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Philosophy's Cool Place

D. Z. Phillips

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In Memory of

RUSH RHEES

My ideal is a certain coolness. A temple providing a setting for the passions without meddling with them.

—WITTGENSTEIN

Contents

Preface ix

Chapter 1 Philosophical Authorship: The Posing of a Problem 1

Chapter 2 Kierkegaard's Qualitative Dialectic 13

Chapter 3 Wittgenstein's Philosophical Method 41

Chapter 4 Rorty's Lost Conversations 65

Chapter 5 Cavell and the Limits of Acknowledgment 87

Chapter 6 Annette Baier and Moral Philosophy: "The Arrogance of Solitary Intellect"? 115

Chapter 7 Nussbaum on Ethics and Literature: A Cool Place for Characters? 131

Chapter 8 Trying to Go Nowhere: An Autobiographical Afterword 157

Index 167

Preface

The title of this book, *Philosophy's Cool Place,* is not meant as an adjectival acknowledgment of the pleasures of spending every spring in southern California. Rather, it refers to my attempt to elucidate a contemplative conception of philosophy, one indicated in the quotation from Wittgenstein that serves as a motto for this book. A contemplative conception of philosophy raises fundamental questions about the nature of reality and the possibility of discourse. We are asked to give a certain kind of attention to our surroundings without meddling with them. It seems to me that this conception of philosophy is central in Wittgenstein's work and in critical extensions of it by Rush Rhees.

I have dedicated this book to the memory of Rush Rhees, not simply because of my debt to him as my teacher but also for reasons directly related to the present work. I am indebted to discussions with Rhees in my attempts, in the first three chapters, through comparisons of Socrates, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein, to elucidate a contemplative conception of philosophy. I have developed the contrast between Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein begun in "Authorship and Authenticity: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein," published in a special Wittgenstein issue of *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* (1992) and reprinted in my collection *Wittgenstein and Religion,* Macmillan and St. Martin's Press, 1993. These further developments were stimulated by James Conant's response to me, "Putting Two and Two Together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and the Point of View for Their Work as Authors," in *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief,* edited by Timothy Tessin and Mario von der Ruhr in the series *Claremont Studies in the Philosophy of Religion,* Macmillan and St. Martin's Press, 1995. My understanding of a con-

templative conception of philosophy was formed also through my editing of Rhees's work, in particular his *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse,* Cambridge University Press, 1998.

In the remainder of the book, with the exception of the autobiographical afterword, I discuss, with reference to the work of Richard Rorty, Stanley Cavell, Annette Baier, and Martha Nussbaum, how extremely difficult it is not to go beyond a contemplative conception of philosophy. The chapter on Rorty consists, more or less, of my "Reclaiming the Conversations of Mankind" published in *Philosophy,* 1994. I am grateful for permission to use the material here. When I looked for a treatment of values with which to contrast that of Rorty, it was to Rhees that I turned. I had discussed Rorty more extensively in *Faith after Foundationalism,* Routledge, 1988, and Westview paperback, 1995.

My interest in Cavell's work is long-standing, but the present work was stimulated further by reviewing Richard Fleming's *The State of Philosophy* and writing a critical notice of Stephen Mulhall's *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* in *Philosophical Investigations* 17, 2 (1994) and 19, 1 (1996), respectively. The contrasts I drew with Cavell were also informed by editing Rhees's work, not only the work already mentioned but also Rhees's *Wittgenstein's "On Certainty," Philosophy and the Presocratics,* and *Plato and Dialectic,* all hitherto unpublished.

My work on Baier and Nussbaum grew out of two McManis Lectures given at Wheaton College in 1996. The work on Baier appears in a somewhat different form in *Critical Reflections on Medical Ethics,* edited by Martyn Evans, JAI Press, 1998. I am grateful for permission to use the material here. In the contrasts I wanted to draw in relation to Baier's work, I had in mind Rhees's *Moral Questions,* to be published by Macmillan. Rhees's use of literature, along with my discussions and those by Peter Winch, R.W. Beardsmore, and Ilham Dilman, constitutes a Wittgensteinian tradition with which I contrast Nussbaum's appeals to literature.

The autobiographical afterword grew out of an invited address delivered to the Pacific Theological Society at Berkeley in 1997.

I am extremely grateful to Helen Baldwin, secretary to the Department of Philosophy at Swansea, for preparing the typescript for publication and to Timothy Tessin for help with the proofreading; to Roger Haydon for being an encouraging editor at Cornell University Press; to Nancy Raynor for outstanding editing; and to the Press's anonymous reader for helpful suggestions.

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Claremont, California, and Swansea

Philosophy's Cool Place

1 Philosophical Authorship: The Posing of a Problem

The nature of philosophy is itself a philosophical problem, a problem as old as philosophy. It is a problem that can arise from many different directions, and this book explores simply one of them—the problem of philosophical authorship.

What is a philosopher trying to do? What is the subject matter that is characteristically his or hers? These questions cannot be answered by a survey of what philosophers actually do. Whatever one concludes about the nature of philosophy, there will be philosophers who, as a matter of fact, engage in something different. Is one to say that they are not doing philosophy? If one does, one will be accused of operating with an a priori conception of the subject. When one looks at the variety of activities that go on under the name of philosophy, any attempt to reduce these activities to an essence, or a definition, in any descriptive sense, is obviously futile.

On the other hand, philosophy is a critical discipline, and much of its history has been concerned with its own nature. The discussion of that concern will not be content with a purely descriptive answer of the kind we have mentioned, if only because philosophers are critical not simply of the conclusions other philosophers may reach but also of what they take themselves to be doing in philosophizing.

In this book, I discuss what I call a contemplative conception of philosophy, one that is concerned, in a certain way, with giving an account of reality. There is a big difference between philosophers who want to keep this conception of the subject and those who either never possessed it or who, for one reason or another, think it is a conception that must be abandoned. Some abandon it gladly, others with regret.

Where one stands on these issues will affect what one thinks a philosophical author is doing.

Philosophers may have a contemplative conception of the subject and yet arrive at conclusions that others, who share the same conception, disagree with strongly. The contemplative character of their concerns is shown not in the conclusions they reach but in the *kind* of questions they raise, the depth of their treatment. Thus the fact that we disagree with a philosopher's conclusions will not be a sufficient reason to say that that philosopher was not wrestling with central issues in the subject in a contemplative mode. This disagreement does not mean that one is indifferent to the conclusions but rather that one can learn in this context, where one does not when philosophers cease to engage, in this contemplative way, with fundamental questions in the subject. The disengagement may take the form of a too easy skepticism: the denial that there is any reality to contemplate. Or the disengagement may take the form of a denial that philosophy's primary task is one of contemplation and understanding. Philosophy's task, one may say, is not to contemplate reality but to answer substantive questions about it or to bring about changes in it where necessary. This latter conception of philosophy suggests itself easily to a technological culture with its primary interest in arriving at answers and solutions. In this book, I try both to characterize the questions raised by a contemplative conception of philosophy as well as to show why, given that philosophers have pursued such questions in different ways, a certain development of them is to be preferred, philosophically, over the others. This conclusion is not stipulative, for it must be supported by philosophical argument.

I realize that in speaking of the contemplative conception of the subject I run the risk of associating 'contemplation' with contemporary vulgarizations of the concept, where it is thought of as an easy, unearned serenity, to which working through, or struggling with, difficulties would be quite foreign. The philosophical contemplation I want to discuss, by contrast, demands a *kind* of attention to our surroundings that we are reluctant to give them because of the hold which certain ways of thinking have on us. These ways of thinking have us captive, not against our wills, but because of them.

The attention philosophical inquiry asks of us becomes an issue as soon as we say that philosophy is concerned with giving an account of reality. The thought may strike us: aren't the other arts and sciences

concerned with the same thing? When science, history, literature, and the social sciences are said to pursue certain tasks, what task remains for philosophy to fulfill? It is tempting to conclude, the most general question of all: "What is reality?" or "What is the reality of all things?" The difference between philosophy and other inquiries, on this view, is a difference in generality. Just as biology is a more general inquiry then botany or zoology, so, we may think, philosophy is the most general discipline of all. Philosophy is not concerned with the reality of this and that but with the nature of reality as a whole. When we look back to the beginnings of philosophy among the pre-Socratics, is that the conception of philosophy we see at work? The fact that they inquired into the nature of 'all things' shows that they were asking a question that cannot be answered by empirical means. There is no empirical inquiry into *that.* Any empirical investigation will be into a specific state of affairs, no matter how general. Any hypothesis put forward in this context, that takes the form 'It is . . .' allows the possibility of a counterthesis, an 'It is not . . .'. But the 'It is . . .' that is supposed to be an account of 'all things' is an account of reality; it does not allow the possibility of 'It is not . . .'. An account of the nature of reality is supposed to rule out the question, "And why do you call *that* real?" The philosophical account of reality is not meant to explain the existence of one state of affairs as opposed to another but to show how it is possible for anything to be real. But given this feature of a philosophical account, the answers offered by the pre-Socratics seem problematic.

The pre-Socratics give us various accounts of the nature of 'all things'. Thales says, "All things are water." Pythagoreans say, "All things are number." Democritus says, "All things are atoms." And so on. They all had special reasons for giving the answers they did, but these reasons are not my primary concern. Rather, I want to draw attention to a difficulty that attends all such answers, a difficulty almost as old as the answers themselves: the problem of measuring the measure. An account of reality is supposed to rule out the further question, "And what about the reality of *that?*" Yet this is the question which the pre-Socratic answers seem to invite. If Thales tells us that water is the nature of all things, it is natural to ask what account is to be given of the water. How can one rule out such an account? The difficulty is not confined to Thales' answer but will apply to *any* answer that claims to offer *the* measure of 'all things'. The problem is, what account is to be given of 'the measure'? And one can ask this of *any* measure offered.

Plato appreciated the problem of measuring the measure. He came to see that the account of reality being sought, the account of 'all things', is not one that the natural sciences can provide. The issue is not an experimental one but a logical or conceptual question that can be settled only by *discussion*. Take the question of the reality of physical objects. Observation or experiment may determine whether a *particular* physical object exists, but the reality of physical objects cannot be discussed or determined in the same way. To begin with, in any attempted empirical explanation, we would be presupposing the very reality we are supposed to be investigating. But that is not the kind of account Plato sought. The question is whether anything intelligible can be said about the reality of physical objects, whether a coherent account can be given here. But even if an account can be given, it would be an account of the reality of physical objects. Can a similar account be given of reality as such—an account of 'all things'?

The problem of measuring the measure can easily lead us to abandon the search for an account of 'all things'. We might say, "There are particular measures of this or that, but there is no measure of all things." When this is said, the view is not that there *happens* to be no measure of all things but that it makes *no sense* to seek one. Such a conclusion would have a direct effect on what we take to be the scope, content, and nature of philosophical authorship. If accepted, the conclusion would be that a philosopher *cannot* investigate, in any positive way, the nature of reality.

We can see how this conclusion is reached by linking the problem of measuring the measure to the related difficulty of subliming the measure. If we face a plurality of measures, why should we favor any *one* above others as *the* account of the reality of 'all things'? For example, 'the mathematical' has been said to be the measure of 'the real', not only by the Pythagoreans and by Plato but also, in the twentieth century, by A.J. Ayer, when he said that it was logically inappropriate to speak of 'certainty' in connection with any empirical proposition. Why should 'the mathematical' be so favored? Why should the fact that there are important differences between mathematical certainty and my certainty that I am writing these words in the familiar surroundings of my home lead to the assertion of certainty in the former context and its denial in the latter context? Other philosophers have sublimed, as a measure of certainty, incorrigible sense experiences, which are said to be 'the given' from which each of us, necessarily, has to begin. The

problem thus created is how, from such beginnings, we can have any confidence that we share a common world or how there *can* be a common world to share. Again, given important differences between "I am in pain" and "You are in pain"—for example, the first, unlike the second, is not based on observation—why should that fact lead to the conclusion that while I am certain of my own agony, I can never be certain of yours?

If we combine the difficulty we have called "the problem of measuring the measure" with the difficulty we have called "the problem of subliming the measure," why not settle for recognizing that there are many measures of 'the real', that what we *mean* by 'the real' is not one thing but varies with the contexts in which questions about 'the real' may arise? Protagoras would have been happy with that conclusion, as in the twentieth century would J.L. Austin, who insists that when we speak of 'the real', we should always ask, "A real *what?*" It seems that philosophy has been brought down to earth with a vengeance. It can no longer claim to be the unique means by which *the* nature of reality is arrived at.

If we reach this conclusion, what are its implications for philosophical authorship? Philosophy, it seems, is left with a purely *negative* task, as far as metaphysics is concerned. It has the task of exposing its pretensions. Metaphysics loses its subject—there is no reality to discover, inquire into, or give an account of. In some people's eyes, this negative task leads to the demise of philosophy. In other people's eyes, including my own, this consequence is not a necessary one. The negative task may, and has, led to different conceptions of philosophy. But those conceptions would not be what I have called a contemplative conception of philosophy. I want to elaborate on these two consequences.

The Sophists said there was no such thing as 'reality'—nothing to inquire into in the way the pre-Socratics had thought. But the Sophists went further, positing that there is no such thing as 'knowledge' or 'truth', only *opinion*. Opinions may be strong or weak, but not valid or invalid; they may be effective or ineffective, but not true or false. Their strength and efficacy depend on the degree of public backing they receive. Words are weapons, and rhetoric is the means by which weak opinions can be changed into strong ones, and vice versa.

Needless to say, if we accept this view, we accept not simply the demise of a contemplative conception of philosophy but also the demise of philosophy itself. Small wonder that while Callicles acknowl-

edged that philosophical argumentation may sharpen a young person's wits, he argued that those wits, once sharpened, would be better employed in helping one to get on in the city. It would be scandalous to devote one's life to philosophy. Philosophy, at best, should be the handmaid of rhetoric.

Abandoning the pre-Socratics' search for an account of 'all things' need not lead to the demise of philosophy or to the extremity of the Sophists' conclusions. After all, Socrates, who also abandons the pre-Socratic search, nevertheless provides a devastating critique of the Sophists. But I want to ask what conception of philosophy Socrates arrives at. My conclusions, in this respect, are tentative, but even if I am wrong about Socrates, the noncontemplative conception of philosophy I attribute to him is certainly in evidence in the subject.

Socrates asks Gorgias what it is that he teaches. The question seems to be straightforwardly factual but goes to the heart of philosophy. Socrates is really asking whether there is anything to teach, whether there is a *logos* in things to be understood. Gorgias claims that his subject has to do with speech; but, he is asked, "Speech about *what?*" If Gorgias gives a substantive reply, Socrates points out that the subject is that of an already existing art, such as mathematics, music, medicine, shipbuilding, or weaving. If each art has its distinctive subject matter, what distinctive subject remains for the so-called art of rhetoric? Neither is there any refuge for Gorgias when he claims that rhetoric is not concerned simply with speech but also with speaking *well.* Once again, Socrates asks, "Speaking well about *what?*" Whether one is speaking well will be determined by the logos appropriate to the art relevant to the example of speech. The most rhetoric can be, Socrates argues, is an aid to expressing what there is to understand in the various arts—arts that cannot be reduced to rhetoric.

Socrates shows that rhetoric cannot be an art and that it is logically parasitic on the very 'knowledge' and 'truth' whose reality the Sophists denied. Persuasion involves a reference to 'truth', because persuasion, even when deceptive, involves a reference to 'what is the case'. The persuader relies on concepts of 'truth' and 'knowledge' in those he is trying to persuade. In that way, Socrates inverts the claims of the Sophists: the arts and their logoi cannot be reduced to rhetoric; rather, rhetoric is logically parasitic on what it denies.

But, by the same Socratic questions, can we have a contemplative conception of philosophy? What if Gorgias asked Socrates to specify

philosophy's subject matter? Socrates might say that he is concerned with discourse. But, then, Gorgias could ask, "Discourse about *what?*" Once again, any substantive answer, on the Socratic view, will be the domain of an already existing art. What if Socrates were to say that he is concerned with knowledge and understanding? Could not Gorgias ask, "Knowledge and understanding of *what?*" Any substantive answer leads back to the arts. Are we thus to conclude, that philosophy, like rhetoric, is not a genuine art, because it has no distinctive subject matter?

We need not embrace this conclusion, for there is an essential difference between Socrates and the Sophists. The latter are not even aware of the problems with which Socrates is wrestling, confident that they have all they need in their persuasive techniques. When asked what kind of discourse he is concerned with, Socrates could have replied, "Discourse about discourse." He is concerned with the *possibility* of discourse, the possibility of 'knowledge' and 'truth'. His question is whether an intelligible account can be given of them, the kind of account that can be arrived at only through a conceptual discussion. The question, however, is whether Socrates' conclusions express a contemplative conception of philosophy. I am inclined to think that they do not, although my reasons for saying this will depend on the degree of irony I ascribe to Socrates.

With respect to the nature of reality, Socrates said that the only difference between himself and others is that he knows that he does not know. If I take this remark as being free of irony, Socrates would be saying that it *should* be possible to give an account of reality as a whole but that he, unlike others, knows that no one has succeeded in providing one. Furthermore, Socrates comes to the same conclusions in more restricted contexts, such as questions about the nature of knowledge or the nature of virtue. When given examples of 'knowledge' and 'virtue', Socrates denies that these can constitute the nature of knowledge and virtue, presenting counterexamples to prove it. This procedure annoyed Wittgenstein. He thought the examples Socrates was offered were perfectly acceptable. They are rejected only because Socrates thinks that all examples of knowledge and virtue should have something in common, that 'knowledge' and 'truth' should have an essence. Thus on the first reading of Socrates, he is skeptical about the possibility of a successful contemplative account of reality.

On the other hand, if I attribute irony to Socrates' remark, he is saying that he knows that he does not know what others take for granted

so confidently—that is, he knows that there is nothing to know here. There is no nature or essence of reality to be discovered, hence it cannot be the subject matter of philosophy. One may ask why irony is necessary. If this is what Socrates means, why doesn't he say so? Why doesn't Socrates produce a direct refutation of his opponents? These questions misunderstand Socrates' mode of inquiry. He does not think that a direct refutation of an opponent is possible in philosophy. Such a refutation would suggest that the opponent's thesis was intelligible but false. Yet the trouble with such theses is not their falsity but their unintelligibility. An attempt is made to say something that does not make sense. Socrates can get someone to see this only indirectly, by getting that person to appreciate the route that led to the confusion, so that the person no longer wants to say what he or she did.

On the nonironic reading of Socrates, he is skeptical about whether we can give a successful account of reality as such. If we ascribe irony to Socrates, he is questioning the intelligibility of such an account. Instead of trying to give an account of reality as such, we will be content to clarify the confusions in the attempts to do so and to point out the diverse uses of 'real' to be found in the various arts. It is futile to seek a conception of reality that transcends these contexts.

Having contrasted the reactions of the Sophists and Socrates to the recognition that the *kind* of account of 'all things' offered by the pre-Socratics is not a possible one, what are we to say of Plato? He, too, shared their negative reaction to the pre-Socratics, but he did not think that the attempt to give an account of the nature of reality should be abandoned. For Plato, Socrates' reaction is, in some ways, dangerously close to that of the Sophists. If we do not attribute irony to Socrates, he is skeptical of the possibility of giving an adequate account of the nature of reality, whereas Plato wants to combat that very skepticism. If we attribute irony to Socrates, he is not saying that no successful account can be given of reality but that the very idea of such an account is confused. Plato would believe Socrates is saying that we must be content with the various conceptions of reality to be found within our diverse activities. Plato would think this conclusion settles for the arbitrary, for the arts or activities we *happen* to have. The Sophists, on reflection, might settle for saying that discourse is a matter of skill in moving from art to art. But Plato wants to say that their position would be a denial of the reality of discourse. Discourse is more than a collection of arbitrary activities, and living is more than the skill of moving from one activity

to the other. But what 'more' can discourse be, if we have already agreed that no measure of reality of the kind offered by the pre-Socratics is possible? That is Plato's big question.

Plato's answer, it could be argued, has two aspects. First, he emphasizes the importance of dialogue. Human activities cannot be treated as a collection of arbitrary arts. They stand in a dialogic relation to one another. When Socrates discusses the separate arts in Plato's *Gorgias*, he does not give a great deal of attention to their occurring in a discourse wider than themselves, although there is a suggestion to Callicles, at one point, that were it not for a common discourse, he and Callicles could not understand each other. Wittgenstein would say that it is the fact that we understand one another that constitutes our common discourse. Certainly, Socrates does not suggest that the reality of the arts, their being what they are, is internally related to discourse, to the ways in which we talk to one another, although he does insist, as against the Sophists, that there is something to understand, that each art has its logos.

But none of this is sufficient for Plato. He wants to go further by asking how we know that there *is* any reality in the different ways in which we talk to one another. For Plato, we have to show that these ways of talking themselves correspond to a Reality that is independent of them. This is what leads him to say that all discourse is about Reality. Plato never succeeds in giving a very clear account of how discourse *is* related to Reality, although he has much to say about accounts that must be rejected. He remains acutely aware of the problem of measuring the measure that would arise were he to give the kind of answer found in the pre-Socratics. But he is dangerously close to this problem when he suggests that all discourse has a common subject—namely, Reality. And yet he believed that philosophical authorship has to do with the investigation of that subject. This belief is what shows that he has a contemplative conception of philosophy. If, on the other hand, we are simply puzzled by the differences between human activities and want to clarify them, the big question or puzzle about the reality of discourse itself need not arise. That reality would simply be taken for granted in the concern with marking off different kinds of discourse. In relation to Wittgenstein, as we shall see later, it could be said that his philosophy would not be contemplative, in my sense, were we to think that all it amounted to was clarifying distinctions between language games. We would have omitted the fundamental questions which those distinctions subserve.

I have discussed the pre-Socratics, the Sophists, Socrates, and Plato because doing so helps me to formulate the problem which I want to pose in this opening chapter but which is also to be the theme of the book: How can one develop a contemplative conception of philosophy, given the difficulties we have mentioned? The problem of philosophical authorship, in the light of our discussion, may be summarized as follows:

(a) Philosophy is an attempt to give an account of Reality.
(b) If one provides any measure of 'the real', one can always, in turn, pose a question about the reality of the measure. No measure offered can avoid this difficulty.
(c) As a result of (b) one may abandon the whole enterprise of giving an account of reality and embrace a skepticism about any notion of reality.
(d) As a result of (b) one may admit that it makes sense to seek an account of reality but be entirely skeptical as to whether one can, in fact, arrive at an adequate account.
(e) As a result of (b) one may assume that philosophy cannot give an account of Reality as a whole, because that conception is confused. No one measure of 'the real' can be provided. What we need to recognize is that in human activities there are many conceptions of 'the real' and 'the unreal'. Philosophy must settle for pointing this out, clarifying the differences between them, and locating the confusion of attempting to transcend them in a more comprehensive account of Reality.
(f) Despite recognizing the difficulties mentioned in (b), philosophy's task described in (a) is not abandoned as it is in the different reactions found in (c), (d), and (e). All our discourse refers to Reality. Were that not so, our dialogues would simply be an absurd collection of arbitrary activities.

The question I will pursue is this: I, too, want to reject the reactions found in (c), (d) and (e), but I also reject the conclusions found in (f). I do not see how they can avoid the problem of measuring the measure mentioned in (b). What is the one Reality to which all discourse refers? Or, what is *the* relation in which all discourse stands to Reality? I accept that there are various distinctions between 'the real' and 'the unreal' in discourse and that they do not all have something in common; they are not subject to 'a common measure'. That is what is valuable in the reactions of (b) and (e). Yet I want to agree with (f) that if one settles for the differences emphasized in (e), one leaves out the fundamental questions in philosophy about the nature of reality. My question is,

How can philosophy give an account of reality which shows that it is necessary to go beyond simply noting differences between various modes of discourse, without invoking a common measure of 'the real' or assuming that all modes of discourse have a common subject, namely, Reality? Contemplative conceptions of philosophy engage with the question of the nature of reality, but come to very different conclusions. The contemplative conception of philosophy I shall be concerned with is one that attempts to answer the question I have posed. In this attempt it will be necessary, again and again, to show that I am not falling back into the attempt to give a single account of Reality. Thus much of the time I will emphasize the differences philosophy must respect by recognizing them. But those differences are not the end of the philosophical story. They can only be the differences they are because their reality depends on the place they occupy in human life. This is why Wittgenstein said that to imagine a language—discourse—is to imagine a way of living. The contemplative conception of philosophy I will talk about and, hopefully, express in my discussions is one that engages with the implications of Wittgenstein's remark, not least its implications for philosophical authorship.