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PHILOSOPHICAL TALES

■ JONATHAN RÉE ■



Philosophical Tales

An Essay on Philosophy and
Literature

JONATHAN RÉE

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I am grateful to the following for permission to reproduce pictures: for Figure 1 *The Chart of Hell* (1700l c15, plate 1) on page 70 and for Figure 3 *The Royal Pastime of Cupid* (Games Folder, John Johnson Collection) on pages 78–9, the Bodleian Library; for Figure 2 *Plan of the Road from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City* on pages 74–5, The Mansell Collection.

Jonathan Rée
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Introduction

The classics of philosophy contain some of the most skilful and ingenious writing in the world. But these literary beauties sometimes cause unease rather than rejoicing. Philosophers who cultivate them risk the condescension of their colleagues; and readers who take more than a passing interest are treated like people who are so charmed by the stamps on an envelope that they forget to read the letter inside.

Plato spoke of the ‘ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry’, and decreed that poets would be exiled from the ideal city, where philosophers would be kings.¹ From time to time, philosophers have attempted to conform with Plato’s prescription, hoping to express themselves so directly and so clearly that they would avoid the complications of poetry and style altogether: their ideal, presumably, would be to transfer their ideas straight onto paper, as if they were having their fingerprints taken.

Paradoxically, though, Plato was unashamedly inventive in

his own writing. He was, as Sidney noted in the 'Defence of Poetry', 'of all philosophers the most poetical';² and Shelley agreed, observing that with 'the truth and splendour of his imagery, and the melody of his language' Plato was 'essentially a poet'.³

But the truce between poetry and philosophy was tense, 'Plato versus Homer' was still 'the whole, authentic antagonism', according to Nietzsche;⁴ and Matthew Arnold, whilst acknowledging Plato as 'the poet among philosophers', hoped that – 'one day' – it would be possible to affirm that 'poetry is the reality, philosophy the illusion'.⁵

Antagonism to poetry has been enthusiastically maintained within twentieth-century philosophy. At one extreme, there have been reformers who hoped to refurbish philosophy completely, giving it a new start as an objective, cumulative, specialized, and professional discipline. These philosophers – principally the 'logical positivists' of the twenties and thirties – were so dismayed by what they considered to be lax intellectual standards amongst their predecessors that they even spurned the name 'philosophy'; as Rudolf Carnap emphasized at the time, '*we are not a philosophical school and . . . we put forward no philosophical theses whatsoever*'. Old-fashioned philosophy, or 'metaphysics', was, in Carnap's opinion, 'expressive' rather than 'representative'; it had 'no theoretical content' and was essentially a symptom of a psychic state, comparable to blushing, or stammering, or – to use Carnap's own example – 'lyrical verses'. Although poems had nothing to do with knowledge, they could, like other artistic activities, have a 'high value for personal as well as for social life'. Metaphysics, in contrast, was '*deceptive*, because 'a metaphysical proposition . . . – as distinguished from a lyrical verse – *seems* to have some [theoretical content], and by this not only is the reader deceived, but the metaphysician himself.' Metaphysics, in short, was a poetical counterfeit of science.⁶

The main target of Carnap's derision was his contemporary, Martin Heidegger, who responded to such attacks by affirming that science's pretensions to 'sobriety-of-mind and superiority' were 'laughable', since science itself depended on

metaphysics, though unconsciously. On the other hand, metaphysics too was chronically deceptive; it could offer no support for the sciences, since it dwelt in 'a groundless ground'. So although philosophy ranked far above the sciences – 'in a totally different realm and order' – it did not stand alone; poetry was at its side.⁷

Since the 1960s, Heidegger's conception of the bond between philosophy and poetry has been broadened by a group of philosophers and critics led by Jacques Derrida. They have subjected the philosophical classics to the kind of close literary attention which was formerly reserved for verse, demonstrating how they teem with metaphors, images and ambiguities – all the tricks of the poet's trade, in fact. They have concluded that this destroys philosophy's credentials as the supreme arbiter of ultimate demands, or even as a source of humbler kinds of knowledge; and some of them have suggested that, where it cannot be absorbed by imaginative literature, philosophy ought to be shelved with such obsolete curiosities as phrenology, astrology, or animal magnetism: for what is traditional philosophy, except poetry fraudulently masquerading as the senior partner of literature and science? Thus the extreme neo-Heideggerian 'deconstruction' of philosophy can turn into a recapitulation of Carnap's 'rejection of metaphysics' which, ironically, was originally intended as a rebuttal of Heidegger above all.

But philosophy need not be seen as a potentially obsolescent aspect of a high cultural tradition descending from Plato to the professional academic philosophers of the twentieth century. It can also be defined in terms of a special kind of experience, available to anyone, when you are alert to the sheer arbitrariness of the habits of thought and feeling which ordinarily get you from one day to the next.⁸ Religious thought gives particular attention to these numinal experiences, although they are equally open to atheistic interpretations, and have always been a main concern of philosophy as distinct from theology. They may not happen to you often, and Descartes, for instance, said that he could not think at this metaphysical

altitude for more than a few hours a year.⁹ Such moments do not involve a special kind of knowledge, so much as a special attitude to it: seriousness seasoned with frivolity and scepticism; or, in one word, irony.

The ideas of irony and philosophical experience will be my guide in the pages that follow: four chapters, in which I shall adopt a literary approach to philosophy, dwelling on its connections with story-telling as well as with poetry. Perhaps the ironic literary method of the philosophers will then stand out not as an unwitting betrayal or refutation of their vocation, but as a fulfilment of it: a tribute to philosophical experience, and an incitement to it too.

1

Descartes' comedy

According to a very old story, the 'modern age' began with Descartes creating a philosophy based exclusively on his own mental existence. '*Cogito ergo sum*', he said: 'I think therefore I am.' On this foundation – 'the *cogito*', as it is called for easy reference – Descartes is supposed to have raised a philosophy which takes private, individual minds for granted, and which then paints a mechanistic 'world-picture' to represent everything else. 'Here we finally reach home', as Hegel put it after surveying 2,000 years of philosophy leading up to Descartes, 'and like a mariner after a long voyage in a tempestuous sea, we can shout, "Land ho!"; for with Descartes the culture and thought of modern times really begin.' In particular, 'his *cogito* . . . established the mental sphere as distinct from matter,' and so 'the philosophy of modern times begins with the distinction contained in *cogito ergo sum*'. Hence the glories of the modern world: physical science and industrial technique; but hence, too, its shortcomings: individualism, shallowness, intellectualism,

and incapacity for feeling, for mystery, for art, for literature, for love, for life.

Or so the story goes. Clearly, Descartes is not just another individual thinker. He is an ancestor-myth, 'the father of modern philosophy'; and if he had not existed, he would surely have been invented. 'In order to do justice to his thoughts', says Hegel, 'we must grasp the necessity for his appearance.' Descartes' method is so typical of modernity, in fact, that it is 'without special interest'; and as for his philosophy as a whole, it is so familiar that 'there is very little to say about it'.¹ 'I've had enough of it', says Flaubert's Bouvard; 'this precious *cogito* bores me stiff.'²

The great promiser

Descartes was an ambitious and arrogant young man. He believed that, if he invested his talents properly, he would be able to create, as he put it in a letter of March 1619, a 'totally new science'. Later the same year he wrote of pulling away the 'masks' which hide the lovely countenance of the sciences, and in November he had a sequence of dreams which, he thought, pointed to his brilliant future as a scientist. He then set about composing a treatise for publication the following Easter, 1620, when he would just have passed his twenty-fourth birthday.³

Few writers have been more conscious than Descartes of the danger that they might die before their work was done; but his plans kept collapsing under the strain of his perfectionism. He could not bear to publish anything which was not flawless: comprehensive, but beyond criticism or correction. So the hopes of 1619 came to nothing, and it was not till eight or nine years later that he tried to write another book. It was to consist of thirty-six 'Rules for the Direction of the Mind', with extensive explanations of each rule. Unfortunately he lost heart again, and the project petered out at rule twenty-one. A little later, probably in 1629, he was engaged in writing a different book,

entitled 'Elements of Metaphysics'; but nothing seems to have come of this either.⁴

In retrospect, it can be seen that at this time, the early 1630s, Descartes was well on the way to formulating the intuition to which his life would eventually prove to have been devoted: namely, that if you manage to avoid being led astray by the false clues of sensory experience, you will be able to explain everything in the physical world by reference to a small set of laws of nature, that is, equations referring to the fundamental properties of matter. But to Descartes at the time, it seemed that he was becoming a laughing-stock. The public were calling him *celebris promissor* – 'the great promiser' – and whispering that he was one of those charlatans who 'for many years boasted that they were going to bring out books, when they had not even put pen to paper'.⁵ His career was a comedy.

All in all, then, Descartes' ambitious literary plans were working out very badly, especially considering that he had long ago sold his share of the family estates and opted for exile, celibacy, and urban solitude in the hope of pursuing his intellectual concerns undistracted. In 1630 he had begun to search for a way round his inhibition against writing. In an uncharacteristically shamefaced letter to his unfailingly helpful and encouraging adviser Marin Mersenne, he wrote:

You will be appalled at the amount of time it is taking me to complete what is supposed to be a very short Treatise, which people could probably read straight through after dinner. . . . In case you find it strange that I have started writing several Treatises, . . . only to abandon each of them, the reason is quite simple: I kept gaining new knowledge as I worked, and in order to make room for it I always had to start afresh on a new plan. . . . But now at last I am sure that I shall not change course again, since my present design will still be serviceable, whatever new knowledge I may acquire in the future.⁶

What was this approach to writing, and how was it supposed to

protect Descartes from the inevitable risk that he might change his mind, or that his theories might turn out to be mistaken?

The outline of the new policy can be discerned in several of Descartes' literary ventures in the next couple of years. His writing lost some of its legalistic, stiff-necked, and impersonal style, and, spasmodically, it acquired a confident writerliness which would be playful if it were less self-conscious.⁷ In particular, many of the writings of this period attempt to tell a tale or a story (by 'story' I mean a sequence of the actions and experiences of one or more characters).⁸ And a great attraction of story-telling, especially for a nervy perfectionist like Descartes, is that it enables an author to avoid taking personal responsibility for ideas and formulas, since they can be attributed to the fictional characters within the story instead.

Story-telling was nothing new in theoretical writing: Plato's dialogues tell stories, and so too, in a rudimentary way, do the many medieval and renaissance textbooks in the form of catechisms or of dialogues between a master and a student. But a story can be expressed in many different ways. It can be presented wordlessly, in dance, music or pictures, for example; or, with words, in folktales, songs, anecdotes, plays, novels, history books, and films. The best established classification of verbal story-forms is the one given in Plato's *Republic*. On the one hand, according to Plato, there is drama (*mimesis*), which consists of words which are supposed to be the very ones used by the characters; and on the other, there is narrative (*diegesis*), in which the characters are described and reported, rather than imitated and quoted. Many stories, of course – for example those of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* – are, as Plato pointed out, formulated in a mixture of the two modes. Plato seems to have placed pure narrative above other forms of story-telling, on the ground that it requires the author to 'speak in his own person'; as soon as an element of drama is introduced, according to Plato, the author must practise a deception by 'assuming another character'. There is some doubt about what Plato really intended, however, since in practice he nearly always wrote in the dramatic mode himself. Aristotle preserved the

inconsistency by reversing both Plato's preference and his practice.⁹

A large part of the difficulty with the distinction between narrative and drama arises from a factor which was not given explicit critical recognition until the twentieth century. This is that narrative adds an extra character to those who would be involved if the story were being presented in a dramatic form. The supernumerary is the narrator – not the author of the piece, but a character in it who tells the tale.¹⁰ In some works, the narrator is explicitly described, like Scheherezade in *Arabian Nights* or the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales*; but usually the audience arrives at this character by inference from the sorts of description, evaluation, vocabulary and syntax employed; it is like working out where the painter was positioned by noting which features of a landscape are in the picture. An author may use several narrators, or just one; they can be more or less intrusive, officious, or trustworthy, and they can be placed at various distances from the other characters, as well as from their author, whether real or implied. This suggests that Plato was quite mistaken if he thought that narrative was less deceptive than drama; one might argue that it is actually one degree worse, because it involves the additional fiction of the narrator; or alternatively, narrative could be thought of as a special kind of drama – drama with just one character, the narrator.¹¹

The innovation which Descartes brought to theoretical writing in the 1630s was the use of narrative devices: he put an obtrusive narrator into nearly every paragraph, an 'I' buttonholing a 'you' with beseeching insistence. In the 'Treatise on Light', for example, the narrator comes on like a dramatic prologue, exhorting the audience to 'be so good as to allow your thoughts to depart this world for a little time, to observe a different, pristine world, which I shall bring to birth before you in imaginary space'. And the narrator of the 'Treatise on Man' develops a mechanistic description of the human body from a deliberate piece of make-believe: 'I shall assume', he says, 'that the body is simply a statue or machine made out of clay, created by God

specifically so as to resemble us as closely as possible.’¹² The effect of these devices, plainly, was to put some distance between Descartes and the ideas formulated in his text: criticism might touch his narrator, but would leave Descartes himself unscathed. Despite the precaution, Descartes lost his nerve at the last moment, and once more withdrew his work from publication, this time having the censure of Galileo in 1632 as a plausible excuse.

Descartes now began to rewrite and extend the unpublished treatises, distributing the material between three essays – the *Dioptrics*, the *Meteors*, and the *Geometry* – and removing most traces of his narrator in the process. By the end of 1635 he was looking forward to publishing them in one volume, together with a simple preface. A few months later, the preface had become the most important part of the book, and Descartes planned to call it ‘The Project for a Universal Science, suited to Raise our Nature to the Highest Level of Perfection’. He was still working on it whilst the three essays were being set in type. He also changed the title, to *Discourse on the Method for the Correct Use of Reason and for Seeking the Truth in the Sciences*. And although the three scientific essays occupied more than 400 pages, almost overwhelming the seventy-eight-page *Discourse*, they were presented as a mere appendix to it, providing some examples of ‘Essays in this Method’.¹³

The *Discourse* itself makes no claim to be a methodical treatise however; on the contrary, it is a conspicuously narrated story. Unlike Descartes’ earlier literary experiments, it is not merely decorated with a few narrative ornaments; it is narrated through and through. One critic has even described it as the first real novel.¹⁴ The *Discourse on Method* is, in form, an autobiography; that is to say (in a provisional definition) it is a narrative telling the story of its own narrator. This formula, it should be noticed, covers not only factual autobiographies like Augustine’s *Confessions* or Abelard’s *Calamities*, but also fictional ones like *Tristram Shandy* or *Great Expectations*. But the line between truth and fiction in autobiography is sometimes impossible to draw. It is usual to regard Descartes’ *Discourse* as factual,