Being on the Ground:
Philosophy, Reading, and Difficulty

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Abstract: *Philosophy's task in the university of today is to show that there is such a thing as universal knowledge and to teach the student how to receive it. Put another way, it is to help students become highly literate, that is, to learn to read difficult texts. This paper first diagnoses the malaise current in the university through the dialectic of accessibility, whereby the more accessible a thing is made, the harder it is to grasp. It then argues that it is a mistake to presume that the only universal knowledge that can be taught are subjects whose content can be quantified. In fact, the application of the scientific method to cultural reality results in an antinomy that requires the inquirer either to treat language as an event in the world and deny its assertory character or to judge it as a true or false statement. Finally, the author argues that university students need to learn to read texts that will challenge them on the most basic level of their being.*

There is photograph from post-war Japan, which appeared in the *Asahi Shinbun* [newspaper]. People are sleeping on the ground outside the Iwanami bookstore in Kanda, Tokyo.[1] The caption says: "People queue overnight to buy the first book of philosopher Kitaro Nishida's complete works in front of Iwanami Bookstore on July 19, 1947 in Tokyo, Japan." I first came across a copy of this photo more than 25 years ago. At the time I mused, "I hope that someday students will line up to buy my book," and then, more sardonically, "I wish they would line up to buy any philosophy book," and " Will anyone stay up all night to buy any book at all."

[1] The image can be view on the Getty images website. http://www.gettyimages.co.jp/detail/%E3%83%8B%E3%83%A5%E3%83%BC%E3%82%B9%E5%86%99%E7%9C%9F/people-queue-overnight-to-buy-the-first-book-of-philosopher-%E3%83%8B%E3%83%A5%E3%83%BC%E3%82%B9%E5%86%99%E7%9C%9F/468992124#people-queue-overnight-to-buy-the-first-book-of-philosopher-kitaro-picture-id468992124

Indeed, in the intervening years people have stayed up all night to buy things, even books – *Harry Potter*, for example. Whatever one may wish to say about the *Harry Potter* series, it is not Nishida. More commonly people now sleep on the ground to buy a new product, either a game or a gadget. I do not think it is too much to say that something has been lost. I think that there is room to wish for a return by ordinary Japanese to themselves, to their own lives as a serious project to be properly reflected upon.

The photo has a direct bearing on my thesis in that Nishida's writings are notoriously difficult. My thesis is that the role of philosophy in today's university is to teach students to read such difficult texts.[2] We are to teach students to read these texts slowly, carefully, with understanding. As a British colleague of mine reminded me, in Britain it is proper to ask, "What did you read at university?" not "What did you study at university?".

I am not unaware that our students come to us by and large literate. They can read and write. But, not surprisingly, they struggle to read difficult texts; they are literate, not highly literate. It is unsurprising that students would struggle to read difficult texts; what is a cause for concern is that the university no longer sees itself as having the mission to teach this particular art. In fact, philosophy's central task in the university is to teach this art to today's students.

Allow me to clarify what I mean by "difficult" texts. First of all, difficult, in the way I intend it, does not simply equate with complex. There are difficult texts that are complex and others that are not. Nishida wrote in a very grammatically complex Japanese but this does not constitute the real difficulty of the text. Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote in a limpid French and yet his texts are, by my lights, extremely difficult.

In the context of what philosophy does at the university "difficult texts" are those texts that help us to reflect on ourselves in the human predicament. As I will show below, there is no direct approach to the human condition. Rather we reflect on ourselves and try to give that reflection an objective expression. This is done in both art and philosophy. Where philosophy differs from art is that it explicitly reflects on the difficulties inherent in giving an objective expression to my

[2] I must confess that I have been heavily influenced in my use of the word difficult here by Robin Kirkpatrick's excellent study, *Dante's Inferno: Difficulty and Dead Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). There he ties together the difficulty that character Dante faces in the poem with the difficulty the author Dante faced in writing the poem and how the overcoming of both led to a new, living poetry.

subjective and existential situation. Philosophy makes reflection itself the object of its reflection.

One way of making this clearer is by contrasting the notion of "difficulty" with the related notion of "accessibility." Part of what we do as educators is to make texts more accessible to our students. I am not opposed to this. I appreciate those who write clearly and break down complex ideas to simpler parts. Those of us who teach survey courses in philosophy must simplify some things in order to present a large amount of material in a limited amount of time. This can be done more or less skillfully. But here a different sort of problem arises.

Accessibility itself is subject to its own dialectic – not always, but often enough, the more accessible something becomes, the harder it becomes to grasp. The more any experience, but especially an experience of knowledge, is made available, the less one has of it. Certainly, the more one approaches the goal of knowledge the further away it recedes – the more we know, the more we know that we do not know. One can distinguish two levels to this dialectic. A more general level that applies to varying degrees to any experience and the more radical level of knowing oneself, which is the source of the dialectic in its more general forms.

Philosophy is critical, then, to higher education today because philosophy alone, out of all the disciplines, makes this dialectic an object of its reflection. I believe that the lack of appreciation of this dialectic is one of the major stumbling blocks to getting an education at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Let us begin with the dialectic more common form. It occurs even on the level of physical accessibility. To borrow an example from the American novelist Walker Percy, in the sixteenth century the Grand Canyon was a very difficult place to reach and one can imagine Gracía López de Cárdenas's awe when the ground opened beneath his feet after his ordeal of crossing hundreds of miles of mesquite.[3] In sharp contrast, we drive right up to the rim, get out, take a few pictures and leave. Have we *seen* the Grand Canyon? How does our experience compare with García López?

In the university, we are not sightseeing. But the experience is not totally different either. We present our students with some of the greatest texts ever

[3] This example appears in Chapter 2, "The Loss of the Creature" of his book *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other* (New York, Picador, 2000). He opens the chapter with these words: "Every explorer names his island Formosa, beautiful. To him it is beautiful because, being first, he has access to it and can see it for what it is. But to no one else is it ever as beautiful - except the rare man who manages to recover it, who knows that has to be recovered."

produced by the human race: Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and so on. Further, these texts come in translation and in relatively inexpensive paperback editions. One can download all the published works of Kant for free. We have numerous commentaries and introductions. In other words, we have constructed roads that lead right up to the rim of these texts. The very existence of these introductory books indicates a desire, an implicit recognition on the part of people that they lack something vital and important to which they are cultural heirs but which they cannot somehow grasp.

So the question emerges: Are our students actually engaging the text on any deeper level than earlier generations of students who had none of these advantages? Or are all these attempts at making the texts accessible somehow obstructing the students approach? Do we educate the students to the fact that text "has to be *re*covered" by each one of them? Dare we teach them that, in the words of Flannery O'Connor,

> the artist uses his reason to discover an answering reason in everything he sees. For him, to be reasonable is to find in the object, in the situation, in the sequence, the spirit which makes it itself. This is not an easy or simple thing to do. It is to intrude upon the timeless, and that is only done by the violence of a single-minded respect for the truth (O'Connor, 1962, 82-3).

This experience with philosophy and literature is nowhere more striking than when it comes to knowledge of ourselves. Rousseau wrote that the inscription at the temple Delphi, "Know thyself" is the most important and most unheeded of the moral precepts. But he also explains why. "So that it is, in a sense, by dint of studying man that we have made ourselves incapable of knowing him" (Rousseau,1992 12). Recall also Nietzsche's haunting words as opens *The Genealogy of Morals*: "We knowers are unknown to ourselves, and for a good reason: how can we ever hope to find what we have never looked for?[…]The sad truth is that we remain necessarily strangers to ourselves, we don't understand our own substance, we *must* mistake ourselves; the axiom, 'Each man is farthest from himself' will hold for to all eternity. Of ourselves we are not 'knowers'…." (Nietzsche, 1990, 149).

The peculiar mode of human self-consciousness is such that a person can gain knowledge of many external facts – the size of Neptune, the aggressive nature of meerkats, the trend of incomes in present-day China – and still be relatively

clueless about who she is. To ourselves, we seem to have an identity that slides between the capacity for marvelous insights, acts of real charity and incredible obtuseness and viciousness. All of us share in St. Paul's plaintive words: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. […] I can will what his right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do (Rom. 7:15-19).

This radical form of the problem of accessibility is part of the human condition with all of the ethical, epistemological, and metaphysical considerations that implies. Again, philosophy makes this human condition an explicit object of its reflection, and this is the critical point, none of the other knowledge gained in a university will have any meaning without this exploration. Without this all the other studies will be mere information.

But this perennial problem has its contemporary form. The university in the twenty-first century makes its aim to provide an education in the most effective way possible. It provides more and more services to its students. It accommodates more and more diversity. It tracks student learning, it analyses student progress. It requires us as faculty to develop measurable learning outcomes so that we can show that students have gained knowledge that they did not previously possess.

I do not mean to disparage these efforts, in fact I support them. I merely wish to point out a hidden trap that, if we are not aware of it, and if we do not make our students aware of it, can undermine all of our attempts at education in the very attempts we make.

One can provide information about the cosmos in very digestible bite-size units and then test the students to show that they have, in fact, learned something. But one cannot increase a student's self-knowledge or self awareness in the same way. In fact, the very attempt to do so will necessarily backfire. The more we render the student an object to be grasped, the further away the self to be grasped will drift from the self doing the grasping.

I will go further and say that all of our attempts at making an education "easier," more accessible, more accommodating have this unwanted but unavoidable consequence. The process ends up making learning, the grasping of the true essence of something, more and more difficult. This explains the malaise that we often experience in the classroom in which students, brought into contact with the greatest art, literature, thought, and sciences, respond with bored yawn and wonder when the class will be over, when they can collect their credit, collect their degree and get out. Please believe me, I am not blaming the student.

Philosophy is the one discipline that reflects on this inherent difficulty in education and includes ways of helping the student become self-aware and thus begin not so much to overcome this obstacle as to live within its tension. The idea that the closer something is brought to someone, the more it recedes from his or her grasp is a central anthropological insight about which philosophy reflects. Other philosophers may speak about this problem in a different vocabulary than mine but all the great philosophers have recognized this problem. We can begin with Socratic irony which intends to prevent a direct grasp of what is being communicated and end with Heidegger's reflection that the most thought-provoking thing in our thought-provoking time is that we are still not thinking. Plato used the dialogic form in order to force the reader to grapple with what he was trying to express. The more straightforward philosophical treatise exemplifies the dialectic of accessibility in that it seems easier to analyze; it seems more accessible, while, in fact, it only makes this grappling harder because the reader can suffer from the false impression that one needs merely to grasp the reasons and the conclusions that follow necessarily from them. But neither Hume nor Kant can be approached in such a straightforward fashion without missing the depth of what they are trying to express. The beauty of philosophy is when the student recovers for him or herself that depth.

Philosophy is not having information about a philosopher, nor having his or her texts memorized. The one thing necessary for philosophy is the struggle to understand what the philosopher thought, what the philosopher is obliquely trying to communicate through a series of words on the page. This is not done without a certain amount of struggle. These efforts at making something accessible can function as the gateway to an encounter with the mind of great philosopher, if they remind the student of the struggle involved. I do not despise the popularizers. I just want all of us to realize that each time we move the goal closer, it recedes. Letting students struggle with difficult texts is not a bad thing. Students need to be aware that a liberal education is a struggle for the truth that requires a single-mindedness that is not gained in a day. One has to wrest the truth from all of the paraphernalia that the modern university has become and one has to be aware of the need for this wresting.[4]

[4] In the spirit of what I am saying, let me complicate the picture just a bit more. The false conclusion of what I have been arguing is: "Anything that can be rendered accessible is, in the end, not worth having." This is to fall into the opposite trap. One realizes that one must struggle to understand the great texts and then one incorporates the obstacles into the desired object - one thinks that only that over which one has to struggle has worth. The greatest

So far I have argued that philosophy's task is to teach students to read difficult texts and that by difficult I do not simply mean complex but refer to a quality of self-reflection that makes all attempts at a direct grasp useless. By this argument I believe that I have already begun to answer the common objection to the study of philosophy – that it is somehow impractical or useless. To the objection that philosophy bakes no bread, one can only respond, Man does not live by bread alone. That is, without this quality of self-reflection that philosophy helps to provide, all our other studies run the risk of being worse than useless, of being harmful.

The counter argument generally takes the following form. There is one species of knowledge about which there is universal agreement that it is universal: mathematics and the hard sciences, or not to put too fine a point on it, the STEM disciplines. If the university is to teach universal knowledge, and both I and my opponents agree on this, then their conclusion is, to teach those things that everyone can agree are true.

This issue has become, once again, a "hot" issue, in the light of efforts by some in the Japanese Ministry of Education, Cultures, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) to greatly reduce or eliminate the humanities and social sciences in higher education, while increasing the funding and manpower dedicated to the so-called STEM areas.[5] At the Japan Philosophical Association meeting in May of 2016, its President, Yasushi Kato, gave an importance defense of philosophy's place in university education.[6] Such reflections are important because they help each of us to be able, should we be called upon, to give an adequate account to the public as well as to various officials of the necessity of our work.

In speaking to other philosophers, though, I would characterize the problem with this position is that precisely the STEM disciplines cannot account for themselves or for the human who practices them. I again turn to Percy in order to argue that "when the functional method [of science] is elevated to a total organon of reality and other cognitive claims denied, the consequence must be an antinomy, for

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treasures offer themselves gratuitously. One overcomes the obstacles in order to receive something freely.

[5] The controversy began due to a letter sent on June 8, 2015 from Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) that apparently called on national universities to close or reorganize their humanities and social sciences propgrams in favour of more practical, vocational education. See http://apjjf.org/-Jeff-Kingston/4381 for an overview in English.

[6] Please see pp. 8-23 of this journal for the text of this talk.

a nonradical instrument is being required to construe the more radical reality which it presupposes but does not understand" (Percy, 2000, 240).

The scientific method posits a world in which "every detailed occurrence can be correlated with its antecedents in a perfectly definite manner exemplifying general principles" (Percy, 2000, 222). On the other hand, culture can be defined as "the ensemble of all the modes of assertory activity" (Percy, 2000, 222). Here Percy is following Ernst Cassirer and viewing culture as made up of "symbolic forms." That is, culture is the totality of different ways in which the human spirit construes the world and asserts its knowledge and belief. But neither Percy nor Cassirer draws the simple conclusion that given this, then culture is "placed beyond the reach of objective knowledge in general and the scientific method in particular" (Percy, 2000, 223). Rather, an assertion is a real event in time and space and, as such, it can be and has been investigated. So the question that has to be asked is not whether it can be done - it has been done and fact proves possibility, but whether or not such investigations lead to an antinomy - two trains of equally valid thought or argument that lead to two contradictory conclusions. Percy argues that is does.

This antinomy is seen most clearly in the different ways that scientists think about and talk about myths. On the one hand, judging the assertion that "Maui, our ancestor, trapped the wandering sun and made it follow a regular course" as true-or-false claim, scientists are unanimous in declaring it false. There is no evidence that Maui did any such thing, or even that the being Maui actually exists.

On the other hand, if the scientist thinks of the assertion not as a true-or-false claim but sees the assertion itself as a phenomenon under consideration (as in an anthropological study of the mythic mind) then judgments vary. There are those who hold that that myths are in some sense true. Others would hold that myths are necessary for the function of society and that our modern society is impoverished by its lack of myth. We require a new mythology or the recovery of archetypes. A "re-enchantment" of the world.

In this case, Percy observes, the mythical consciousness is not evaluated "according as it is true or false or nonsensical, but according to the degree to which it serves a social or cultural function" (Percy, 2000, 225). And this means that it is a mistake to judge a myth using scientific standards and to proclaim the myth false. A myth can be symbolically true as it satisfies the symbolic needs of the society. But as Percy comments, "the antinomy is manifest in the very usage of the word *myth* by modern ethnologists." On the one hand it is a value-charged term. Myth means a belief which is "not true." On the other hand, the term myth is used neutrally, "as

data-element along with other data-elements, canoes, baskets, dwellings" (Percy, 2000, 225). The result is the prescriptive stance that a culture needs that which the scientist knows to be false. However, this prescription cannot work (and the scientist knows this), if the myth is believed to be false.

This leads to a certain schizophrenia in both the scientific community and the culture at large. We know certain things are false but we somehow need to prop them up in order to enhance our well-being. It ends up postulating two types of humans - those who need myths and those (scientists) who observe and tell the truth. But there are not two types of humans. Rather the antinomy results from the limitations of the scientific method itself.

The scientific method is itself not simply a nexus of cause and event but an assertory or cultural activity. I will follow Percy in summarising the difference between the object of the scientific method and the method itself in the following terms:

> One is a dynamic succession of energy states, the other is an assertion, an immaterial act by which two *entia rationis* are brought into a relation of intentional identity. Both these elements, world event and symbolic assertion, are provided for in the scientific method but it is a topical provision such that a symbolic assertion, *S* is *P*, *E=f(*C), is admitted as the sort of activity which takes place between scientists but is not admitted as a phenomenon under observation. A scientific assertion is received only as a true-or-false claim, which is then proved or disproved by examining the world event to which it refers. *The symbolic assertion cannot itself be examined as a world event unless it be construed as such, as a material event of energy exchanges, in which case its assertory character must be denied*. (Percy, 2000, 237)

Percy goes on to explain that at the subcultural level of phenomena the antinomy does not occur because this distinction between world event and intersubjective assertion holds. But when culture itself becomes the object of scientific investigation the assertion has to be accepted both as a true-or-false claim between scientists and as phenomenon under investigation. The assertion has to be

fitted into the scheme of "event *C* leads to event *E*." But this is impossible. "An assertion is a real event but it is not a space-time event" (Percy, 2000, 237). When one attempts to order an assertion into the scheme of world events then either the assertory character is denied, or it is accepted as an assertion but not as a world event. "The final result is an antinomy with scientists interpreting the same event in a contradictory fashion, as a world event and denying its assertory character, as an assertory event, a true-or-false claim, but refusing to examine it as such" (Percy, 2000, 237).

For his part Percy proposes a radical anthropology that does not stop at the functional linkages of space-time events but includes an account of the scientific method's elements and structures. An "account of the scientific method's elements and structures" is a philosophy of science. It is part of an account of the human as being who can flourish or wither in an astonishing variety of ways that do not at all correlate with good and bad environments.

Thus, a concentration on STEM subjects will lead to a worsening of the already present situation – citizens who know more and more about the world around them and less and less about their own place in it. No is seriously calling for the abandonment or reduction of STEM subjects. There is capital available for these important enterprises and certainly the government and its ministry in Japan and other countries is right to be concerned about these subjects. What I am arguing for is an equal concern for the persons who carry out these activities. These people also need an understanding of themselves.

A better understanding of reality through a better understanding of the self through a better of understanding of difficult texts is the crux of my argument. A "difficult text" then does not refer to one that is "unnecessarily complex" and knowledge of self is an ongoing struggle. These two things work together in a university education because what makes a text "difficult" is that it demands that I change myself in order to understand the it and in so changing myself I also am able to come to some knowledge of myself. Human beings long for change and loathe it. This is also the structure of reading a difficult text – I am drawn to it and I resist it. And this is universal. It is as true of the works of Nishida as it is of the works of Kant. All great texts lead to this point.

I have approached the task of philosophy first from the ground up, as it were, arguing that the basic act of philosophy is to read and understand a text written by another philosopher. In conjunction with this I have also showed why excessive reliance on the STEM disciplines will lead to an antinomy. Now I want to approach

the problem more from the top down, looking at the definition of the university and thinking through the role that philosophy can and should play in it.

John Henry Newman wrote at the beginning of his classic, *The Idea of a University*, that a university is " the place where universal knowledge is taught." He cannot simply be referring to things like mathematics and physics whose research results remain invariant through time and space. Rather, "universal" refers to a quality by which the knowledge has an effect on every person who receives it. Universal knowledge is addressed to everyone and yet reaches him in his particular circumstances.

This becomes clear if we look at the three traditional faculties of the university: medicine, law, and theology. Medicine is not the faculty of biology, rather it teaches the art of healing each and every human in the particular circumstances of his or her illness. Law teaches more than general precepts of what is allowed and what is not allowed, but teaches jurisprudence, the art of judging what law is to be applied and how it is to be applied in each particular case. Finally, theology does not teach general thoughts on God, but teaches how the message of the Gospel is to be understood so that it may be taught to each person in their particular situation.

Further, medicine, law, and theology are universal because all human beings need, want, and deserve good health, a just society, and proper relation with God. That is, these disciplines teach the universal knowledge of which Newman speaks and without which no place of learning can be a university.

If one accepts this, then what is the role of philosophy in the university? It seems to me that it is to enable the student to think universally, that is, to understand or to comprehend the universal knowledge that we are teaching them. We can specify this by saying, that philosophy's task in the university of today is to show that there is such a thing as universal knowledge and to teach the student how to receive it.

We can further specify this by saying that the way in which one shows that there is such a thing as universal knowledge and teaches students to comprehend it is by teaching them how to read difficult texts – texts that either impart universal knowledge or impart knowledge in a universal way.

Finally, this can be even further specified for present day Japan. The role of philosophy in the age of digital devices and instant messaging and tweets is to teach university students how to, slowly and carefully, read relatively long and difficult texts.

Our students come to us with a highly developed set of skills. Generally, they are good test takers, good note takers, good at finding answers to limited questions and skilled at finding where the answers might be. All of our students are literate, they can read and write Japanese and not a few of them can read a fairly complex passage in English.

Through no fault of their own, most of our students cannot read a difficult philosophical or literary text. While they are literate, they are not highly literate. Our task is to make them highly literate, to teach them to read difficult texts.

The first kind of difficulty that students encounter in the university is that of complexity and ambiguity. We have already established that is not the difficulty at which philosophy aims. Students find in the university that things are no longer clear-cut; there are no clear right and wrong answers. Different interpreters offer different views on the same text and these views often clash with one another. There is a real value in reading these complex texts, texts whose grammar and syntax is unfamiliar. It enables the student to hold a complex thought in mind, to see different aspects of a problem simultaneously and to accept that it is often a messy world.

The second level of difficulty is the one in which philosophy has an interest. It occurs when the work makes you face a reality that you would rather not. An example is Rousseau's famous *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, in which he responded with a resounding 'No' to the question of whether the Arts and Sciences improved morals. Europeans were proud of their technical, scientific progress and equated it with having a higher moral standard than the primitive peoples about which they were hearing. Say what you will about Rousseau's "noble savage," he did force European intellectuals to look at their own lack of virtue, their hypocrisy, and their smug satisfaction. The university is the time and the place that many students learn of the failings of their society. They learn about the problems of poverty and injustice. They learn about unequal distributions of resources and exploitation. They explore the issues of discrimination and gender. This is an important moment in their development.

But let's be honest. Rousseau's *First Discourse* won the prize from Academy of Dijon that year, that is, the Academy loved hearing how depraved the Academy was. Our students enjoy hearing about how corrupt the establishment is. We can all enjoy either a Marxist or a capitalist critique of the present situation. We may get discouraged but a lot of social critique is used to either make me feel good about myself (I am not part of the establishment) or make me feel romantically bad about

the state of the world (things are terrible, but that is way things are). We are sad, but not too sad.

I do not mean to belittle this moment in which we shock our students into awareness of issues or problems about which, up till that point, they have been blissfully unaware. I do not mean that none of these shocks ever bear fruit. When one talks to very dedicated people, their commitment often is rooted in some experience at the university that opened their eyes and gave their life direction. Philosophy plays a role in this opening of the eyes and in giving some direction.

But I think for that to really happen, we have to reach a new level of difficulty: the internal difficulty of allowing one's self to be challenged by a truth whose shape we cannot really anticipate, the level for which we use the word, conversion. Both streams of the Western tradition, Greek philosophy and Judeo-Christian thought, begin and end with the notion of conversion or change. Plato gives classic expression to it in his allegory of the cave, in which the denizen of the cave is dragged up kicking and screaming into the light and then returns to the cave to tell others about what exists outside the cave (to their utter amusement). The Christian Gospel's message is simply, "Repent, and believe the Good News." This is what makes a text difficult in the way that I intend. They are not difficult in the way that theoretical physics or pure mathematics is difficult. They are difficult because of the real possibility they embody to change the reader. The classic works of the tradition put demands on the reader. All of them proclaim with Rainer Maria Rilke "You must change your life." George Steiner expresses it in this way:

> The archaic torso in Rilke's famous poem says to us: "change your life". So do any poem, novel, play, painting, musical composition worth meeting. The voice of intelligible form, of the needs of direct address from which such form springs, asks: 'What do you feel, what do you think of the possibilities of life, of the alternative shapes of being which are implicit in your experience of me, in our encounter?' The indiscretion of serious art and literature and music is total. It queries the last privacies of our existence (Steiner, 1989, 142).[7]

[7] The whole work should be consulted. It contains both an appreciation and critique of deconstruction with which I find myself in sympathy. More profoundly, Steiner wrestles

Now this proclamation of the need to change is both desired and feared by the reader, by our students, and it is the role of philosophy to develop in students the inner resources so that they can allow their own selves to be challenged and changed on the most intimate level of their existence. Only then does one become capable of grasping universal knowledge.

Thus, by "difficult texts" I mean challenging texts and the challenges exist on multiple levels. The works that we teach them to read will challenge them intellectually, morally, and spiritually. The texts will often, but not always, have a certain level of complexity. They will be the kind of texts that students do not naturally want to read. They will be the kind of texts that change the reader.

But how are we to be changed, how are we to allow ourselves to be challenged on this level of our being in order to reach the truth? I am posing a question here that echoes a question addressed to Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: "How do I inherit eternal life?" Jesus is asked this by a lawyer. This is perhaps the deepest question that one can ask. How do I integrate my life into such a unity that it has eternal significance, that it extends beyond death? Jesus asks in return, "What is written in the Law? How do you read?" He is, of course, referring to the text that Christians know as the Old Testament, but let us recall what the Old Testament was to the Jews of his time. It was not simply a "religious" text that could be set up over against other religious texts or secular texts. The Old Testament was everything to the Jewish people: their legal system, their founding myth, their history, their poetry, their philosophy, their prayer. It was their difficult text, the text that formed and reformed them. When Jesus asks, "How do you read?", he is saying that how you read will determine how your life will go. How you read difficult texts opens up the possibility of death and life. How you accept or reject what you read in difficult texts has eternal consequences. The answer to the deepest questions in our lives is answered by how we read. The way that we read texts is the way that we will read the world, read each other. By teaching our students to read difficult texts we will teach them to answer for themselves the most important questions, not just for once, but for the rest of their lives.

The works that we teach our students to read have the capacity to reorient their lives in this way. In order to truly understand them it is not enough to be intelligent, one has to allow one's thinking to be turned upside down. One has to

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with the central question that I only hint at: Can there be real literature and great art in the absence of God or is God implied in these acts?

allow one's old vision to pass into blindness so that a new vision can be born. We see things differently, which means that we have become different persons.

Now, this is not a one off deal. One does not read the great works and say, 'Well, now I am done with that.' It is an ongoing, constant process that has certain key, unpredictable moments we can look back on.

To return to the image of the people waiting for Nishida's book. It holds the key for us. These people's lives had been undone. They suffered the loss of brothers and sons. They were defeated and devastated. Their homes had been burnt, their cities destroyed. Such was the price that they had to pay, the ordeal they had to undergo in order for reality to be revealed to them. While we do not wish that for ourselves or for anyone else, we do not know when our world might erupt into violence again. Should that happen, we will respond as best we may. But even in quiet times, philosophy can quietly prepare the person for the challenges ahead. Kant serves as a good example. Here is a man who lived a relatively quiet life on the exterior. As is well known, he hardly left the area of Königsberg. Certainly, external events, such as the French Revolution, affected him and affected him deeply. But these were always mediated by the two great softening agents of time and space. Nevertheless, Kant was able to let himself be undone time and time again. Each new work represents a kind of breakthrough, reflects an interior upheaval that can be called a conversion. That this process never stopped is testified to by the *Opus Postumum*.

We spoke above about the dialectic of access, of how making something more accessible renders it less so. Building roads makes the place easier to get to but harder to experience. The point is not: Do not build roads. The point is certainly not, cover up the roads that are there. The point is to teach our students that all of these roads only lead to the edge of what matters. Once you are at the edge, what you do, how you think, the kind of attention that you are capable of paying becomes critical. We are helping our students to develop the capacity to pay real attention to reality.

A final point: the truth is that there are few roads into the world of academic philosophy in Japan for the non-Japanese. Most of our colleagues in the wide world remain ignorant of the current of thoughts that flow through these islands. And so here we have something small but to my mind significant. The Japanese Philosophical Association has decided to inaugurate an English-language journal. That is, the Japanese philosophic community has decided to lower a barrier, to allow more open access and to share itself with the larger community. I cannot help but think that this is hopeful sign of the commitment we share to bringing our students

into contact with the difficult but rich tradition which philosophy is. It is a sign of openness that is consistent with everything I have written about philosophy's role in today's university.

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