

What is Decadent Philosophy

It's hard to read those pages of Descartes where he's asking if he really has a body and doubting that other people exist without wanting to elbow him in the nose. That'd take care of his doubting. It wouldn't do much for philosophy, though. And I don't mean it wouldn't do much because there's some flaw in the painful nose argument. The real problem—the debility ruining *any* convincing argument—is that philosophy isn't geared to prove things, it's geared to generate more proving.

Rhetorical question: if you've set your sights on a chair at Harvard, who would you rather be? The one meticulously assembling descriptions telling us how the world is, or the one producing truths that make a lot of others want to respond, want to debate and argue about how the world is?

The same question again, but this time about Descartes. We know he started with philosophical thought and arrived at the highest truth, God. But, did he think to reach God, or was God the excuse he used to think philosophically?

The reason the answers are obvious states neatly. Philosophy isn't the love of truth, it's wanting thinking. So, the best philosopher isn't the one accurately theorizing about the world but the one whose ideas stimulate the most subsequent theorizing, which means the hottest discussion in conferences, the fastest responses in academic journals, the highest number of footnotes in books written by others. This reality explains why earnest attempts to *prove* things, to set matters to rest—I'm thinking of Thomas Nagel's precious *The Last Word*—seem so quaint, so misguided even if they're persuasive.

The fact that quaintness exists in philosophy carries an implication: the replacement of truths that are correct with truths that are provocative at the core of philosophical desire has been insufficiently absorbed into the discipline. I mean, we frequently speak as though we're trying to explain experiences, while what we really want is to generate philosophizing about experiences.

Now, the space between what we say we want and what we really do want, and the failure to close it—the failure to simply and publicly agree that I’m like everyone else here in that I don’t care whether my assertions are true, I’m only concerned about whether you’ll be talking about them tomorrow—the failure to make that explicit has retarded some philosophical advances that could be easily realized.

One of the advances concerns contemporary Nietzscheanism and the notoriously—though only incidentally—wrong mantra that there are no facts, only interpretations. The qualification “incidentally” here is apt since no one fails to see that “everything’s interpretation” immediately contradicts itself. True, the phrase still gets used, but we all know that it’s a kind of intellectual shorthand, a way of not getting bogged down in detailing for the hundredth time all the little and great reasons for the persistent *suspicion* that perfect objectivity won’t be reached and therefore everything’s interpretation.

On the other hand, this assumption about the use of “everything’s interpretation” seems wrong. I don’t know how else to explain why so many anti-Nietzscheans take *so much* trouble and amounts of their readers’ time to ponderously explain the proposition’s self-refutation. Here’s a remarkable example—a really remarkable example—from a widely read collection of essays, *Why We Are Not Nietzscheans*:

The proposition ‘a’ is logically equivalent to the metalinguistic proposition “‘a’ is true” (Tarski). To say with Nietzsche that “there is no truth” is to say “It is true that nothing is true,” which is not, *stricto sensu*, paradoxical, but equivalent to the statement p: “All sentences are false,” which cannot be true (because if p is true, it is false). [Ferry, Luc and Renault, Alain, *Why We Are Not Nietzscheans*, trans. De Loaiza (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 13. As another, similar example, there is Comte-Sponville’s essay in *Why We Are Not Nietzscheans*, pages 52-55, as well as Thomas Nagel constantly throughout his *The Last Word*.]

While it’s not a metalinguistic proposition and I can’t appeal to Tarski, it’s still reasonable, I hope, to assert that Alain Boyer wouldn’t have published these not entirely elegant but

nonetheless highly logical and persuasive sentences (~~assuming a metalinguistic proposition can safely be inked onto a piece of paper~~) if he didn't have good reason to suppose the existence of theorists who have trouble figuring out that "There's no truth, everything's interpretation" can't be true. Wherever they are, they locate a place where Boyer's argument deserves cautious attention.

Which catches Nietzscheanism in a predicament. And it's one far more threatening than the verifiable incorrectness of the movement's guiding slogan. The problem is that Nietzscheans—along with everyone else pretending that they're pursuing one or another kind of truth—don't have any choice but to *respect* Boyer. I mean philosophy conceived as loving truth forces the concession that his argument is valuable because it's admirably tight, seamlessly presented.

Which means: the desire driving any philosophy guided by truth forces philosophers to embrace triviality as long as what's trivial happens to be right.

On the other side, those of us who raise thinking above truth don't—*can't*—have this problem. Since banal truths depress thought, and since Boyer's anti-Nietzschean argument is so listless that its most challenging aspect is decoding the jargon (metalinguistic, *stricto sensu*), those who only want thinking can not only shamelessly skip over the sentences, they're impelled, even compelled by their own guiding desire to encounter other philosophical readings better stimulating their primary aspiration.

This significant advantage decadents hold over those clinging to the image of philosophy as wanting truth can be amplified on the most human level, simple pride. Going back to the beginning, the difficulty philosophers oriented by truth face is that they have no choice but to respect Boyer's argument. Which means belittling their own capacities as can be easily gauged if you happen to have teenage children and try explaining to one of them that this is your job: you sit around trying to make judgments about, "The statement p cannot be true because if it is true, it is false. . . ."

Of course as parents we're all accustomed to the disdain of 14 year olds, but what's important is there's no need for it here because the privileging of thinking's acceleration over any truth's instantiation efficiently removes slacker sentences from the philosopher's job description.

Broadening the point, this predicament set in front of Nietzscheanism is a specific version of a thick, practical obstacle occasionally blocking all philosophers: what's to be done with conference presentations, journal articles and books that are right and persuasive but perfectly obvious, painfully belabored, boring? Yes, we want to dismiss them, but how can that be *justified*? How can we establish as something more than juvenile impatience the refusal to read beyond the first pages of, say, Thomas Nagel's *The Last Word* when the pages so clearly reveal that the whole book will amount to little more than a multiple chaptered repetition of Boyer's already monotonously prolonged argument? Within philosophy conceived as love of truth, it's difficult to satisfactorily answer that question; it's difficult to justify the decision to ignore what's right. It's not at all difficult, though, when philosophers accept that they're devoted to thought.

As a note here, despite simple appearances the real reason "There are no facts, everything's interpretation," isn't wrong is that the very question of wrong or right isn't philosophy. Since philosophy concerns inspiring thinking, the only demand properly made of any truth claim is that it do that. Questions about whether the claim happens to be true, consequently, drop to meaninglessness.

Put differently, because any research library abundantly teaches through reams of printed pages that the truth "Everything's interpretation" urgently stimulates philosophical thinking, the answer to the right/wrong question is clear. The claim "everything's interpretation" is right, and it's right—it's a good truth—even though we all know it's a contradiction.

Much more could be added about the virtues of explicitly changing philosophy's definition. For example the old Nietzschean tension between his insistence that there are no model philosophers (because everything's interpretation), and his equally forceful contention that the Overman is the future's model philosopher, can be resolved in only a few steps.

It's more important to repeat, however, that solving this kind of problem is an irksome distraction. More, any effort to lay a question to rest, to settle an issue, to quiet a debate is

necessarily a distraction or worse since philosophy's guiding endeavor is the opposite of all those things.

That's not to say, though, that there's no place in philosophy for answering questions. There is, it's just that the range is narrow: it's all those questions—all those truths waiting to be said—that *serve* thought, that participate in the generation of future thinking. Three quick examples:

1. Which drives thinking most aggressively: the hope for universal understandings in the Platonic mold, or limited interpretations as Nietzsche proposed?
2. About those limited interpretations and Gilles Deleuze, how limited can you go? I mean, if philosophy really is the art of producing concepts that are new, then don't the finished truths evaporate? Isn't Deleuze a decadent because his concepts reduce to *nothing more than* what you use to think toward your *next* description of the world?
3. About rhetoric and presentation: are the truths found in written dialogues more provocative than those found in aphorisms, or than those extending as gracefully developing monographs?

This list could be drawn out, but length doesn't matter so much as the way it's used, and it's used to underline this: there's no attempt here to remove truths from philosophy. We sincerely want to answer these questions. Still, what's occurring is insidious because truths are being maintained *only* to provoke thought.

Turning toward thought, toward its techniques and mechanisms, we'll find a different line of questions, ones aiming more directly into philosophy's essence.

1. What kind of writing stirs thought? Is it the careful progression from a thesis statement to a complex outline for a book and then contained segments of

argumentation managed serially? Or, is it scattering: writing five lines here, ten there and then letting something larger emerge from the impulses?

2. What kind of reading incites thought, a few canonized texts within a narrow field of interest, or, vagabond studies across disciplines and genres? And are books for studying and mastering, or should opportunistic eyes skip through the pages?

~~3. In *Persecution and the Art of Writing* Leo Strauss shows how the pressures of censorship squeeze work forward. But maybe it's the absence (or collapse) of monitoring authority that invigorates philosophical labor: Paris 1968.~~

~~4. Economic questions. How many books have been lost by the drowning of great talents in the indolence of overflowing luxury? How many didn't get written because the potential author was busy washing plates?~~

5. Does talking about philosophy with others foster thought? Deleuze and Guattari join Socrates on the yes side. Difficult, though, to imagine Nietzsche working productively with someone else.

~~6. What about pryingly personal (or, somewhat less intriguingly, biological) factors? Foucault, we know, taught that any discussion of truth connected with "the body, the nervous system, nutrition, digestion and energies." [Foucault, Michel, "Nietzsche Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 89.] Moving this over to the contemporary interest, we've all passed hours or more not eating because it makes us heavy and distracts us from our work. And some of us commit our writing to the morning when, presumably, we're most sharp and alert. That doesn't close off another possibility, though: philosophizing progresses fastest late, during those tired hours when we let our guard down and write whatever comes to mind with the idea that tomorrow it can all be cleaned up.~~

7. Another personal factor, and the last I'll mention today, was raised for me by a studious Kantian. He occasionally interrupted his rational conversation with the poetic insistence that he couldn't write with a computer. His work, he said, literally flowed along with his fingers and hand when recording ideas with a pen, but when pecking on a machine he couldn't advance; instead of one notion leading to another, each seemed final, an obstacle to more progress that day. So which is better, computer or pen writing?

Finally, it shouldn't seem odd that a paper on philosophy now concludes with a question about whether philosophizing should be done with a pen. Similarly, it's not at all sad that an old Kantian isn't being remembered for the truths he produced, but instead for the velocity of his thought. There's nothing strange or sad here because both the pen and the memory are far closer to philosophy than any truth.

As for words, they too can be philosophy: all the questions I've just listed along with the paragraphs preceding them are philosophical, or, at least they are to the extent they're subjected to the same judgment they describe. Stronger, to the extent they're judged that way, everything I've said today is proven true.

The conclusion affirms another. The only reason we have truths is *for* something else, to serve something else. Worse, they'll serve what had always been the most servile, the act thinking, the laboring that we'd always thought existed *only* so that we could reach what we truly wanted.

And while our shared discipline probably had to culminate this way, not with vindication but as a collapsing perversion of its entire history, it's nonetheless difficult to avoid finding—just as it's uncomfortable to admit feeling—a tinge of alleviation. Really, it has gone on too long, our obsession with the questions of truth. Should we want clean, objective knowledge? And if we do, where's it found? Or, should we be after tentative interpretations and ceaselessly renewing concepts, and if we are, what're the rules for their creation? No matter the answers, what's most disheartening is how these larger questions and then all the smaller ones marching

behind have constrained, how tightly they've bound us to work in the name of one or another kind of truth.

Doubtless, the stifling will continue, some even in the most humiliating form: there'll always be philosophers announcing that the statement "nothing's true" can't be true.

No matter how long the scolding and frustration go on, though, *we* will no longer be affected. No longer because matters are far worse than our adversaries realize. It's not that we've rejected their kind of truth, it's that we no longer respect the demands of any truth. We don't because philosophy is the desire for thought.

Finally, a historical note. Philosophy crossing into decadence has little in common with the move from Modernism to Postmodernism, it's not an extension of the last century's weakening of truth. Actually it's nearer the opposite because the move from universal hopes to Nietzschean perspectives was an attempt to *save* truth after the failure of objective knowledge. Because we still wanted philosophy to be truthful in one form or another, extremely modest aspirations got adopted. But now that's all gone; we've turned away from the entire idea.

