# Meaning and Mistakes in Philosophy and Life

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**Abstract**

The history of philosophy is a history of contradictions, not consensus. This suggests that the history of philosophy is, for the most part, a history of mistakes. A scientist who devotes their life to a mistake can console themselves with the thought that they still contributed to scientific progress, but this source of consolation is not available to the philosopher. In *The Remains of the Day*, Kazuo Ishiguro suggests that dignity may be found in making your own mistakes. This suggests that my life might be meaningful because I attempted a difficult and worthwhile task appropriate to my station and failed. Failure might produce beneficial by-products such as conceptual clarity, but to pretend that this counts as success would be dishonest, not dignified. The true philosopher is disappointed at failure, but takes consolation in the fact that they at least made their own mistakes.

## 1. Introduction

Anyone who contemplates a career as a professional philosopher is likely to study the history of philosophy, at least a little bit, and the most cursory study of that history is likely to lead to the depressing conclusion that the history of philosophy is a history of mistakes. I do not think that a more thorough study of that history is likely to provide alleviation. If Aristotle was right, then Plato was wrong, if Descartes was right then Aristotle was wrong and so on. It is true that occasionally, philosophical research can lead to the development of a new academic discipline where some kind of definitive progress is possible – mathematical logic being a case in point – but even this kind of victory is rare. Anyone who sets out to devote their life to philosophical research must face up to the fact that the most likely result will be that they add to the long list of philosophical mistakes.

If there is no such thing as a meaningful life, then the fact that the professional philosopher seems to be doomed to make mistakes would not seem to matter very much since, *ex hypothesi*, nothing would matter very much. The follower of Camus can pursue the futile path of the academic happy in the knowledge that futility is the lot of us all, and that if everyone is Sisyphus, it is preferable to find

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a rock that can be pushed without much physical effort. However, if one thinks, as I do, that someone who spends their day building a good solid house has done something meaningful, because they have succeeded in leaving something worthwhile that will outlast them, then the decision to pursue the life of a philosopher begins to look unwise.

In saying that time spent building a good house (or perhaps digging an irrigation ditch) is meaningful, I am aligning myself with the form of moral cognitivism advanced by David Wiggins in his "Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life."[1] As a moral cognitivist, I think that just as declarative sentences can be true or false and, when true, informative, feelings can be appropriate or inappropriate and, where appropriate, informative. Fear is an appropriate response to danger. A phobia is irrational not because fear is itself irrational, but because the person with the phobia reacts to something harmless as if that thing were dangerous. Gratitude is an appropriate response to receiving a good gift, and my sense of gratitude should guide me to find an appropriate way to share my joy with the giver. Just as a fear can be a phobia, so too gratitude can be misplaced – for example when the gift was a wooden horse and the recipients were the Trojans. But to say that our feelings are fallible is to contrast the situations in which they give us a false picture of how things are with the situations in which they really are bearers of information. A feeling of satisfaction really can be what it seems to be – an indication that I have completed a truly worthwhile task. As we describe situations in which satisfaction is the appropriate emotional response, we are describing situations in which someone has carried out a meaningful activity.

I will not here engage in a defence of moral cognitivism. In the first place, I have nothing to say in defence of moral cognitivism that has not already been said by Wiggins and others. Secondly, as I have indicated, it is only if one accepts moral cognitivism that the decision to devote one's self to philosophical research becomes problematic. Satisfaction comes from constructing something valuable that will endure, not necessarily forever, but for a few generations after my death, and for the moral cognitivist, it is legitimate to use this fact about satisfaction as a guide to life. The professional philosopher is like the foolish man in the parable who chooses to build on soft sand, a man who is surrounded by the ruins of previous efforts as he toils daily, and who can see, in neighbouring fields, the solid structures erected by natural scientists, historians, and others who have found

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[1] Wiggins (1976).

good, firm, soil, and yet persists in the hope that his tower will not topple like all the others. One traditional defence of the philosopher is that the unexamined life is not worth living. There is certainly good reason to suppose that the person who consciously thinks about what is involved in living a meaningful life thereby increases their chances of attaining such a life, but that is not at issue here. The question is not whether someone who is a philosopher in the sense that Socrates or Kierkegaard were philosophers can lead a meaningful life, but whether the life of the academic philosopher is meaningful.

Another defence of the life of the professional philosopher would be to point out that everyone has to earn a living somehow, and philosophy is a harmless pursuit that can be used to support all kinds of meaningful activities in personal or public life. I think this is true, and one can point to many examples of philosophers who have helped the world through non-philosophical activities, but it would be nice to think that philosophical research itself can be meaningful despite the near inevitability of errors. It would be depressing to think that there really always is something better one could be doing than engaging in philosophical research.

Here Kazuo Ishiguro comes to the rescue. In his *The Remains of the Day*, the protagonist, Stevens, is a butler who spent his life working for Lord Darlington, an English aristocrat who set out to help Germany recover from the blow of the Treaty of Versailles and became, for a time, a pawn of the Nazis. Looking back, Stevens says:

> …at least he had the privilege of being able to say at the end of his life that he made his own mistakes. His lordship was a courageous man. He chose a certain path in life, it proved to be a misguided one, but there, he chose it, he can say that at least. As for myself, I cannot even claim that. You see, I trusted. I trusted in his lordship's wisdom. All those years I served him, I trusted I was doing something worthwhile. I can't even say I made my own mistakes. Really - one has to ask oneself - what dignity is there in that?[2]

Ishiguro here offers the hope that a meaningful life can come not just from getting things right, but from getting things wrong in a certain kind of way, that there is a certain kind of mistake, a dignified mistake, that could give life meaning.

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[2]  Ishiguro (2009), p. 243.

## 2. Lord Darlington's Mistake

I am not going to argue that Stevens' judgment about his own lack of dignity as compared to Lord Darlington is correct. The best reasons for accepting Stevens' judgment can be found by reading the book and I am confident that most readers will find the passage I have quoted to be a moment of insight and self-knowledge. My concern is whether, assuming we accept Stevens' judgment about Lord Darlington, this judgment contains any crumbs of comfort for philosophers. What is it that makes Lord Darlington's mistake one that confers a sort of dignity?

My aim is, by reflecting on *The Remains of the Day*, to come up with a set of prerequisites that would enable philosophers to produce work such that, even if it is mistaken, will contain the kind of mistakes that allow for dignity.

It is clear, after all, that not every mistake confers dignity. At one point, Stevens is left stranded after his car runs out of petrol. This is his mistake in the sense that nobody else was responsible, but it is not a courageous error that he will look back on with rueful satisfaction. It is a trivial error in a matter of little importance. It is moreover a careless error that results from a lack of attention. I can hardly attain dignity as a philosopher on the grounds that I was careless when preparing the references section of my work.

We can contrast the trivial error of the petrol with Lord Darlington's horrific political misjudgement. It is only possible to make a mistake if you are trying to do something. Aimless wanderers cannot be said to have lost their way. Lord Darlington is not Bertie Wooster, drifting through life. He has ambitions; noble ambitions to set right injustice and promote peace between nations. It is right that he feels wretched at the end of his life. It is not merely that he fell short of his goals; his actions were positively injurious to them. He committed an act of injustice (in which Stevens is complicit) by firing two Jewish servants, and he promoted the policy of appeasement whose disastrous results are well known. He is a failure when measured by the standards that he set for himself – but at least he set himself high standards to begin with. The higher the standards we set for ourselves, the more likely it is that we will fail. So, the first prerequisite for achieving meaningful, dignified failure is that we set ourselves a significant and worthwhile goal.

Stevens placed too much trust in Lord Darlington. He was exempt from making the kind of error that Lord Darlington did because he simply followed

Lord Darlington blindly – albeit with a culpable blindness at times. Philosophers too can be guilty of such blindness, either by unthinking devotion to the works of a great individual, or, what is perhaps more common, by unreflective acceptance of the agenda that was set by a previous generation. This is why some education in the history of philosophy is highly recommended to anyone who wants to pursue a career in philosophy: only by understanding the choices that shaped the tradition we belong to can we ourselves make a clear and conscious decision about what to accept and what to reject from that tradition. Stevens thinks of Lord Darlington as the hub around which the world turns. His inability to gain a broader perspective leaves him unable to see, until it is too late, that Lord Darlington is not a giant among men.

So, the second prerequisite is easily stated, although it requires careful elucidation: we need a sense of perspective.

Lord Darlington does have a sense of perspective. He is an English aristocrat in an age where that conferred wealth, status, and connections. This means that he has the opportunity to exert an influence on international relations, and he endeavours to use this opportunity for the good. He is right to think that his status confers an obligation to use his position to bring about a good result. Stevens lacks perspective. He is right, perhaps, to point out that there was no way for him to know that von Ribbentrop was a charming scoundrel, or that Sir Oswald Mosley was not to be trusted, but he can be blamed for failing to say a word when Lord Darlington fired two maids simply because they were Jewish.[3]  Stevens had every reason to think that his own judgement was better than that of Lord Darlington in this instance, and just as it was reasonable of Lord Darlington to believe that his informal conferences might affect British foreign policy, it would have been reasonable for Stevens to conclude that if he were to offer his resignation, he might have persuaded Lord Darlington to reconsider his decision. The point is not that we are in a position to say that if Stevens had threatened to resign, Lord Darlington would probably have changed his mind. We are, after all, considering whether it is reasonable for philosophers to undertake tasks in which the probability of success is very low. The point is that if Stevens does not try to dissuade Lord Darlington from firing the maids, then nobody will (the housekeeper, Miss Kenton, considers doing so but does not precisely because she has no support from Stevens).[4] Had Lord Darlington stood by while injustices

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[3]  Ishiguro (2009), pp. 147-150.
[4]  Ishiguro (2009), p. 152.

were done to Germany (as he sees it, perhaps not without justification), had he wrung his hands and expressed a desire that somebody should do something, then he would have failed to achieve dignity in his errors, since nobody, or at least very few people, were in a better position than he was to do something.

Stevens thinks of Lord Darlington as a giant among men, and of himself as a pygmy by comparison. That is one error of perspective. The opposite error, that of overestimating your own abilities relative to those of others, is just as dangerous.

Stevens describes Lord Darlington as "a courageous man." Stevens does not seem to have considered the possibility of offering his resignation, but Lord Darlington was willing to take a great risk in order to achieve his goals. When accused by Mr. Lewis, an American diplomat, of being a rank amateur, Lord Darlington responds:

> Let me say this. What you describe as "amateurism", sir, is what I think most of us here still prefer to call "honour".[5]

"Honour" is perceived as an important value in societies where reputation matters. It is not that having honour is the same thing as having a good reputation, but to be honourable is to do the kind of deeds that should earn such a reputation (there is here an implicit commitment to moral cognitivism). Lord Darlington is able to exert an influence on international affairs because he has a reputation, and the price he pays for his mistake is that he dies with that reputation in shreds. A gentleman who surely regards dishonour as a fate worse than death is sentenced, in his final days, to a life of shame. To say that Lord Darlington had a kind of dignity in his error is not to say that he should have felt no shame – rather, he had a kind of dignity because he was willing to take this risk.

So, to set the conditions that render dignified error possible, the philosopher should have a sufficient understanding of tradition, a sense of perspective, ambition, and should be risking something through their devotion to philosophy. Most professional philosophers are expected to acquire a knowledge of tradition and a sense of perspective as part of the standard academic training. A typical doctoral dissertation will include some form of literature survey or historical introduction, and a clear statement about what can reasonably be achieved by

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[5] Ishiguro (2009), p. 102.

applying the chosen methodology. However, it is less clear that standard academic training encourages the kind of ambition and willingness to take risks that are prerequisites for dignified errors. Indeed, one might wonder whether good postgraduate programs – the kind of programs that give students a fighting chance of finding a decent academic job – will tend to make students somewhat risk averse.

So in the next section, I will look at two examples of philosophers who do show that they are willing to openly acknowledge the risk that they are producing work that is worthless, and who proceed anyway. Though they see the ground is soft, they persist in building their towers.

## 3. Philosophers with big dreams

Derek Parfit confronts the possibility that much of his philosophical work might be a waste of time if it all rests on a mistake. It is true that Parfit is imagining how Henry Sidgwick might have responded to claims made by a hypothetical moral naturalist, but, as Parfit makes absolutely clear, he is on the same side as Sidgwick here, so the speech he writes for Sidgwick expresses his own position as well:

> You have not seen how deeply you and I disagree. Though you and I are both Utilitarians, and Ross rejects Utilitarianism, my view is much closer to Ross's view than it is to yours. Your view does eliminate morality, as Ross and I both think we understand it. Ross and I both know that some acts have the natural property of maximizing happiness. We believe that we can ask an important further question, which is whether all such acts also have the very different, irreducibly normative property of being right. If your view were true, there would be no such property, and no such further question. That would be how, in trying to decide which acts are right, Ross and I would have wasted much of our lives.[6]

Lest we miss the point of this speech – and Parfit tells us that many Naturalists have missed the point – Parfit presents the following analogy:

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[6] Parfit (2011), p. 304.

Suppose that I believe in God, and I have spent many years trying to decide which religious texts and theologians give the truest accounts of God's nature and acts. You tell me that you also believe in God. Love exists, you say, in the sense that some people love others. God exists, because God is love. I could reply that, if your view were true, I would have wasted much of my life. I believe that God is the omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good Creator of the Universe. If God was merely the love that some people have for others, I would have made a huge mistake, and all my years studying religious texts would have taught me almost nothing.[7]

By any of the usual metrics that are applied to measure the value of scholarly work, Parfit's achievement was magnificent. Most of us, I am sure, can only dream of writing the work that would have anything like the impact that his work has had. But here, he confronts the reader with the possibility that if Naturalism is correct – and to many philosophers the truth of Naturalism seems obvious – then his work, the very book we are reading, has been a waste of time. The book in question is Volume II of *On What Matters*, and if, as Parfit claims, the truth of Naturalism implies that nothing really matters, then the truth of Naturalism would imply that the very idea of writing a book on what matters (in the sense that Parfit things some things really do matter) is an absurd idea. Parfit could only hope to write about things that matter by taking the risk of writing a book that would be a complete waste of precious time.

Parfit is aware of the risk that he is wasting his time. It is true that Parfit is more confident than many philosophers about the possibility of making definitive philosophical progress, arguing that it is rational to hope that within less than a thousand years, philosophers might achieve the same kind of consensus that scientists do.[8] However, it should be noted that although Parfit has an argument against Naturalism, and he has an argument that philosophers may achieve a consensus after less than a thousand years, he does not have an argument that after less than a thousand years, the consensus will be that Naturalism is wrong. His optimism about the prospect of philosophical progress is not optimism about the eventual vindication of his own theories.

One philosopher who is less optimistic than Parfit is Peter van Inwagen. In his *The Problem of Evil*, he argues that the argument from evil is almost certainly

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[7] Parfit (2011), pp. 304-305.
[8] Parfit (2011), p. 193.

a failure on the grounds that most philosophical arguments, including his own, should rightly be judged as failures.[9]  A successful philosophical argument, argues van Inwagen, is one that would convince an ideal philosophical audience in a debate that takes place under ideal conditions (van Inwagen contemplates the possibility of persuading an audience who initially hold the opposite view, and trying to win over a neutral audience).[10]  Whereas Parfit hopes that after a thousand years we might achieve a consensus, van Inwagen suggests the gloomy conclusion that perhaps we humans just don't have the skills that are required to resolve philosophical questions. Humans attempting to solve metaphysical problems are like dogs walking on their hind legs. Having made this analogy, van Inwagen stumbles on his metaphysical way.[11]  A dog that tries to walk on its hind legs has ambition.

An objection that might be raised to Parfit and van Inwagen is that they simply set the standards for philosophical success too high. We do praise philosophers, including Parfit and van Inwagen, recognizing that they have achieved something, without imagining that their work has created a consensus, or would create a consensus in idealized conditions. Indeed I did make this point to van Inwagen (in 2000) and clearly did not convince him. I now think he was right not to be persuaded. In the quest for philosophical truth we may stimulate interesting and worthwhile thoughts, and these may be regarded as beneficial by-products of our quest. But it would be dishonest to pretend that the beneficial by-products were in fact the goal that originally motivated our quest. (This may not be the answer that van Inwagen gave at the time, but it is the conclusion I came to after reflecting on whatever it was that he did say).

I think that Parfit and van Inwagen are correct that the goal that motivates the best philosophical research is to attain the kind of objectively true result that is the hallmark of scientific activity. But there are serious objections to this view of philosophical research that need to be considered, and that will be the focus on the next section.

## 4. Philosophy Is Not Natural Science

So far, I have been claiming that most philosophical work consists of mistakes

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[9]  Van Inwagen (2006), p. 52.
[10]  Van Inwagen (2006), pp. 41-47.
[11]  Van Inwagen (2015), p. 15.

because philosophers reach contradictory conclusions. But perhaps this is based on a mistake about the goals of philosophical research. If two different scientists reach contradictory conclusions, we know that at least one of them must be wrong, and past experience gives us confidence that, over time, we will learn which of them is wrong because a consensus will emerge. Perhaps it is a mistake to suppose that, when two philosophers reach contradictory conclusions, at least one of them must be wrong because the goal of philosophical research might be quite different from the goal of scientific research.[12] In this section, I want to present the strongest possible case against the idea that philosophers should strive for the kind of success that we associate with science. To do so, I will consider proposals put forward by Gary Gutting and Nicholas Rescher about the differences between philosophy and science, proposals that I find plausible. Gutting and Rescher are correct that we should not expect philosophy to make definitive progress in the way that natural sciences do. However, I will also argue that if we accept the points that Gutting and Rescher make about the differences between philosophy and science, so far from providing consolation to the philosopher, we should conclude that the philosopher who errs is worse off than the scientist who errs, because the scientific mistake can be part of a success story in a way that the philosophical mistake cannot.

Gutting published *What Philosophers Know* in 2009 and Rescher published *Metaphilosophy* in 2014. As far as I can tell, the two books were written independently, and they do not agree in all respects, but they do converge on a number of key points. The fact that two observers of the philosophical scene arrive independently at the same conclusions gives those conclusions a certain amount of credibility, so I will be focussing on those points of convergence.

Rescher argues that if philosophers attempt to achieve the kind of consensus that we see in the natural sciences, they are pursuing a false goal.[13] Gutting thinks that philosophers have achieved knowledge, but might be blinded to their own achievements by a false idea about what knowledge involves, based on a misunderstanding of science:

> To insist that knowledge excludes approximation and incompleteness would require claiming that, for example, physicists don't know anything

[13] Rescher (2014), p. 125.

about matter because they don't know its ultimate constituents, or that chemists don't know that PV=kT because they haven't worked out all the limits on its application. In contrast to the natural sciences, philosophers ignore the knowledge that they have achieved because of what we might call the Philosopher's Fallacy: the assumption that all genuinely philosophical knowledge must involve ultimate final understanding – through a perfect definition, an explanation that itself needs no explanation, etc. … Giving up the Philosopher's Fallacy does not, moreover, mean giving up the grand goals of ultimate understanding – to give perfect definitions of knowledge and justice, to discover the ultimate source and meaning of the universe, and so on. It is, rather, to realize that, even if these goals are never reached, there is still a substantial body of philosophical knowledge that our inquiry has discovered.[14]

What kind of knowledge can philosophers boast of if not answers to the big questions? The answer is knowledge of distinctions – we can understand that what seems to be a single concept might actually involve two or more concepts.[15] A philosopher who has read Kripke, for example, will realize that "necessarily" can be used to make either a metaphysical or an epistemic claim, and that the two are quite different. Rescher offers a variety of ways in which philosopher can make progress without providing a definitive answer to one of the big questions. He includes the introduction of a new distinction on his list, and adds some other examples that Gutting does not consider – a philosopher might offer a new argument for a familiar position, or one might be said to make a significant contribution to philosophy simply by posing a new problem.[16] Rescher and Gutting are correct that introducing new distinctions, offering new arguments and posing new questions are all the kinds of achievement that members of the philosophical community, (myself included), celebrate. Parfit and van Inwagen are both recognized as significant philosophers because of this kind of achievement. At the same time, Parfit and van Inwagen both seem to be saying that they will not have achieved what they set out to do unless they achieved more than this.

    Gutting and Rescher both have similar ideas about why it is that we can only

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[14] Gutting (2009), p. 89.
[15] Gutting (2009), p. 228.
[16] Rescher (2014), pp. 155-156.

expect limited results from philosophy, even when it is done well. Both Gutting and Rescher insist that we do not do philosophy from within a void, nor should we try to. Gutting bids us remember Hume's dictum to be a philosopher but to be a man first: we have convictions that are pre-philosophical, that may be a core part of our identity, and that require no philosophical defence.[17] We should not abandon such convictions lightly, nor expect others to do so, because this would be to compromise our epistemic integrity.[18] Such convictions may be religious convictions – and Gutting is indebted to Alvin Plantinga's argument that belief in God is properly basic,[19] but they could be non-religious – Quine's radical empiricism, for example, can be regarded as a pre-philosophical conviction, since it is not the conclusion of Quine's argument, but a starting point from which Quine argues, expecting that there will be others who share this starting point.[20]

A good example of philosophical writing that springs from a pre-philosophical commitment is Michael Dummett's *On Immigration And Refugees*.[21] As Dummett clearly states, his commitment to working with refugees stemmed from a hatred of racism that stands in need of no philosophical justification. His wife Ann shared this hatred of racism and commitment to working with refugees, but had no interest in philosophy. His philosophical reflections on the topic were the result of, not the motivation for, his political activism.[22] It is clear from his intellectual autobiography that his hatred of racism preceded his study of philosophy, and so this commitment was pre-philosophical in a strictly chronological sense.[23]

Pre-philosophical commitments need not be ethical in nature. Consider for example the opening statement of David Armstrong's *Sketch for a Systematic Metaphysics:*

> I begin with the assumption that all that exists is the space-time world, the physical world as we say. What argument is offered for this assumption? All I can say is that this is a position that many – philosophers and others – would accept.[24]

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[17] Gutting (2009), p. 147.
[18] Gutting (2009), p. 148.
[19] Gutting (2009), p. 120.
[20] Gutting (2009), p. 23.
[21] Dummett (2001).
[22] Dummett (2001), pp. xi-xii.
[23] Dummett (2007), pp. 8-9.
[24] Armstrong (2010), p. 10.

I can confirm that this is an assumption that many non-philosophers share, because many students are already committed to this idea when they take their first philosophy class (they are usually surprised to find that this is considered to be a metaphysical theory). Anyone who boldly accepts a challenge to spend the night in a reputedly haunted house to demonstrate that there are no ghosts is committed to the kind of worldview that Armstrong is defending, even if they have not considered exactly what such a worldview entails.

Like Gutting, Rescher thinks that philosophers always start within a pre-existing set of commitments, what he calls a 'probative orientation', within which we search for answers:

> The resulting metaphilosophy roots in the view that in philosophy we are dealing with real issues that admit of real (and unique) solutions – albeit solutions that are only attainable through approaching the issues from the vantage point of a commitment to a definite probative orientation (evaluative methodology). And so we cannot say in philosophy "the real truth" is what holds from *every* methodological perspective. Nothing does. We cannot say that "the real truth" is what holds the *canonical* perspective (the correct one, the one at issue in the philosophers' penchant for the myth of the God's eye view). For only God knows what this is: there is no way for us to come to it…And we cannot say that the real truth is what holds from *some* perspective – that is, at least one of the diversified spectrum of available possibilities. For it is rationality [sic] incongruous to opt concurrently for incompatible alternatives. The best we can do on behalf of our own solutions to philosophical issues is to claim that they afford "the truth *as we see it*," yielding a position that is correct for anyone sharing our basic commitment to a particular probative-value orientation.[25]

Two researchers have different probative orientations if they attach different weights to different epistemic variables when weighing up rival theories, and as a result adopt different methodologies.[26]

For a concrete example of a probative orientation that springs from a pre-philosophical commitment, consider the following statement by Dummett:

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[25] Rescher (2014), p. 131.
[26] Rescher (2014), p. 130.

It is just possible that some politicians believe the twaddle about firm and fair immigration controls as the key to good race relations, if indeed a politician can be said to believe anything but that such-and-such is the politically advantageous thing to say.[27]

Dummett's language makes it plain that he does not merely reject the idea that firm and fair immigration controls are the key to good relations after carefully and dispassionately weighing up the evidence. He regards the idea as absurd to the point where it is hard for him to imagine that anyone might believe it. One can imagine Dummett agreeing to review purported evidence for this claim with the purpose of debunking it and exposing the stupidity of certain politicians, but one also imagines that anyone who invited Dummett to examine serious evidence that makes such a claim credible would themselves become a target of his suspicion.

Dummett dismisses certain positions as "twaddle" because he is trying to set out the boundaries of legitimate political debate. Armstrong, who is not concerned with significant moral issues, does not engage in such rhetoric. But his probative orientation is still very clear. For example, he states:

We may call this position Possibilism in mathematics. It does involve a cost, the cost that an existence proof in mathematics gives us something less than one might hope for – it is only, I'm arguing, a proof of possibility. But it saves us from abstract entities![28]

Armstrong might be more open to examining the case for abstract entities than Dummett is open to the case for solving racial tension with a "firm but fair" stance on immigration, but it is clear that, from Armstrong's perspective, the deck is stacked against abstract entities. He thinks that we need to be saved from abstract entities as we might be saved from a ghost – saved in the sense that both should be unmasked as impostors. The very fact that some theory implies their existence would be, for Armstrong, a strike against that theory. A dedicated pure mathematician who perhaps takes the existence of abstract objects for granted might say that Armstrong has a prejudice against abstract objects.

My statements that Dummett and Armstrong are prejudiced against certain

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27 Dummett (2001), pp. 104-105.
28 Armstrong (2010), p. 89.

positions is not intended as an accusation. Both are transparent about their starting assumptions, and from those starting assumptions there follows a certain probative orientation. To someone who does not share the initial commitments, the probative orientation will appear as a set of prejudices.

It is easy to think of other examples. A substance dualist is strongly committed to some form of the principle of credulity – until we have good reason to believe otherwise, we should accept that things are as they seem to be. A refusal to accept the reality of qualia is a threat to this principle, argues the substance dualist, not simply because if there are no qualia things would not be what they seem to be, but because without qualia, there would be no such thing as seeming. The materialist is not impressed, because the materialist thinks that a good scientific theory is one that overturns our initial impressions. The good scientist, like Hamlet, knows not "seems". The substance dualist and the materialist seem to be in two different minds, but between those two minds there is no meeting.

So although the terms "pre-philosophical commitment" and "probative orientation" are not equivalent, a pre-philosophical commitment, in Gutting's sense, leads to a probative orientation, in Rescher's sense.

Gutting and Rescher agree that what sets a philosopher apart from a non-philosopher is that the philosopher thinks through the implications of the pre-philosophical commitments in a systematic manner: the good philosopher starts from intuitions (from things that seem intuitive within a particular orientation) and builds up a system.[29] When done well, this systematizing reveals what is truly involved in those initial commitments. It does not show that the commitments are correct, but it enables someone who stands by those commitments to know exactly what it is that they are standing for.[30] The person who observes such a debate between people with different orientations will not see a clear winner, because each participant has different criteria for winning, but they will at least know what is at stake when one chooses between the two stances.[31] This helps clarify the sense in which a philosopher can be said to have made their own mistakes – the dignified error comes from following without flinching the implications of those commitments that are central to one's identity. My commitments are not correct because they are mine, but by being true to them I am doing the best that I can possibly do. In an extreme case, my inability to systematize my commitments in

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[29] Rescher (2014), p. 99; Gutting (2009), p. 81.
[30] Gutting (2009), p. 193.
[31] Rescher (2014), p. 92.

a satisfactory manner might persuade me that at least some of those commitments should be abandoned.

The problem is that there is nobody else who is really in a position to tell me that it is time to abandon my pre-philosophical commitments because, although I may face criticisms that seem compelling to other people, it might still seem to me that these criticisms are the result of their subscribing to a different probative orientation. Gutting, as we have seen, believes that philosophers should try to preserve their intellectual integrity. It would be a clear violation of intellectual integrity to endorse a position that you do not think is supported by the evidence and this implies that it would be a violation of intellectual integrity to betray your own probative orientation. So, we should expect that philosophers will engage in interminable debates without resolution.

We expect things to be different in the sciences. Suppose that I am trying to estimate the number of monkeys in two rainforests that are in two different locations. If I just selected two amateur observers and sent each of them to one of the rainforests and asked how many monkeys they saw, that would not give me a scientific result. Perhaps Bill reports twice as many monkeys in Forest A as Bob sees in Forest B because Bill mistakes other animals for monkeys. If Bill and Bob have both received the same scientific training, then, should Bill report twice as many monkeys in Forest A as Bob reports in Forest B, I should be confident that had Bill been sent to Forest B and Bob to Forest A, the results would have been the same (within the limits of experimental error). This is not just an empirical observation about how scientists tend to work. An academic discipline can be called a science precisely because it is an organized body of knowledge, organized in such a way that large scale research projects are possible where many researchers collaborate to produce a result, a result to which the whole team is committed because the team shares a commitment to a common methodology. To become a scientist means that one learns to evaluate evidence in the right way. To become a scientist is to be inducted into a community that is bound together by a commitment to a certain methodology, in other words, a community that shares a certain probative orientation.

Of course, a scientist may come to think that the methodology pursued by their research group is flawed. There might be occasions when, in order to maintain her intellectual integrity, the scientist may have to rebel against the status quo. One expects such situations to be rare in science. But there is a sense in which such a situation is impossible in philosophy, because in philosophy there is no

status quo against which to rebel. There is a certain amount of hyperbole in that statement. There have been times and places where particular philosophical methods have been taken for granted, and within one particular philosophy department, a certain *status quo* might prevail for a while. However, the kind of large scale collaboration that is usual in the sciences – where a typical research paper may have dozens of authors, and researchers in different countries rely upon each other's established results – has yet to happen in philosophy. According to Gutting and Rescher, this is to be expected if all philosophers remain true to their pre-philosophical commitments.

But this also implies that philosophical errors are more serious than scientific errors.

Consider the case of a graduate student in the sciences who joins a laboratory engaged in the research for a vaccine. The staff of the laboratory have been divided into three teams, each focussed on a different possible formula. If two of the formulae fail but one is successful then that laboratory's work will have been a success. The head of the laboratory assigns the student to one particular team. Of course, the student might hope that her team has been assigned to study a formula that will be successful, so that she will have the glory of being on the right team in the right laboratory. But as a scientist, a participant in an organized search for knowledge, she is expected to be a good team player. If her team simply reveals that one particular formula is a dead end, she should be satisfied that she contributed to the project by eliminating a hypothesis that initially seemed plausible. She should be willing to move from one team to another, if asked. The head of the laboratory, in turn, might be aware that there are other laboratories engaged in similar research but following different leads. If this particular laboratory does nothing but eliminate false trails, and some other laboratory discovers the correct formula, still, this laboratory was playing an important role in the search for a vaccine: it was right that all of these leads should be pursued. The scientist should be glad when the search for a vaccine reaches a successful conclusion, and whether or not his laboratory or her team had the glory of producing the correct formula should be a secondary concern.

A real example that follows the same pattern can be found in the history of astronomy. In the 16th Century, there were three competing theories of astronomy, the Heliocentric theory of Ptolemy, the Geocentric theory of Copernicus and the Geo-Heliocentric theory of Tycho Brahe. Tycho Brahe was responsible for improvements in astronomical instruments and he contributed a lot of important

new data to the study of astronomy. He did so in the hope that his data would contribute to the vindication of his Geo-Heliocentric theory. In the event, Kepler used Tycho-Brahe's data to vindicate the Heliocentric theory, with planets moving in ellipses rather than circles. We might imagine that Tycho Brahe would have been disappointed with this outcome but, at the same time, we can see him as an important contributor to astronomy. It was good that astronomers consider a variety of theories – the path to scientific success involved the consideration of the merits of his theory and its eventual rejection in favour of something better. He was part of the story of success in the same way that the laboratory whose work only serves to eliminate false candidates for a vaccine has played a role in the successful search for a vaccine. To show the scientific spirit is to see yourself as part of an organized search for knowledge, and to rejoice at the success of the whole team, even if you part turned out not to be a glamorous one. Of course, it is hardly news that a scientific methodology can bring success in the long term even though there are many errors along the way precisely because the errors and the dead ends can be incorporated into the progress. Science is a collaborative process in which one scientist can learn a valuable lesson from another's mistake.

To see how things are different in philosophy, let us return to Parfit's example of two philosophers who agree that there is a God, but disagree strongly about what God wants for the world. They share the same pre-philosophical commitments, but have different ideas about what the implications of those commitments are. They could well come up with some fine conceptual distinctions, and pose new questions, uncover new and interesting arguments for established ideas. Given their common starting point they might, between themselves, reach a consensus. But – and this is Parfit's point – if there is no God, then all of that was a waste of time. That whole finely developed apparatus of distinctions between transubstantiation and consubstantiation becomes merely quaint. An outsider might admire the intellectual ingenuity, while ruefully reflecting that it is a shame that such great minds wasted their time on questions that are simply worthless given the fact that the God they were arguing about does not exist. Parfit confronts head on the possibility that this could be the fate of his work – and goes on working nevertheless.

The scientists are working together to discover the motion of the planets, or to find a functioning vaccine. Even those who pursue blind alleys have played a role in the project, and they can all recognize that the project has been successfully completed, and that success gives their activity meaning. The failure of Tycho-

Brahe's theory was not the failure of Tycho-Brahe. But philosophers who have different probative frameworks do not share the same idea of the kind of success that would grant meaning. The two theists disagree about the will of God. A third philosopher looks at their work and concludes that the implications of their pre-philosophical commitments have been explored, and the result has been to expose the intellectual bankruptcy of theism. Suppose one of the theists is led to accept this appraisal of her work. We could imagine Tycho Brahe saying "Well, my particular theory was wrong, but at least I helped people uncover the most accurate theory about the Solar System", but our imagined theist is not in the same position. She cannot say "Well, my particular theory about the will of God was wrong, but at least I helped people discover what the will of God is." Could she say "Well, my attempt to discover the will of God was wrong, but at least I helped later generations to abandon all those principles that seemed to give meaning to my life"? For Tycho-Brahe, "at least" introduces a comforting consolation. In this case, "at least" introduces a thought that would only serve to rub salt into the wound. The best source of consolation I could consider for her is "at least I made my own mistakes."

## 5. Disappointment and Meaning

At the start of this paper, I expressed a commitment to moral cognitivism (this may be regarded as a pre-philosophical commitment of my own). For the moral cognitivist, just as fear is an appropriate reaction to danger, and gratitude an appropriate reaction to gifts, disappointment is an appropriate reaction to failure. The person who fails may never come to learn of their failure, and so may never experience the bitterness of disappointment. Doubtless there are many second-rate philosophers who die with a sense of deep but undeserved satisfaction, fondly imagining that their half-baked theories were definitive solutions to the problems they considered. But what of the first-rate philosophers who experienced disappointment in their own lifetimes. Did any of them find meaning?

Confucius is, perhaps, the archetypal figure of the disappointed philosopher.

The earliest surviving biography of Confucius was written by Sima Qian, and according to Nylan and Wilson, it was Sima Qian's own experience of disappointment (his military career came to an end when he was castrated) that induced him to tell the story of Confucius as that of a man who gained wisdom

late in life as he learned to deal with disappointment.[32] Confucius had hoped to see his political vision implemented by one of the states that made up the Middle Kingdom, but in later life contented himself with being a teacher, and took up the study of music.[33]

It is this that gives piquancy to the first words of the *Analects*:

> The Master said, Studying and from time to time going over what you've learned – that's enjoyable, isn't it? To have a friend come from a long way off – that's a pleasure, isn't it? Others don't understand him, but he doesn't resent them – that's a true gentleman, isn't it? (1,1)[34]

Confucius hopes to be understood not because he is insecure and seeks reassurance, but because he hopes to help humanity by advancing a political program. If he can overcome the resentment caused by his failure, he will have become a true gentleman – from Confucius' perspective, this is the most important mark of a true gentleman precisely because it was the hardest for him to attain.

> Zilu stopped for the night at Stone Gate. The gatekeeper said, Where are you from? Zilu said, From the household of Confucius. The gatekeeper said, The one who knows there's nothing can be done but keeps on trying? (14, 40)

> When he was in Wei, the Master was once playing the chiming stones. A man carrying a basket passed the gate of the house where Confucius was staying. He said, Someone of strong convictions is sounding the stones! After a while he said, Shallow – all this clang-clanging! If no one understands you, you give up, that's all.
> *In deep water, let your robe get wet;*
> *In shallow, hike it up.*

> The Master said, Quite right – that would be the easy way out. (14,42)[35]

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[32] Nylan and Wilson, (2010), p. 5.
[33] Nylan and Wilson (2010), p. 8.
[34] Confucius (2007), p. 16.
[35] Confucius (2007), p. 102.

I only know Confucius' words through reading (a variety of) translations, so I cannot speak with confidence about the precise meaning of this passage in the original Mandarin. But I have long imagined that Confucius' point was that his bitterness, while undignified, was a symptom of the fact that he cared deeply about achieving a worthwhile goal. Recognition that the goal will never be achieved should not mean pretending that the goal was never important to begin with. I can feel good about myself because I tried my best and failed, but if I really tried my best, then I should feel bad about failing. The gentleman knows nothing can be done and yet persists, playing the stone chimes but without bitterness.

At the start of this paper, I said I was taking it for granted that a sense of satisfaction really can be a sign of a worthwhile job that has been completed. If satisfaction does indeed indicate completion of a worthwhile job, I think we can agree that such satisfaction can give a life meaning. I am now suggesting that a sense of disappointment at the failure to achieve a worthwhile task, a task appropriate to the individual's station, and a failure despite the individual's best efforts, can also give a life meaning. A meaningful life need not be a successful life.

We academic philosophers should certainly hope that this is the case, since that is the very best that most of us can expect from our chosen path.

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