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## Inventing Philosophy

Ted Cohen

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*Ted Cohen*

## Inventing Philosophy

Ted Cohen

*"But I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before."*

American culture—or the lack of culture in America—is sometimes thought of in comparative terms like these: an ordinary, educated Frenchman can be expected to know something of what is in Descartes and Rousseau, and he certainly can recognize lines from Stendahl or Flaubert; his German counterpart knows something of Kant, and not only can he recognize but he can himself quote endlessly from Goethe and Schiller; the English version knows Locke and maybe Mill and Hume, and Shakespeare is in his tongue.

But an American. What can he do? What philosophy does he know? Does he know Thoreau or Emerson? Maybe he knows something about "different drummers" or "the rude bridge that arched the flood," but maybe not, and he may not associate those things with the right authors or texts. What about the literature he knows? Can he get past 'Call me Ishmael'? Small wonder if he can't remember past that because probably he never *read* past that if he has read Melville at all.

But our documents, one might say, are not *those* philosophical and literary ones. Our texts are our foundational documents, our scripture, one might say, the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Constitution*. But what does the ordinary, educated American know of those works, really? Our last President has shown more than once that he does not know which document is which, that the location of the "Bill of Rights" and 'inalienable rights' and the stuff about "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" is not clear to him. And I would guess that the former President is not an atypical American in this regard. Who is our Descartes or Rousseau or Locke or Kant? Which words stand for us like Shakespeare's or Goethe's? And if we have none, how can we have a *culture*? How can we have a *philosophy*?

This schematic comparison of Americans with Western Europeans is exaggerated, of course. I know that. The French don't really understand Descartes. Some Germans thought they were conducting the Holocaust in the name of Kant. Some Englishmen think that the *Magna Carta* guarantees them a right to one phone call when they've been arrested. So the crude comparison of American culture with that of Western Europe sounds dissonant; but I think it is in the right key none the less.

We ordinary, educated Americans are not cultural illiterates, and yet, I daresay, we are more likely to have *King Lear* in common than *The Bear* (and we are likely to take Dickens more seriously than Mark Twain), and when we know a philosopher it is much more likely to be Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Locke, Kant, or Marx than say Peirce, Dewey, or Thoreau. That is to say that the

textual culture we may seem to have, in effect is the culture of Western Europe. But that is not exactly *ours*, and we don't really possess it in common; and that seems to leave us with nothing.

There is a European assessment of America which begins with a sense that indeed Americans have nothing, no culture or tradition rich enough to support us as significant historical people. This assessment gives rise to two specific charges, which are the most common negative remarks I hear about America:

1. Americans are politically naive. They have no clear international position and hence no discernible consistent foreign policy. And they have no domestic socialistic influence, no political left, which leaves their national politics simplistic.

2. Americans are crudely materialistic. They are bent on the acquisition of wealth for the purpose of buying indiscriminately and without taste. Those without wealth are made to feel guilty on that account, and among the unprivileged this creates great resentment and envy which frequently erupt in violence.

This is not my place to quarrel with these charges. (In fact I accept them: I virtually embrace them.) But it was recently the year of the *Constitution*, after all, and so I will take one rhetorical moment and ask your indulgence as I note that these charges come from what ought to be an uneasy smugness.

We Americans are politically naive. Who says so? Who orchestrated the battle of the Somme, the betrayal of Czechoslovakia, and the horror of Belfast? What political sophisticates did those things? How did all those poor Poles who fled their country for England in the 1930's and 1940's, and then fought for Britain, wind up being slaughtered by Stalin? Would it have been unsophisticated to save them?

The rampant and random violence that haunts American cities results from America's naive domestic politics combined with our unbridled materialism. We are uncivilized. Of course the loss of life in Europe has been infinitely greater, occurring in and around the areas of two large-scale wars—but that is different, more sophisticated politically.

The French have discovered that colonialism is morally wrong and politically incorrect, as have the English. These sophisticated realizations, these evolutions in political consciousness which outstrip American primitivism, have occurred, providentially enough, just as all those colonies were being lost. Not quite all. It was correct, evidently, for the French to leave Algeria and Indochina, and for the English to leave India; but it would be naive to think that the English should leave the Malvinas (we Americans do not have to say 'Falklands').

There is a difficulty in West Germany, of late, caused by the influx of immigrant workers. Did you know that in Germany this difficulty is sometimes called 'the Turkish problem'? In that piece of technical political terminology, and in the recent Austrian presidential politics known as Waldheimer's Disease, there is political sophistication that makes my blood run cold.

I don't feel especially good saying all those things, but it does relieve me to get them out. And that will be just about the end of it. Thank you for the time it took to read it, and for putting up with whatever offense it gave.



Let me get back to the theme. America is without an identifiable textual culture, where this means that there are no old American books which resonate in the work of contemporary Americans when we write our philosophy. If I am permitted a far-fetched comparison, I might say that when we philosophize we are like Catholics without a clergy, or, even more, like Jews without the *Talmud*. Perhaps our condition is like that described in the Hebrew Bible at the very end of the book of *Judges*:

In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes.<sup>1</sup>

How do you hear that line? Does it sound to you like a description of events and nothing more? Does it seem to have a negative thrust? Was it bad that there was no king in Israel? Listen again:

In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes.

One might hear an awful hopelessness in that line, a desperate, unremitting anxiety. The book of *Judges* is in Christian Bibles as well, but often it is placed differently there. In the Hebrew Bible it is followed immediately by the books of *Samuel* and *Kings*, and these are the books which record the subsequent history of the kings of Israel. Near the end of that history we read this:

Therefore the Lord spoke through His servants the prophets:  
 'Because King Manasseh of Judah has done these abhorrent things—he has outdone in wickedness all that the Amorites did before his time—and because he led Judah to sin with his fetishes, assuredly, thus said the Lord, the God of Israel: I am going to bring such a disaster on Jerusalem and Judah that both ears of everyone who hears about it will tingle. I will apply to Jerusalem the plumb line of Samaria and the weights of the House of Ahab; I will wipe Jerusalem clean as one wipes a dish and turns it upside down. And I will cast off the remnant of My own people and deliver them into the hands of their enemies. They shall be plunder and prey to all their enemies because they have done what is displeasing to Me and have been vexing Me from the day that their fathers came out of Egypt to this day.'<sup>2</sup>

Is this a better fate than living without a king? Perhaps those people might have had better luck with kings. Indeed they did have some good kings. There were Saul, David, and Solomon, and much later there was Josiah who was a wonder but came when it was too late for anyone to redeem Judah from Manasseh's depredations. But Saul himself was a mistake, wasn't he? God gave them Saul, but He was annoyed that they demanded a king.

If that final line from *Judges* sounds to you as if it is describing an intolerable

situation, then it should sound to you like a terrible line, because it signals that there is no good way to go. Perhaps the current state of Israel can be understood in this way. Those people were not meant to be a nation like other nations. God showed as much when He showed disappointment at their demand for a king. But when they were not a nation they were dead. What are we to do?

Well, nothing entitles me to lumber you with amateur Bible-reading and speculations upon the history of Jews in the modern world; so let me get back to the theme and try to stay with it.

Those who think that without a king we cannot be like other nations are like those who think that without a textual philosophical tradition we cannot have a philosophical culture like those of Europe. Those who think that are exactly right about their point, but they miss the larger point. We cannot have a philosophical culture—a tradition—like that of Britain or France or Germany without texts like Hume or Descartes or Kant; but who is to say that we can have no philosophy unless we have philosophy like that?

Those who want an American philosophical tradition recognizably like those of Europe would like Thoreau or Emerson or Dewey or James to be our philosophical scripture, the fount of our philosophy. The most obvious choice for such a position, probably, is a group of texts called the works of Pragmatism, an amalgam of things by Peirce, James, Dewey, Mead, and a piece or two of Tarski's. But even with that choice the project won't work. At least I think it won't. We could establish Pragmatism as the preeminent American *school*, and then American philosophers will develop as Pragmatists, Neo-Pragmatists, Tarskian Pragmatists, Early Pragmatists, Unreconstructed Pragmaticists, &c., rather like the Young Hegelians, Neo-Kantians, Marburg Kantians, Althusserian Marxists, Gramscian Marxists, Structuralists, Neo-Structuralists, Deconstructionists, &c. of modern Europe. If we do that we will do what Cary Grant does in *North by Northwest* when he tries to become an American by joining up with a European-style spy who calls himself an American.<sup>1</sup>

Our most neglected first-class thinker and writer is Thoreau (probably, unless it is Jefferson or Emerson). Thoreau thought Americans needed a scripture and he aspired to give us one in *Walden*. But Thoreau did not see that we could not take the book, or any book, as that kind of scripture. When I write I may think of the chapter in *Walden* called 'The Bean Field'. It is the part of *Walden* in which Thoreau meditates upon what it means for an American to write for American readers, and in particular what it means for Thoreau himself to be writing *Walden* for an American audience (an audience Thoreau thinks unborn when he writes). But I don't have to think of that, and certainly I don't have to suppose that you will read what I write with "The Bean Field" in mind, and no American author can or ever will suppose that Thoreau will be widely heard to resonate in his work. Perhaps a German author cannot escape the sorrows of young Werther, but American writing is not like that.

What Thoreau does not see is that if *Walden* were accepted in the way he hoped, it would amount to a kind of Europeanization of American culture. It would be un-American to accept it in that way. We do not have to read and write with *Walden* or the Pragmatists in our ears. As Cary Grant says to the



Europeanized American spy master. "Nobody has to do anything!" Then what are we American philosophers to do? Before I say something about *one* thing we might do, let me disclaim a few things. I am not asking Europeans to stop making critical observations of America, nor Americans to leave off discussing Europe and its texts. That kind of insularity is tempting, and the temptation has never found better expression than in the words of an American jazz musician.

I don't see why we need a Frenchman to come over here and tell us how to play American music. I wouldn't think of going to France and telling him how to jump on a grape.<sup>4</sup>

That's funny, yes, and one might even feel like saying good for Eddie Condon, but in general there is no good reason to be reluctant to hear European assessments. They are not all smug and negative. For instance, less than ten years before Eddie Condon's observation, in Vienna Wittgenstein said this:

What should be given to the Americans? Surely not our half-rotten culture. The Americans have no culture yet. From us, however, they have nothing to learn.<sup>5</sup>

What I want to urge is that an American philosopher might have a vocation without either continuing or imitating European models, but surely that does not forbid Americans and Europeans from absorbing and appraising one another's efforts. It may be irksome when some European assesses American culture and philosophy, but I find it far less troublesome than when the same thing is done by an American who speaks to us about America in a European idiom. I am thinking of the glib prattle and knowing weariness of American academic Marxists, for instance, or the pronouncements upon "analytical philosophy" made by American sycophants and epigones of French literary theory who are themselves utterly unable, say, to work their way through the first-order predicate calculus and consequently have absolutely no idea what they are talking about when they talk about Quine or Carnap or Davidson. That Derrida or Paul de Man should be completely ignorant of these things is not exactly excusable, but it is not obviously shameful, as it is when some American art theorist discusses the logical theory of reference, because all she has ever needed to do was step across the hall and ask some American philosopher to explain the theory to her.

One last disclaimer. When I have charted the geography of *North by Northwest* I have said that America is both a state and a state of mind, certainly not a new idea with me. The same conception is at work here. I am going to describe a kind of philosophy and I will say why it seems to me a peculiarly American kind of philosophy; but there is no reason why Europeans cannot practice it, and there is no reason why an American philosopher cannot work in traditional European modes. In fact the kind of philosophy I will be describing was practiced at its best, if not invented, by an Englishman, J. L. Austin. It is the kind of philosophy that was once called 'ordinary language philosophy', and I am going

to present it to you along with America's "ordinary art," the movies.

One topic of this essay—a kind of secret topic not carried in the title—is what is, on my view, the striking similarity between the ascendancy of Ordinary Language Philosophy and the advent of the movies. The extraordinary appeal of this kind of philosophy (to professional academics and all other students of philosophy), and of movies (to almost everyone, it seemed, and eventually even to those who meant to reserve their deepest feelings for Art), was due, in part, to their capacities to restore connections with the ordinary. This theme has at least three variations that I know of, each of them worth a monograph or two, and I will just state them roughly and settle for a very partial development.

1. The well known but little understood capacity of movies to deal with ordinary, common, even pedestrian things, and the way in which this capacity seems to have been able to do the work of the high artistic traditions typically standing behind work in other arts.

2. The curious fact that at some times for some people an authentic appreciation of the finest movies has been grounded in a deep affection for all movies, or at least for very many movies of no particular apparent artistic strength.

3. The wish that was satisfied by some of the best ordinary language philosophy, namely that philosophical language reflect without distortion language in its ordinary use.

My generation's complete absorption in movies was achieved, roughly, in four stages. The first stage was virtually unconscious. We had all gone to movies regularly as children, and they were a constant part of our lives, but most of us had just enjoyed them and had not associated them with art in any particular sense. When we became acquainted with art in a conscious and self-conscious way, we never thought that it had anything to do with movies. The thought literally never occurred to us. For us, art was essentially a European phenomenon, with a few—very few—American authors and painters mixed in, and the movies belonged with pop music, drag racing, and going to baseball games. In college we learned to take on serious things and movies didn't come along.

The second stage was occupied with three moviemakers, as I remember.<sup>6</sup> The movies of Bergman, first, and then of Godard and Truffaut appeared for the first time in America when I was in college. Bergman was the key figure. *The Seventh Seal* appeared immediately to virtually any viewer as serious and wrapped in artistic pretension. The themes, life and religion, death and salvation, are deep and obscure. The plot exhibits an obvious and intense dramatic structure. And there is real acting, immediately reminiscent of closely coached, long practiced repertory theatre. In addition to all this, one's sense that this movie was inescapably Art was fortified by what looked to be, and was, its lineage: a European ancestry: the soul of Scandinavian literature had carried over intact into the movies.

The effect of Bergman was two-sided. Initially his movies strengthened a preconception of what movies are and what the best ones would have to be like, for exactly those qualities found wanting in American movies were presented brilliantly by Bergman. Here was a moviemaker who cared about acting and story composition and even set design. But at the same time, more immediately



and directly. Bergman's movies established a *positum* for movies in general. They could no longer so easily be taken lightly or dismissed out of hand. Individual movies were now going to be taken singly, more openly and ingenuously, with theoretical conceptions at least in abeyance. It was not that a new taste or sensibility had been elicited. Indeed when that finally occurred the Bergman movies themselves would suffer for it. But it was now possible for this to come about, for now we were ready to pay attention: to try to understand, to let the demands be placed on us instead of setting them for the movies.<sup>7</sup>

In this mood we encountered Godard and Truffaut. The effect was bewildering and exhilarating. Those who had been impressed by *The Seventh Seal* and *Wild Strawberries* were now struck by they knew not what. The conception of the primacy and centrality of the theatre for movies, so recently reinforced by Bergman, was shaken. After Bergman's troupe of players, Seberg and Belmondo were nearly incomprehensible. Were they acting badly? Belmondo seemed not to be acting at all, or not in any recognizable way. As much as anything he seemed to be acting at acting: he undertook not a role but Humphrey Bogart. What then had *Bogart* given us in those American movies we had forgotten? That led us, and still leads us, to wondering what acting in movies is. But let me get on with this story.

Godard's *Breathless* and Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* were stupefying. They confounded precisely those demands and expectations Bergman had satisfied, but these movies touched us. And that left us without theories. They were to come. There would be reflections on how these movies could have worked, theories of a "new cinema," and, of course, there would appear sects of inside specialists. But for the moment there was nothing but a kind of miracle, the phenomenon of making sense of a thing whose sense is unaccountable. It was, one might say, the experience of art.

The next stage was the one that intellectuals always force upon themselves. We turned instinctively to theory and began to read, and we found *Cahiers du Cinéma*. The initial effect of that experience was incomprehensible. We had some acquaintance with movies of Ophuls, Buñel, Visconti, and others whose movies were shown by the local film society (which also showed what it called 'documentary films'), and we supposed that Godard and Truffaut and Bergman belonged with these European moviemakers, and that, as always, Europe was making the art while America was making Hollywood garbage, for this was how we thought about those American movies from our childhood local theatres. But in *Cahiers* we found Truffaut, Godard, Bazin, Rohmer, and Chabrol extolling the work of John Ford, Howard Hawks, Nicholas Ray, George Cukor, and Hitchcock. We found stunning, magnificent remarks like this,

I am willing to forgive my fellow-countrymen for the mistrust with which they view American cinema; a mistrust I myself once shared.... And then came the day when, in the shape of Claudette Colbert and Clark Gable, the cinema held up to me, under the most favourable lighting, a face without artifice, unpolished but not rough. It spoke to me in a language that was open, yet

without a hint of coarseness in its tone. It behaved like the most civilized of creatures, yet without diminishing any of its naturalness. It touched, not my schoolboy's heart with its ardour for Gide or Breton, but that innate taste that we French never lose for a moment—beyond all changes of fashion—for the art of the *moralist*.<sup>8</sup>

Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert? Frank Capra? *It Happened One Night*? The work of a moralist? The theses of these wonderfully elated Frenchmen were not so clear, but the mere fact that not only Eric Rohmer but even Francois Truffaut, the maker of *Jules and Jim*, cared for these American movies was enough to send us back to them.

The recovery of what had always been in our theatres and had entertained us as children was the last major accomplishment in the development of our appreciation. To do that we had to learn to do new things, or, rather, to undo some old ones: to see John Wayne, or perhaps that is to see the Ringo Kid, but it is not to see John Wayne enact the role of the Ringo Kid; to move with the movie instead of the story, to accept the camera's delineations and innuendoes instead of only those of dialogue and plot. It had been easy to feel the force of Bergman's telling us of a man who is a magician precisely because he knows that he has no magic. It was harder—and certainly different—to come to *feel* the moral judgment Hitchcock passes in *Rear Window*, for Hitchcock uses the movie itself to do this, to trap us, to make us watch a watcher and feel for him. What was required for this was a shift in what is taken as merely technical, mere virtuosity, and what is not.<sup>9</sup>

The final stage in my generation's acquisition of movies occurred with American movies and this is no accident. What these movies so conspicuously lack is the declared presence of artistic background so prominent in various non-American movies of that time and earlier. Buñuel, for instance, with his Picasso-dream black bulls, his compositions direct from Dali, his innocent but omnipresent and ominous children, and his menacing beggars-minus-parts, makes sense to anyone familiar with Magritte, de Chirico, and Surrealism in general. Visconti and Max Ophuls, like Bergman, appear working out of established traditions. These traditions, sometimes of the theatre, sometimes of painting, appear in the composition of individual shots, the duration of scenes, and the transitions from shot to shot. There *seem* to be no traces of these resources in Ford and Hawks. There is no obtrusive exhibition or even an overt indication of these things, and there appears a much greater reliance on the capacity of real things, when shown, to hold the attention of a viewer—mountains, horses, tomahawks, plain faces. One's first guess may have been that to work, these real things will have to be spectacular things, like mountains, sunsets at sea, Russian faces in dialectical throes—the kinds of things that appear in David Lean's movies. But when one looks one sees that this isn't so. Spectacular things can be fine, but ordinary ones will do, and often just as well and sometimes better. Sometimes ordinary things become special, as they appear freed of dramatic conventions and painterly constraints, and are just screened. Why it is



in American movies that these discoveries are made is a good topic which I must leave alone. It must have to do with the (presumed) absence of a consciousness of high art in the makers of these movies and in their presumptive audience, and it is in America where this presumption prevails—but I will say no more about that.

Every significant work of art, every artwork that *works*, attaches to its significance by way of some convention, or a style, or a tradition—some framework, or context. It may repose in this frame or struggle against it or even burst it, but without the frame there could be no *sense*. As I think of the story of movies, the importance of ordinary things, of what Panofsky has called ‘unstylized physical reality’ (although Panofsky may not have been alert to every “style”), was prefigured by the absence of any antecedently given way of beginning with extraordinary things. That is, there was no prior context, no tradition, and especially not in America. Learning to film, to film anything at all and hence the absolutely unextraordinary, was the creation of a context and not the adaptation of one already at hand. This begins to account for the fact—at least I think it is a fact—that the full appreciation of a fine movie, of *L’Aventura* or *Jules and Jim* or *Grand Illusion* or *Chinatown* or *North by Northwest*, is tied to the appreciation of pedestrian movies, while the appreciation of great music or painting is not similarly tied to appreciation of, or even acquaintance with mundane exercises. No doubt the appreciation of fine movies is *likelier* to be accompanied by acquaintance with ordinary movies than is the appreciation of fine painting to be accompanied by acquaintance with ordinary painting—just as a matter of fact, because of the omnipresence of movies in our experience. That is not the point. The claim is that with movies the appreciation of the fine is not merely accompanied by, but is dependent on the experience of the ordinary. This claim is a (perhaps unwarranted and unwanted) amplification of some remarks made a few years ago by Stanley Cavell:

The movie seems naturally to exist in a state in which its highest and its most ordinary instances attract the same audience (anyway until recently) .... [M]y claim is that in the case of films, it is ‘generally true that you do not really like the highest instances unless you also like typical ones. You don’t even know what the highest are instances of unless you know the typical as well.’<sup>10</sup>

For some time I have found Cavell’s claim powerfully suggestive, but now that I have found a way to develop it I think that my development may be foreign to Cavell’s intentions. For one thing, I do not know how to explain the relation between liking something and knowing what kind of thing it is, and I do not know how Cavell would explain the relation. To know that *x* is an instance of *y* you would have to know generally about the instantiation of *y*, I suppose, and certainly you would have to be able to recognize *typical* instances of *y*, wouldn’t



you? That seems logical. But why couldn't you like  $x$  alone among the instances of  $y$ ? There is no logical objection to that possibility, is there? If the relation between liking  $x$  and liking other, typical instances of  $y$  is not a *logical* relation, then what is it? Cavell's words suggest that it is, perhaps, a *natural* relation. But I doubt that Cavell would like to oppose logic to nature. And I am suspicious of the distinction until it is clear what is supposed to follow. Is there no connection between knowing and liking? Could you know what movies are and not like *Grand Illusion*? Could you know what movies are and not like any movies at all—not even one? Could you know what art is and not like any art you've ever seen? Or: could you like a movie and not know that it is a movie? Of course you *can* do all these things—knowing without liking, liking without knowing—so far as *logic* is concerned.

But if you do these things you will be very peculiar, even pathological, one might say. In some central kinds of cases—art is one, people are another—liking and knowing do not separate so cleanly. I do not think you can know what people are and never care for any of them, for without caring for at least some you cannot really come to know any of them. And when you like a person without reference to his being a person, that is a severely attenuated affection. Movies have required affection, I think, for there was nothing in place to count as our *knowledge* of movies, and that is not so bad when it is good to make a new beginning.

Music and painting must have their origins, too, one supposes. Panofsky thinks that the difference between movies and what he calls 'the other representational arts' is that movies originated with a technical capacity only later to be joined by an appropriate aesthetical motivation, whereas the others began with an artistic urge in need of some technical means. That is not my point. My point is that, speaking conceptually, or perhaps I should say "phenomenologically," the origin and subsequent evolution of other arts is out of time and out of mind for us: we need not refer to these origins in the act of appreciating the highest instances of music and painting. The point in music or painting, the reason why there is any, is not at the surface of our apprehension of music and painting. There is instead a *given* tradition, a history, and somehow that is enough. This is not given for movies. Instead of an entrenched tradition, coming to us from prehistory, which we have somehow been able to absorb from experience confined to the highest instances, we have our experience of *and fondness for* just plain movies. Perhaps, whatever Panofsky thinks, it was once, a million years ago in a different aesthetical world, like that with painting. But it is not like that with painting now and it has recently been like that with movies.

So much for this fact, as I see it—the dependence of fine movies on ordinary ones, and some account of the fact—the absence of an entrenched "internalized" tradition upon which movies could depend. Now, finally, I will try to connect this account of the state of movies with the condition of philosophy as it might be understood by one who would be an American ordinary language philosopher.

Think of what it is like, or would be like, to take up some technical philosopher *fresh*. If you push your students or yourself fresh into, say, Tarski or Camap or Quine or Kant or Frege, you meet an emptiness. These texts don't make

sense. One understands the words well enough, and one can identify the structures of argument. But the texts don't resonate. I am not talking about the way you and I now read Kant and Quine: I am talking about the way we first read them, or the way it would be if they were the first philosophers we'd ever read. It might be relatively clear *what* these texts are saying, but it will be less clear *why* they speak in the ways they do (and so it won't really be altogether clear just what they are saying), and it will be nearly impossible to understand why they are speaking, for it will be nearly incomprehensible why anyone would care to speak about *that*. I don't mean that one won't, simply and literally, *understand*, but that one won't *appreciate*.

When you are in this position and care to go on, or when you push your students on, there are two ways to do it. Either way, you must somehow fix the setting in which this text is to be animated. You may try to do this either by referring to the text's heritage, its generating ancestry, or by making the text speak directly to you about what you know you care about. The first way is to look behind Kant to Hume, Leibniz, and the rest, or behind Quine to classical Vienna Positivism. The second is to read the text as if it were speaking your own non-technical language. At least in writing about them, this is the way in which Austin reads Descartes, Berkeley, Ayer, and Wisdom. This is not simply reading, nor is it simple. It is exceptionally artful reading. It is the same master art which Austin deploys in the construction of examples. In fact the reading sometimes consists of supplying examples which make philosophical theses devastatingly concrete. In the movies of Hawks, and Ford, similarly, it is not that there *was* no composing before shooting. I meant that those movies *look* or can look that way. It is not that they are artless, but that they appear artless; and it takes marvelous art to establish that appearance. It is the same art which makes the ordinary real things *look* like that, *bodying* themselves forth. This is art whose power it is to render the ordinary compelling. This is the art which Austin practiced, of which he was a master without peer. It can seem ingenuous, natural, and easy to establish the ordinary force of language by making up examples of its commonplace use. But it is sublimely difficult.

A strain of ordinary language philosophy insisted exclusively on this second way of reading, reading as if the text were speaking "ordinary language." Its proponents may have avoided the first way because they thought it looks back to bankrupt or evil beginnings, or they may have done it therapeutically, or mindlessly, out of ignorance. This is not my concern. I am concerned with the constructive reason for going the second way, for making the text speak to *you*.

If a philosopher, say Descartes or Kant, tells us about knowledge, say, and what he says nowhere fits our concept of knowledge and everywhere militates against our ordinary use of the word 'know', then how can he have told us about *knowledge*? How will we have understood what he is talking about? Perhaps he would tell us that he doesn't care whether his account matches our usual use of 'know', that he is free to use that word and philosophize around it as he likes. No doubt. But then how are we to understand why he expects us to be interested? He said, or so we thought, that he was talking about knowledge. Do we still believe him? Did *he* know whether he was talking about knowledge? Why



does he call this thing he is talking about 'knowledge'? Now perhaps he tells us that we are simply ignorant, that knowledge has been discussed in this way for centuries, at least since Plato, and that we ought to know that, that having that background is prerequisite for really understanding him. This may explain perfectly well why we need to know Descartes if we are to understand Kant—in some class in the history of ideas or in the history of philosophy; but what *reason* is left for reading either Descartes or Kant? What if we are committed to a direct engagement—a philosophical conversation, or any kind of conversation—with this text, and we don't want to animate the text artificially by placing it on a genealogical tree? That was the first way of dealing with the text.

We are committed not to go the first way with movies once we've seen that they are not kinds of paintings or plays or whatever, because there is no first way to go. What great movies once had to do, since they could not assume that we had absorbed some high tradition, was to play upon our sense of movies in general: the sensibility they required was a common sense.

My suggestion is that ordinary movies stand to movies' highest instances somewhat as ordinary language (and what it is about) stand to philosophical language (and whatever it is about).

There is no critical canon for movies, or at least there was none, in the recent past. And at that time movies afforded us a way of getting in touch with art directly, as I'm suggesting that ordinary language affords us a direct connection. We were once drawn to the movies and lived with them without knowing they were Art. There seems no way to approach Sophocles without Aristotle's *Poetics*, no way to approach Dürer without Panofsky, no way to approach T. S. Eliot without T. S. Eliot, no way to approach Webern without all the help you can get. But you can go straight to the movies.

In ordinary language philosophy, or, as it once was called, in 'Oxford analysis', one went to work on problems of obvious intrinsic and human interest, without especially caring whether that was Philosophy. One can feel in one's soul the problem of our knowledge of other minds, or one might infuse it from *Othello*, without first being indoctrinated in its importance, or, like J. L. Austin, take up the topic of excuses without first finding it in a philosophical encyclopedia.

What I am suggesting is a philosophical practice which is a kind of perpetual rebirth, a continuing innocence. It is not the only way to philosophize, but it is a way and it seems to me an especially *American* way. It amounts to starting over, always, every time, taking nothing for granted, assuming nothing about the salience of the problems we are working on or the efficacy of any traditional "method." It is one way of doing what Austin had in mind when he said

Using, then, such a method, it is plainly preferable to investigate a field where ordinary language is rich and subtle, as it is in the pressing practical matter of Excuses, but certainly is not in the matter, say, of Time. At the same time we should prefer a field which is not too much trodden into bogs or tracks by traditional



philosophy, for in that case even 'ordinary' language will often have become infected with the jargon of extinct theories, and our own prejudices too, as the upholders or imbibers of theoretical views, will be too readily and often insensibly, engaged. Here too, Excuses form an admirable topic; we can discuss at least clumsiness, or absence of mind, or inconsiderateness, even spontaneousness, without remembering what Kant thought, and so progress by degrees even to discussing deliberation without for once remembering Aristotle or self-control without Plato....How much it is to be wished that similar field work will soon be undertaken in, say, aesthetics; if only we could forget for a while about the beautiful and get down instead to the dainty and the dumpy.<sup>11</sup>

This may sound easy, but it is not. It is very, very difficult. It is perilous and it is exhausting. The peril: you may choose a topic which turns out to yield no riches. There is no guarantee that thinking about the dumpy will get us anywhere. It is easier to go for the topic of Knowledge or Beauty or Justice—something sanctioned in advance as a Philosophical Topic. And even if the topic is a rich one, our efforts may get us nothing. It is safer to sign on to some method or program already licensed: do a Kantian Critique of something Kant didn't get to, do a Marxist analysis of bourgeois conceptions of justice in late capitalist society with special attention to the advertisements for American Express Gold Cards, join the Davidson program and do a Tarskian analysis of compound adverbial forms of English, work on alternative lexical orderings of Rawlsian goods, or Deconstruct the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

I have nothing against those programs and methods, nor those historically sanctified problems. But how about trying something new, something brand spanking new, a problem you *feel* and didn't have to be indoctrinated in the importance of; and how about going to work on the problem with no particular assumptions and just *thinking about it* as hard as you can. If this were one's steady philosophical diet it would be as if one had to invent the world again every day. Exhausting. Yes. But as the man said,

...Solitary, singing in the West, I strike up for a New World.

It takes faith to do that, and energy, certainly, and maybe even foolhardiness. But the promise of America is not something for nothing; it is more like everything for everything.

We must have examples, but for now I will give just a part of one, a beginning.

A friend says that he does not care for baseball. He finds it boring. In fact he says it is boring. Here are two things to work on:

1. This friend says that baseball is boring. Another friend says that Bach is boring. What's the difference? Is it more noble to be bored by baseball than to be bored by Bach? Does the friend who likes Bach display better taste than the

one who likes baseball? Why? What does liking Bach show about that friend's personality? His sensibility? Are these things different from what is shown about the personality, sensibility, &c of the friend who likes baseball?

And then, what does it show about you that either of these people is your friend? How can someone be your friend who doesn't like baseball—worse, who finds baseball *boring*? If he not only finds baseball boring, but says that he is bored? Says it to you? Could he be your friend if he did not like Bach? Could someone be your friend who did not like *anything* that you like? Would he then just like you?

2. Let us look more deeply at the poor soul who says that baseball is boring. Suppose we ask him, either, what he means by saying that baseball is boring, or what is boring about baseball (these are not quite the same question, as Austin would be eager for us to realize). Suppose he tells us that baseball is not exciting or that it is seldom exciting. Does he mean that he himself does not often get excited when watching baseball? We may already have known that: that seems to be another way of saying, almost, what he said when he made his first and unforgivable remark about baseball. No, he means that the game itself is not exciting. But why? Because not much *happens*. But what counts as something happening? When he goes for a drive in the country, a stroll in the woods, a hike in the hills, nothing much happens. Is he bored then? Oh but those outings are different, he says, because baseball is a sport, like football and soccer and tennis. But in what ways is baseball *like* football and soccer and tennis? If you go to a baseball game looking for the kinds of things that "happen" in football, you won't find many. But why do you go looking in that way? When you listen to Bach do you set your feet a-tapping and soon begin to clap your hands and dance? Does Bach's music disappoint you because it doesn't help you do those things?

But Bach's music is art, and baseball is not. What does that mean? What is the point in a remark like that? That question is the one I would like to answer when I take up "the very idea of art," and when I do, I will begin by asking why anyone would ever care to say that something is or isn't art.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Judges*, 21.25.

<sup>2</sup> *II Kings*, 21. 10-15.

<sup>3</sup> I think this Hitchcock movie is, among other things, an argumentative meditation on what it means to be an American. I have made a case for this way of seeing the movie in "*North by Northwest: The Face of America*," the first in a series of three lectures I was privileged to deliver at the College of William and Mary in 1987. The series was called "An Idea of America." The second lecture was the beginning of the essay printed here.

<sup>4</sup> This poignant remark is attributed to Eddie Condon by Whitney Balliett in *American Musicians* (New York, 1986), p. 5. Condon is supposed to have said this after Hugues Panassié's abortive attempt to produce what he thought the right kind of jazz music on some recordings he organized for the RCA Victor (Bluebird) label

around 1938. Parassie was concerned with the direction American jazz was taking and he hoped to set things right by coming to America and arranging recording sessions.

- 5 The remark is attributed by Friedrich Waismann. See *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, conversations recorded by Waismann (Blackwell, 1979). The original German is "Was soll man denn den Amerikanern gebenn? Etwa unsere halvertaute Kultur? Die Amerikaner haben noch keine Kultur. Aber von uns haben sie nichts zu lernen." See *Wittgenstein und der Wiener Kreis* (Blackwell, 1967).
- 6 My amateur's historical observations owe a great deal to Alexander Sesonske, and my remarks on the styles of various movies owe much to Sesonske and also to Marian Keane. Neither of those people would subscribe to what I say, but both wrought improvements in my sketch. Sesonske has insisted that if I could remove my chronological and regional blinders, although I might maintain my description of the transformation of sensibility, I would have to set the date at least a decade earlier. I think he is right, and that the first very wide general sense of movies-as-art was stimulated by the Italian neo-Realist and Japanese movies that began to appear in America just after the war. But I cannot speak directly for that experience, and so I am telling the story of Bergman and the French New Wave, the stimulus for a part of my generation.
- 7 This is a mark of a genuine form. A work so located then possesses a kind of autonomous integrity. This does not assure its success, but it reserves to the work the dictation of the terms upon which it will succeed or fail. To regard a work in this way is to treat it like a person—something which may prove likable or disgusting, wonderful or dreadful, but which does not before the fact require your sanction for its being.
- 8 Eric Rohmer, "Rediscovering America," in *Cahiers* 54, Christmas, 1955, p. 88.
- 9 This conversion is one way in which the sense of a form or genus or medium develops. It is the mark that the auditor takes works seriously as being in the medium, takes them on their own terms.
- 10 Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (New York, 1971), pp. 5-6.
- 11 J.L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," in *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 182-183.