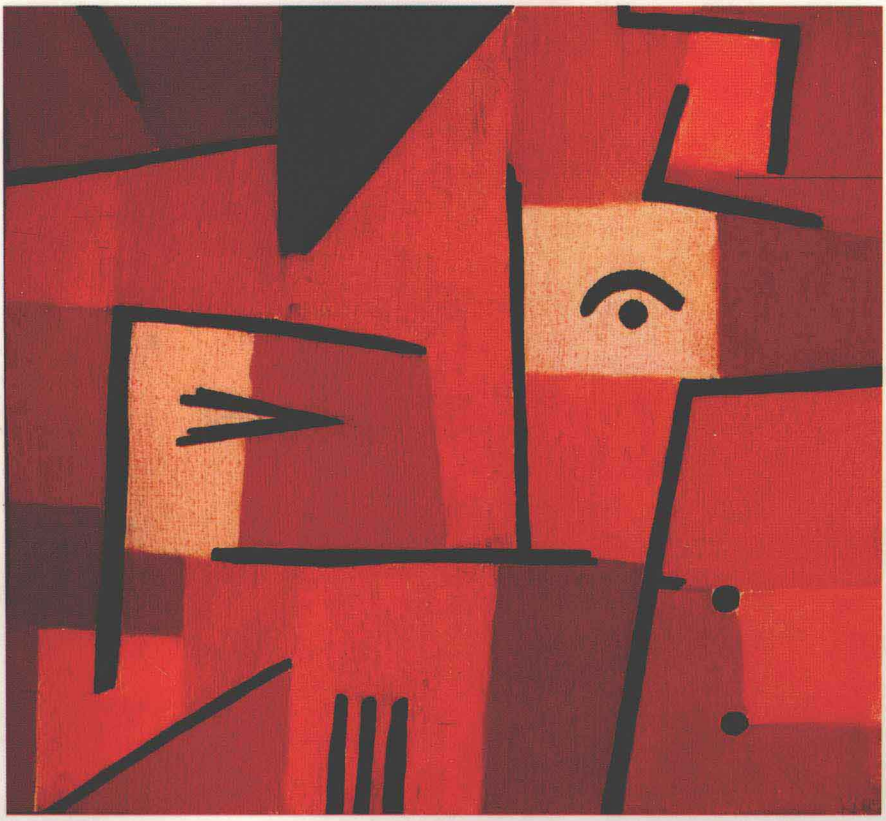
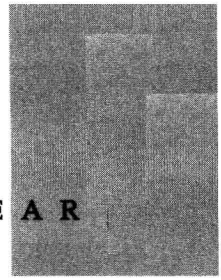
JONATHAN LEAR

# Open Minded

## WORKING OUT THE LOGIC OF THE SOUL





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## *Working Out the Logic of the Soul*

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# Contents


1. Preface: The King and I *1*
2. On Killing Freud (Again) *16*
3. Knowingness and Abandonment: An Oedipus for Our Time *33*
4. An Interpretation of Transference *56*
5. Restlessness, Phantasy, and the Concept of Mind *80*
6. The Introduction of Eros: Reflections on the Work of Hans Loewald *123*
7. Eros and Unknowing: The Psychoanalytic Significance of Plato's *Symposium* *148*
8. Testing the Limits: The Place of Tragedy in Aristotle's Ethics *167*
9. Catharsis *191*
10. Inside and outside the *Republic* *219*
11. Transcendental Anthropology *247*
12. The Disappearing "We" *282*

Notes *303*

Acknowledgments *341*

Index *343*

✥ THIS DISCUSSION IS NOT ABOUT ANY CHANCE QUESTION, BUT ABOUT THE WAY ONE SHOULD LIVE.

Socrates in the *Republic*

✥ IT IS OWING TO THEIR WONDER THAT PEOPLE BOTH NOW BEGIN AND AT FIRST BEGAN TO PHILOSOPHIZE.

Aristotle, *Metaphysics*

✥ AND WITH THE OLD, INTERMITTENT CADDISHNESS WHICH REAPPEARED IN HIM WHEN HE WAS NO LONGER UNHAPPY AND HIS MORAL STANDARDS DROPPED ACCORDINGLY, HE EXCLAIMED TO HIMSELF: "TO THINK THAT I'VE WASTED YEARS OF MY LIFE, THAT I'VE LONGED TO DIE, THAT I'VE EXPERIENCED MY GREATEST LOVE, FOR A WOMAN WHO DIDN'T APPEAL TO ME, WHO WASN'T EVEN MY TYPE!"

Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*

✥ SHE KNOWS THERE'S NO SUCCESS LIKE FAILURE, AND THAT FAILURE'S NO SUCCESS AT ALL.

Bob Dylan, "Love minus Zero/No Limit"

CHAPTER 1

# Preface: The King and I

✣ I AM ALWAYS DISAPPOINTED WHEN A BOOK LACKS A PREFACE: IT IS LIKE ARRIVING AT SOMEONE'S HOUSE FOR DINNER, AND BEING CONDUCTED STRAIGHT INTO THE DINING-ROOM.

Michael Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language*

From childhood, I was brought into a peculiar ritual which I did not understand. Neither did anyone else. As far as I can remember, it began on the first day of real school, first grade. Leaning against the edge of her desk, the teacher, Mrs. Gilmette, explained that she was going to assign each of us our own desks for the year. She went in alphabetical order, and when she got to me she said, "Are you related to the king?" Obviously, I had no idea what she was talking about. But the idea that I might somehow be related to a king was placed in my mind when I was six years old. Perhaps that single grain of phantasy-sand would have been enough for my imagination to work over and make into a pearl; or perhaps I would have forgotten all about it. I wouldn't know: *every year,* on the first day of school, the teacher would ask if I were related to the king. It is hard to describe the bored fascination this question would arouse. On the one hand, I'd inwardly groan: here we go again. And I'd realize that in the intervening year I had done nothing to find out who this king was. On the other hand, as the years passed, I came to think that

the answer to this question had something to do with me. This was my special meaning. It would tell me who I was. But I didn't know what this meaning meant.

As a young man I learned that I was in fact related to a King Lear. My father's uncle Eli was a con man; and in Leavenworth Prison, where he died, the other inmates knew him as "King." According to family lore, my father was on his way to the Plaza Hotel to meet my mother's parents to ask for her hand in marriage when he glimpsed the tabloid headline "Toy-Gun Bandit Arrested!" If the headline-writers had only known, it could have said, "King in Dungeon!" I have often tried to imagine my father—then a young doctor, but from a humble Jewish home—trying to explain to these wealthy, Jewish-proper-Bostonian parents-in-law-to-be that yes, he was related to royalty, but not *quite* in the way they might imagine. This vignette set my mind moving toward crime. Two generations above me, on my father's side, there was a significant strain of sociopathy running through the family. In my father's generation there was enormous worldly success. Perhaps this represented a decline! Perhaps we were descended from a great line of crooks! This made some intuitive sense to me, for I could recognize a touch of larceny in my soul. And then I read Isaac Babel's "The King," in his *Odessa Stories,* a wonderful tale of a Russian-Jewish King of Crime—and for a passing moment I thought I had the answer. My family reputedly comes from Odessa. The King was my great, great . . . grandfather, a Jewish Moriarity, a Karla or Macavity—and from that golden age we have fallen into the bronze. Whether I considered my toy-gun-bandit uncle or my successful television-producer cousin, it was two sides of the same bronze coin. The mantle of truly great criminality had passed out of our family. The Great Violators of established norms were no longer to be found among the Lears. Our only choice now was between petty criminality and vast legitimate success. It didn't seem fair. How had we gone wrong?

Though I have played with this idea for years, and it does have some resonance for me, it has never had that convincing ring of truth. Neither did my first approaches to Shakespeare's King Lear. I know in the center of my soul that I would understand what Cordelia was saying to me and I

would love her for it. I also know absolutely that, even were I at the center of that drama, I would find Regan and Goneril's flattery as repellent as I do from the audience. Whatever my many faults, I simply do not have Lear's insecurity and vanity. Try as I might, I couldn't identify with him. This is a shame, because the play moves me deeply: I consider it one of a handful of the very best things a human being has ever made. And yet, I couldn't get from there to *being* King Lear. There things lay fallow for years. None of this was particularly pressing: it was just an occasional fancy which would not allow itself to be completely forgotten.

And then one night, during the time I was in analysis, I woke up with a start and realized I had it: I am Cordelia! I *am* related to the King! He's my father! I love him dearly, and he just doesn't get it. To identify with Cordelia is to want to be blunt, to avoid embellishment, flattery, or hypocrisy—*and to want to be loved for doing just that.* This is not a set of desires which get satisfied often. By and large, people prefer to be flattered. They find it hard to recognize love in a blunt appraisal; and they find it even harder to reciprocate such love. Cordelia's strategy is not the route to massive popularity. Nevertheless, I have no choice: I *am* Cordelia. Why do I tell you this? Because I want to say that there is something dead in the profession of psychoanalysis and something dead in the profession of philosophy—and I want to be loved for saying so. This book is above all a response to a sense of deadness: it is an attempt to bring some life into two activities which lie at the heart of our humanity.

It has crossed my mind to wonder whether it isn't the point of all professions—of medicine and law as much as of philosophy and psychoanalysis—to instill deadness. Of course, the conscious self-image of every profession is that it is there to maintain high standards. And there must be *some* truth in this image. But what does this image cover over? Don't standards themselves impose a kind of rigidity on a practice? Doesn't a professional set of standards enable the profession to forget about standards? That is, it enables the profession to stop thinking critically about how it ought to go on precisely because the standards present themselves as having already answered the question. The profession can then act as though it *already knows* what high standards are. This is a form of dead-

ness. Now for certain forms of professional activity, this is all right. Indeed, it is what we want. We do not want our dentists, for example, to be too creative in their activity. We want there to be a relatively fixed set of norms of dental hygiene, and we want our dentists to adhere to those norms rigidly, over and over again. We want our dentists to be dead!

But philosophy and psychoanalysis are activities which resist professionalization in this sense. Perhaps this is because they share the same fundamental question, posed by Socrates: in what way should one live?[1] In psychoanalysis, the accent is more on the first person singular—How shall *I* live? in philosophy, on the first person plural—How shall *we* go on? But as anyone who has engaged in either activity knows, you cannot investigate I without addressing We, and vice versa. For Socrates, human living consists in living openly with this question. And any fixed set of norms—whether the standards of a profession or the set morality of a culture—presents itself as having already answered the question. That is, the norms try to shut down the question of how to live by giving a packaged answer. Whatever other functions they may have, norms often serve as a defense against living openly with the fundamental question. For Socrates, this is an evasion of life. This is why, for Socrates, the unexamined life is not worth living: it is not a form of living, but a form of deadness. To live openly with the fundamental question is to avoid assuming that there are any fixed answers which are already given. It is, above all, to avoid all forms of "knowingness."

No wonder Socrates was put to death! The citizens of Athens decided by democratic vote that in him and around him there was too much living going on for them to tolerate. The way they put it was that Socrates was corrupting the youth and introducing new gods. That's how living openly looks to a group which is tenaciously clinging to a desiccated form of life. And Socrates, for his part, did nothing to help the Athenians analyze their transference-distortion. Indeed, he seems to have invited and provoked the transference-storm which resulted in his death.

In the calmer worlds of the professions, symbolic murders go on all the time. How many times have I heard distinguished members of the philosophical profession say, for example, that Hegel and Heidegger are "not

*really* philosophers"! One well-known professor had on his office door a sign which read, "Just Say No to the History of Philosophy." The psychoanalytic profession, at least in America, is no better. For decades the curriculum committees of institutes affiliated with the American Psychoanalytic Association systematically excluded the work of such creative thinkers as the British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein and the French analyst Jacques Lacan. And the method of exclusion was the same, whether it was occurring in analysis or in philosophy. Some extreme or obscure statement would be pulled out of context, there would be a contemptuous shrugging of shoulders—"What could this possibly mean!" "Isn't that absurd!"—and that one statement or position would be used as an excuse to dismiss the entire corpus of work. Each profession thus worked actively to reassure itself that it was all right, indeed, one *ought,* to remain ignorant. All in the name of maintaining high standards.

And this type of facile dismissal seeps effortlessly into the culture. In countless conversations—at cocktail and dinner parties, not to mention the informal conversations which go on in professional settings, like the grand rounds of a psychiatry department or a conference of historians or philosophers, I will hear someone say, "But, of course, Freud has been completely discredited." There will be a tacit assent of the group, and then it will dawn on me that no one in the group has read a word of Freud. Already knowing that Freud is discredited gives the group permission to know nothing.

Psychoanalysis, Freud said, is an *impossible* profession.[2] So is philosophy. This is not a metaphor or a poetically paradoxical turn of phrase. It is literally true. And the impossibility is ultimately a matter of logic. For *the very idea* of a profession is that of a defensive structure, and it is part of *the very idea* of philosophy and psychoanalysis to be activities which undo such defenses. It is part of the logic of psychoanalysis and philosophy that they are forms of life committed to living openly—with truth, beauty, envy and hate, wonder, awe and dread. The idea of a profession of psychoanalysis or a profession of philosophy is thus a contradiction in terms. Or, to put it bluntly, there is no such idea. Before we began the inquiry, we might have thought we were thinking about something when we

tried to think about the profession of psychoanalysis or the profession of philosophy—we might have thought we had an idea in our heads. What we come to recognize is that there is no such idea and there couldn't be such an idea: there is really nothing we are thinking about.

But then, what are the American Psychoanalytic Association and the American Philosophical Association? Attempts to act on an illusion. An illusion, for Freud, is a belief, set of beliefs, or worldview caused by a wish rather than by perception of how the world is. These organizations spring from the wish to hold onto psychoanalysis and philosophy—and from the ensuing belief that one might do so by professionalizing them. I don't intend this as a criticism. Trying to act on an illusion can be among life's satisfying activities—just so long as one doesn't entirely lose one's sense of humor. One discovers philosophical or psychoanalytic activity, and *of course* one wants to try to preserve it and to pass it along. One has bumped into something fundamental, and one cannot bear the idea of its simply disappearing from the human scene. Erotically we strive for the immortality of these deeply valuable activities. And inevitably we face the vicissitudes of dogmatism. Dogma, belief: we want to pass on fundamental truths, and in our attempts to do so truth becomes rigid and dies. The only remedy I have found is to treat this as a comedy rather than a tragedy. At the end of the *Symposium*, Socrates enigmatically suggests that poets should be as good at writing comedy as they are at tragedy. And I suspect he meant that poets ought to be able to tell the same story both ways. (If one tries, as I do in Chapter 3, one *can* read Oedipus as farce.) I suppose one could shed tears that, really, it *is* impossible to preserve and pass on truth. Important insights die. Yet we contribute to that death if we lose the lighthearted sense that, indeed, we are engaged in an impossible profession.

Through a variety of life choices I won't bore you with, I found myself in my twenties in a tenured position at one of the world's great universities, the University of Cambridge. Though I adored being at Cambridge, the fact of tenure caused me anxiety rather than pleasure. And I have thought about that anxiety ever since. In America, the great East Coast universities think of themselves as modeled on Oxford and Cambridge—

but this is really a false-self presentation. In fact they are modeled on Heidelberg. In the German model, the older professor reigns and the younger academics work under him, often in servile submission, hoping that one day they too will be the senior. Tenure is the American-democratic form of a rite of passage which favors seniority. Oxford and Cambridge, by contrast, formed themselves around a phantasy of an ancient Greek ideal of homosexual love. In that world, what is best is to be the beautiful, brilliant young man. The older men, past their bloom, look with nostalgia, delight, admiration, and a touch of envy at their brilliant youngers. Read almost any biography of Keynes, Turing, Wittgenstein, Russell, Ramsey, and you will get some of this flavor.

It is in thinking about my anxiety that I came to realize that the American tenure system is a form of distraction. If I had had to spend the next decade or two worried about whether I would get tenure, I probably would have acted like so many assistant professors, obsessing about getting articles in the right journals, dealing with the issues which were currently fashionable in the profession, wondering what the professors in the department thought of me, and so on. And I might even have been seduced by the profession's self-image that this is all about maintaining high standards. As it was, with tenure out of the way, the only hurdle I seemed to face was the fact of my own death. It didn't seem to be all that far away. And I realized that before I died, I wanted to be in intimate touch with some of the world's great thinkers, with some of the deepest thoughts which humans have encountered. I wanted to think thoughts—and also to write something which mattered to me.

I set out to work my own way through the history of philosophy. I did this by teaching undergraduate courses on thinkers I barely knew—one of the best ways of learning about them—by talking endlessly to colleagues, and by reading voraciously. I wanted to know: in the world of ideas, *where are we?* And what I seemed to discover was not so much an answer to that question, as a mystery in its own right: the very idea of psychology seemed to have gone missing. The most philosophical formulation of this disappearance is expressed by Hegel. For him, the account of human beings in the Western philosophical tradition had become too

"abstract," too formal, to yield anything substantive about who we are. If we want to learn anything valuable about the human condition, Hegel argued, philosophy has to become more "concrete." But how can philosophy become more "concrete" without collapsing into an empirical discipline, like anthropology or empirical psychology? Can philosophy become "concrete" without itself disappearing? And if all that is left is, say, empirical psychology, has psychology itself survived? Plato's answer would be "of course not." And he is not alone. Everyone has his or her own version of "If I had a dime for every time . . . , I'd be rich." My version is, ". . . for every time a student came to my office hours and said, 'I tried taking a course in psychology, but it didn't seem to be about *psychology.*'" The students can never clearly articulate their sense of *what* is missing, but they are filled with longing.

This is not in any way meant to criticize the valuable work in cognitive science, neuroscience, statistical research which goes on in the best psychology departments. It is only to say that a certain activity which Plato called "giving a logos of the psyche" has all but disappeared. An everyday way of rendering the Greek is "working out the logic of the soul." In the twentieth century it has become difficult to understand this phrase because the remarkable advances in formal logic since 1879 have so colored our understanding of what logic is. We lose sight of Plato's project, laid out so beautifully in the *Republic,* of giving a *non*formal but rigorous, not-quite-empirical yet not nonempirical account of what it is to be human. Plato, one might say, is working out *the very idea* of what it is to be minded as we are. And he does this in the light of Socrates' exemplification—a life spent showing—that one of the most important truths about us is that we have the capacity to be *open minded:* the capacity to live nondefensively with the question of how to live.

Human life in general is a study of why this capacity is not exercised: why open-mindedness is, for the most part, evaded, diminished, and attacked. Allow me to say something bold and without a shred of argument: one cannot understand the *Republic* until one can see the entire book as organized around the issue of how to avoid despair. Plato's solution is to introduce matter. If we come to understand ourselves as living in a world in which ideas are realized in matter, then we can hold onto

the belief that ideas themselves are good, while recognizing that human life in general—whether in individual psychology or in politics—is, by and large, a falling away from those ideas. Matter eventually loses form. Disappointment is built into the very fabric of who we are. But in disappointment there is hope, if not optimism, and thus the avoidance of despair.

I have spent the past twenty years not so much trying to answer the question "What is psychology?" as trying to recover a sense of what the question is. I was led, almost simultaneously, back to Plato and Aristotle, to Freud and psychoanalysis, and to Wittgenstein. It may surprise readers to learn that I consider this as being led in one direction. Of course, that psychoanalysis is a continuation of the Platonic tradition is itself hardly news. In the *Republic,* Plato basically invents psyche-analysis. He divides the psyche into three basic parts—and though Plato comes up with slightly different parts from Freud, the method of division they use is the same. For Plato, the appetitive part, consisting largely of drives for sex and food, is more or less identical with Freud's id. Then there is a narcissistic component, concerned with pride, winning recognition from others, anger, humiliation, and shame. In this way, Plato reveals himself as much more concerned with the vicissitudes of narcissism than Freud was, at least at the beginning of his career. Finally, there is a part concerned with thinking and finding out the truth about the world. And Plato understood, perhaps better than anyone else has ever understood, that even this thoughtful attempt to understand one's world is basically an erotic engagement. It is for love of the world that we try to understand it. Again, Freud came upon this insight later in his career, when he reconceptualized and expanded the sex drive into eros. And he thanked "the divine Plato" for inspiration:

> In its origin, function and relation to sexual love, the eros of the philosopher Plato coincides exactly with the love-force, the libido of psychoanalysis.[3]
>
> . . . what psychoanalysis calls sexuality was by no means identical with the impulsion towards a union of the two sexes or towards producing a pleasurable sensation in the genitals; it had far more resemblance to the all-inclusive and all-embracing love of Plato's *Symposium.*[4]

Plato also invented the first sophisticated object-relations theory. He understood that the human psyche is in dynamic interaction with the cultural-political environment, and that both are fundamentally shaped by the movement of meanings from polis to psyche and back again. He works out one of the most insightful accounts of psychosocial degeneration ever formulated. Contemporary object-relations theorists, if they go back to Plato, will study his account of psychopathology with awe. For Plato, the influence of polis on psyche or of psyche on polis is largely unconscious.[5] And human life is, for the most part, lived in the midst of illusion. In Plato's famous image of the cave, we are, unbeknownst to ourselves, strapped to a wall and forced to watch the projections of images onto the opposite wall which we mistake not only for reality, but for ourselves.[6] We are, on this account, strangers to ourselves. But for Plato as for Freud, there is therapeutic potential in pushing hard at contradictions inherent in the illusions themselves. Every image is *a shadow,* a distortion of something bearing more reality than it. In focusing on the distortion we can painfully and slowly work our way toward what the distortion is a distortion of. Once again Plato plants the hope of avoiding despair.

Plato understands the power and shape of unconscious wishes, which he calls lawless unnecessary desires:

> Those that are awakened in sleep, when the rest of the soul—the rational, gentle, and ruling part—slumbers. Then the beastly and savage part, full of food and drink, casts off sleep and seeks to find a way to gratify itself. You know there is nothing it won't dare to do at such a time, free of all control by shame or reason. It doesn't shrink from trying to have sex with a mother, as it supposes, or with anyone else at all, whether man, god or beast. It will commit any foul murder, and there is no food it refuses to eat. In a word, it omits no act of folly or shamelessness.[7]

These desires are, Plato says, "probably present in everyone." In his diagnosis of tyrannical personality disorder, these lawless appetites come to dominate, turning waking life into a living nightmare and ushering in a disintegration of the soul. This is the first serious theoretical discussion of a person powerless to do anything other than act out his inner life.

Freud may have been more or less aware of these various influences upon him, but there is one thread running between him and Plato of which he was certainly unaware: that he, like Plato, was trying to work out a logic of the psyche. Freud could not see this because his self-image and ego-ideal are those of a working empirical scientist and medical doctor, perhaps one with cultural ambitions. Thus he is not well placed to see that his empirical research is not simply in the service of working out what, as a matter of fact, the human psyche is like, nor simply in the service of treating the psyche, but that it is also working out *what it is to be* a human psyche. So, for example, Freud doesn't just discover the fact of neurotic conflict; he lays before us the inevitable possibility of neurosis built into the very idea of a creature erotically bound to the world by different types of desires. Or, as I argue in Chapter 5, Freud did not just empirically discover the drives; he showed that the idea of drive is required for a minded creature, like us, who is embodied and working in an environment. There must be a place for, as Freud put it, a "demand made upon the mind for work."[8] In this way, Freud offers what I take to be the most textured answer we yet have to one of Socrates' most important "What is it?" questions: what is the human psyche? Freud also shows us, in the most vivid way, what it might be for philosophy to become "concrete."

BUT IF ONE CAN SEE psychoanalysis as placed broadly in the Platonic tradition, what possible relation can there be between Freud and Wittgenstein? After all, Wittgenstein's few explicit remarks about Freud tend to be quite skeptical. For example: "I have been going through Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* . . . and it has made me think how much this whole way of thinking wants combatting."[9] Wittgenstein is suspicious that there are no real constraints on what it is to get a psychoanalytic interpretation right, and thus that the correct interpretation ends up being anything Freud says it is. I do not intend here to defend Freud against the charge. Rather, I want to point out that if we stick with these explicit criticisms, we remain at the conscious surface. But if we look at what Freud

and Wittgenstein *are doing,* we can see deep, unconscious affinities between the two thinkers. Starting with Wittgenstein, the *Philosophical Investigations* is essentially an attempt to work through a certain illusion.

The *Investigations* begins with a myth of origins, Augustine's account of how he entered into language:

> When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out . . . Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my desires.

Wittgenstein's opening comment is:

> These words, it seems to me, give us a particular picture of the essence of human language. It is this: the individual words in language name objects—sentences are combinations of such names. In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.[10]

For "picture" read illusion. Reading Augustine's account, we find it so plausible and unexceptional that we think we are looking at something *obviously true.* What we do not understand, to put Wittgenstein's insight in psychoanalytic terms, is that we are being persuaded, not by obvious truth, but by the force of our own projective identifications. We are creatures who cannot help but create mythic accounts of how our mind works, of how we hook onto the world, of what reality is really like. We project this imaginative activity onto the world and then mistake it for "the way things really are." In this way, we systematically mistake a bit of ourselves, our imaginative activity, for the world.

This systematic mistaking we tend to call "philosophy." So, for example, we begin with what we might call this *core myth of meaning*—that individual words are names—a myth only implicit in Augustine, made explicit by Wittgenstein; a fantasy so seemingly innocuous that we are unaware that from it flows a theory of mind, meaning, and world. For if words are names, and if names stand for a meaning, then for me to be