

This is a Work of Fiction: Rethinking the "Doing" # of Philosophy

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This is a Work of Fiction:
Rethinking the “Doing” of Philosophy
in Terms of Literature and Solidarity

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Abstract

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by

Mark Wadley

Within the contemporary philosophical community, written language serves as a primary means of conveying ideas, positions, and arguments; however, discussion of the content of these communicated ideas usually takes precedence over discussion about their modes of presentation—that is, the intentional arrangement of the words themselves. Taking into account a postmodern conception of language and its direct relation to meaning, it becomes important to examine the function of written discourse in the development of understanding, beginning with a recognition of the reader-writer relationship, in which the responsibility for meaning-making falls to both participants. This relationship, while indicative of the hermeneutic articulation of experience as contingent upon interpretation, also lends support to liberal ironist arguments for nonfoundationalist human solidarity. Though readers and writers interact within the context of any mode of writing, their relationship is particularly crucial to narrative fiction, presented here as a productive means of discussing philosophical ideas. Through examination of the philosophical works of Rorty, Sartre, Foucault, and Derrida and analysis of Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Everything is Illuminated*, we can come to a greater understanding of postmodern accounts of experience, the position of writing as a form of discourse, and the vital role narrative fiction plays in the liberal project of fostering solidarity.

The Well-Regarded Rabbi...was able to draw upon the most obscure and indecipherable texts to reason seemingly impossible religious quandaries, but he knew hardly anything about life itself...

Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is Illuminated*

Philosophers—in a traditional, academic sense—utilize written language as a primary means of conveying ideas, positions, and arguments. Despite this, philosophy as a unified field is much less concerned with writing itself, as a method of communication, than with the content it expresses—and rightly so; though writing can serve as a philosophical mode of presentation, “philosophy” is not equivalent with the texts that make it available for reception and interpretation. That said, the mode of presentation of an idea can directly influence the reception and interpretation of that idea. As such, we should pay attention to writing itself to better understand its capability to present or convey; furthermore, we should attempt to progress in our writing toward more effective expressions of the ideas we want to communicate. This new consciousness of writing begins with the recognition of the integral relationship between writers and readers, wherein the responsibility for meaning creation rests on the shoulders of *both* participants. In accordance with this emphasis on writing, I adopt a conception of philosophy as an activity rather than a field—an activity in which readers become agents of critical interpretation rather than passive receivers. These views are supported most directly by the postmodern, nonfoundational approach to philosophy detailed in the first section of this text. To provide a prescriptive conclusion for this approach, I submit narrative writing, particularly fiction, as a highly productive means of presenting and working with philosophical ideas. As evidence for this view, I will analyze Jonathan

Safran Foer's 2002 novel, *Everything is Illuminated* on the basis of its narrative mode of presentation as well as its philosophical content.

In the introduction to *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Richard Rorty argues that "the more 'scientific' and 'rigorous' philosophy became, the less it had to do with the rest of culture and the more absurd its traditional pretensions seemed,"¹ referencing the general path of philosophy since Descartes, which was largely concerned with what Rorty terms "philosophy-as-epistemology"—a predominant search for the foundational underpinnings of human knowledge and experience. With *Mirror of Nature*, Rorty attempts to explain away the need for such a philosophy, and—arguably—philosophy as a defined field; however, it seems that his argument was not for the “end of philosophy” *per se*, but for the end of a *definition* of philosophy as foundation-seeking and categorically separate from other “sciences.” In this case, I aim to “save philosophy” by redefining it as a participatory activity not subject to academic division, but rather an important aspect of meaning-making and understanding. This is not to say that “everything is philosophy”; it does mean, however, that we can productively involve ourselves with a wide variety of informational sources—such as literature, conversation, or music—provided we have sufficient knowledge of the respective epistemology of the sources. Here I use Rorty's revised notion of epistemology, which rejects ultimate commensurability of thought and accepts that different thought-communities can have different—but nonetheless valid—epistemic groundings for their claims. This means that we must be able to “speak the language” of a community—which entails a recognition of

¹ Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1979. p. 5.

the gap between respective languages—to properly converse within it.

If we are to redefine philosophy—or, perhaps more appropriately, “doing philosophy”—as an act of interpretation, we have need to explain interpretation itself. It is important to distinguish two different orders of interpretation; for practical purposes, the first may be more specifically called explication, in which we discuss the meaning of a text by situating it within a particular interpretive community and examining how it interacts with that community. This usually entails some sort of discussion about “what the author intends,” or “what the work is trying to do,” and so a great deal of the explication will concern the position of both the text and its creator in cultural or scientific history. This is all very important; by understanding the community, we can come to a greater understanding of the text. I won’t go so far as to say that this implies a single or fixed meaning for a text; the explicative meaning of a text still hinges on the knowledge that the interpretive community has of the author and his historical situation. Indeed, explication is sufficient on the whole if our goal is to understand what the creator meant, or how the text was influential to or influenced by culture.

The second order of interpretation, which I believe captures the notion of “doing philosophy,” requires more from the person doing the interpreting, and as a result is a more meaningful activity on an individual level. To characterize this second order, I borrow a word from John Dewey: *interest*. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey describes interest as expressing both “the whole state of active development” and “the personal emotional inclination.”² The first expression refers to a state of being; to have an

² Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1916. pp. 132-3.

interest is not simply to be involved with something at a certain time, but to be an active part of something. Dewey calls this “a continuously developing situation.”³ The second expression refers to an attitude; to be interested “is to be absorbed in, wrapped up in, carried away by, some object... We say of an interested person both that he has lost himself in some affair and that he has found himself in it.”⁴ Interest functions as a personal identification with an activity, text, or other interpretable medium, and to have interest is to examine things as parts of a larger whole rather than isolated events. While explication is important, interest requires us to go one step further by examining potential meanings of the text beyond the text itself—to both lose ourselves and find ourselves within it. This means that when we can critically examine a text and explain how it affects our beliefs about existence, ethics, the nature of reality, and so on, we are doing philosophy. Through interest, we surpass the potentially limited meanings that explication can offer and enter into a lived relation of meaning; that is, one cannot be interested in a text without being affected by it. My use of interest takes into account the act of interpretation as well as situational freedom and the liberal goal of solidarity, all of which are further developed below.

Adopting a view of philosophy as interest does not, again, mean that *everything* is philosophy. A text can be badly interpreted when the reader cannot understand the interpretive paradigm of the community in which the text is situated. Though new insights can be brought to a text by examining it from a different paradigmatic perspective, this perspective must be defined in such a way as to provide convincing

³ p. 144

⁴ p. 133

evidence for a particular interpretation as well as knowledge of the paradigm to be challenged. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer refers to this sort of paradigmatic perspective as a “horizon,” explaining the term as a view from a *particular* vantage point, noting that many horizons are possible, and that the entire scope of human understanding is indeed bound within these horizons. In discourse, we approach understanding, or a “fusion of horizons.”⁵ We cannot get away with saying “this is what this means,” only “this is the meaning that I have derived.” The persuasiveness of this latter sort of argument is indeed a subjective matter, but by appealing to the text itself and the interpretive community, or the paradigm in which the text is situated, we can approach a consensus—at least within communities—on what counts as a good or bad interpretation, though we have to be aware that these consensuses are contingent to the vocabularies of their particular communities.⁶ As such, the reader is not a wholly autonomous meaning-making entity, often approaching the work within a certain community and vocabulary. We can call these “interpretive communities,” for which “the reader” or “readers” often stand in as synecdochical representatives.

An illustrative view of writing’s role in philosophical discourse might be to consider it a stand-in for an interlocutor in a conversation. Consider the bulk of Plato’s works; for the most part, they consist of Socrates engaging with at least one other person in a conversation. This approach to philosophical writing emphasizes what could be

⁵ Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, trans. 2nd. New York: Crossroad 1991. pp. 305-6.

⁶ For an example of this sort of understanding, consider Ames and Hall’s “philosophical translation” of the *Dao De Jing*, which views the daoist text from a perspective of process philosophy. Though the originators of the *Dao De Jing* could have had no intention of making this correlation, the translators provide evidence that this is a useful interpretation.

considered the most basic concern of philosophy: the development of ideas through conversation. Even though most philosophical work since Plato has not emphasized this conversational nature so directly, any text that draws from or responds to another text can be seen as an entry into the ongoing conversation that philosophy comprises. It is important to note that, up to this point, I have referred to *texts* as stand-ins for interlocutors rather than *authors* themselves functioning as interlocutors. Though any conversation—verbal or nonverbal, written or vocal—entails a process of interpretation, only a face-to-face conversation can be considered to be between people. This distinction lies in the actual presence of the person presenting ideas for interpretation and the interpreter’s ability to verify his or her interpretations with the presenter. My goal here is not to present writing as something altogether different from a face-to-face interaction—though there are some key differences—but as another means of having a conversation, and one that actually increases the demand for the interpreter to be interested in and take responsibility for the meaning derived from it.

In a vocal conversation, one interlocutor, upon interpreting the other’s point and formulating the implied meaning of that point, might ask something like “So, what you’re saying is that x ?” When asked such a question, the second interlocutor might respond with “Yes, x , but also y ,” or even “No, that’s not it at all. What I mean is z .” These sorts of questions and responses belie the fallibility of language; we cannot expect our words to be interpreted exactly as intended. In vocal dialogue, we can clarify our intentions or correct mistaken interpretations. Gadamer expounds on this, asserting that “the spoken word interprets itself to an astonishing degree, by the manner of speaking, the tone of

voice, the tempo, and so on, and also by the circumstances in which it is spoken.”⁷ By contrast, a *text* does not offer the same sort of dialogical clarity, and so creators of interpretable texts—or authors—must resign themselves to constructing what Sartre calls “landmarks...separated by the void” which readers “must unite” and “go beyond.”⁸

Writers must understand that the subjective meaning of a text—the meaning that the audience might derive from their interest in it—is ultimately not the sole responsibility of the creator. This means that the text itself, rather than its creator, functions as interlocutor, insofar as it exists as the actual presentation of ideas to be interpreted. To read a piece of writing or examine an artwork is to have a conversation with the work itself in which the question “So, what you’re saying is that *x*?” will not receive a direct response. This relationship, rather than resulting in a loss of meaning due to the absence of a physical interlocutor, produces the meaning itself through the reader’s interest in the text.

Though the conversational model extends to other modes of presentation, philosophy is most intimately connected with writing, and so it is this mode onto which we narrow our focus. Writing, simply put, is a method of conveying ideas through written language, though the term can alternately refer to writing in its objective facticity—as mere figures on a page—and to writing as an activity; while these latter definitions are important and certainly carry some weight in this project, our primary focus will be on writing as communication. There are many different types of writing, but for the purposes of my argument, we only need to deal with two of them explicitly: more traditional argumentative writing—which I will call propositional writing—and narrative writing.

⁷ p. 393

⁸ Sartre, Jean-Paul. “Why Write?” *What is Literature?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988. p. 53.

Propositional writing uses statements of belief or value to form a conclusive argument about a subject. This is standard in scientific writing, which helps explain its prevalence in philosophical writing as well; with the Enlightenment, philosophers adopted a scientific approach to philosophy in the search for absolute certainty, and this is reflected in the deliberate, scientific nature of many philosophical arguments. My point here is not to position propositional writing as an ineffective means of conveying ideas (this text is itself written in propositional language), but that, having taken into account arguments against philosophy-as-epistemology and the subjective nature of interpretation, interest can be effectively served by approaching our writing differently, through narrative.

Narrative is the depiction of a series of fictional or nonfictional events. This is not necessarily a form of writing, as stories can be told through theatre, visual art, film, or speech; though these other art forms are worth examining as potential subjects of interpretation, we are primarily concerned here with writing due to its immediate communicative qualities and prevalence in most cultures (though we should appropriately situate this argument within early-21st century American culture, particularly within institutions of higher learning). Narrative writing is different in practice from propositional writing in that it does not use universal statements of belief, instead utilizing particular situations, often focused on characters interacting within a plot structure. It is this situational nature that gives narrative writing its interpretive usefulness; because the ideas that authors want to explore are not laid out explicitly—as in propositional writing—readers are forced, in a way, to become interested in the text to unpack these ideas. Moreover, the presence of common narrative structures like character

and plot move readers through the text, creating interest.

Having established an approach, we can move into a discussion of the works of Rorty, Gadamer, Sartre, and Foucault, through which we can come to a greater understanding of this postmodern approach to philosophy and the role that writing and interest play in the development of individuated consciousness. We will begin by turning to Rorty's critique of foundationalism and his suggestion of hermeneutics as an alternative, appealing to Gadamer to more precisely articulate the central ideas of hermeneutics and lend further support to the Rortyan notions of epistemological behaviorism and interpretive community. From there we can examine the structures of writing by way of Sartre and Foucault, distinguishing writing from other art forms and exploring the relationship between writer and reader; this discussion will be illustrated in analyses of Plato's *Phaedrus*—with reference to Derrida's "Plato's Pharmacy"—and Descartes' *Discourse on the Method* and *Principles of Philosophy*, which offer models of strictly philosophical literature. After returning to Rorty and Sartre to examine the social and ethical functions of literature, we will move into a more direct analysis and discussion of philosophically inclined narrative via *Everything is Illuminated*.

Part I: **"Doing" philosophy and the further distinction of narrative**

In the eighth chapter of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty draws a distinction between two ways of doing philosophy: systematic and edifying. He attributes the systematic signifier to "philosophy which centers in epistemology" and the edifying to "philosophy which takes its point of departure from suspicion about the pretensions of

epistemology,”⁹ thus establishing edifying philosophy as reactive to or suspicious of systematic philosophy. *Mirror of Nature* might be interpreted as a call for “the end” of systematic philosophy; however, though Rorty espouses the intentions of edifying philosophy—to have individuals engage in constant re-description of the self—he recognizes its somewhat dependent relationship to systematic philosophy. By examining his distinctions, we can wrestle with the tension between revolutionary thought and its acculturated beginnings and, hopefully, move toward a conception of philosophy that centers on conversation rather than epistemologically certain knowledge.

To properly understand the difference between systematic and edifying philosophy it may be helpful to first examine Rorty’s distinction between normal and abnormal discourse, a notion he generalizes from Kuhn’s articulation of “normal” and “revolutionary” sciences in chapter seven. “Normal discourse,” Rorty claims, “is that which is conducted within an agreed-upon set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as answering a question, what counts as having a good argument for that answer or a good criticism of it.”¹⁰ Epistemology, as Rorty characterizes it, is that system which claims to be foundational to knowledge—that is, it presents an absolute or certain truth of knowing.¹¹ By virtue of its foundational nature, then, epistemology seeks to become the defining criterion of normal discourse. In Rorty’s conception of epistemological behaviorism, which he describes as a pragmatic approach to—rather than a theory of—knowledge, normal discourse happens within the confines of a singular knowledge paradigm—i.e., the particular vocabulary of an interpretive

⁹ *PMN*, p. 366

¹⁰ p. 320

¹¹ p. 132

community—and all participants can agree based on the discourse’s relation to this paradigm; this is not an appeal to any sort of permanent neutral framework for all inquiry, but rather to convention. Abnormal or revolutionary discourse, however, disregards the conventions of that paradigm, resulting in “anything from nonsense to intellectual revolution.”¹² While epistemology is “the attempt to see the patterns of justification within normal discourse as *more* than just such patterns,”¹³ abnormal discourse, Rorty suggests, falls under the domain of hermeneutics—or interpretive theory—which allows us to study such discourse from the point of view of some kind of normal discourse. He asserts that “we must be hermeneutical where we do not understand what is happening but are honest enough to admit it.”¹⁴

Though the normal/abnormal distinction is important in that it establishes hermeneutics as a sort of theory of knowledge and helps us to understand paradigm shifts, it does not directly correlate to the systematic/edifying distinction. Revolutionary philosophers can be either systematic or edifying; revolutionary systematic philosophers “found new schools within which normal, professionalized philosophy can be practiced—who see the incommensurability of their new vocabulary with the old as a temporary inconvenience, to be blamed on the shortcomings of their predecessors and to be overcome by the institutionalization of their own vocabulary.”¹⁵ Edifying revolutionaries never seek this ultimate institutionalization or assimilation into tradition, instead aiming to react against such tradition with individuated, finite vocabularies. “Great edifying

¹² p. 320

¹³ p. 385

¹⁴ p. 321

¹⁵ p. 369

philosophers...know their work loses its point when the period they were reacting against is over,” Rorty says, but, “Great systematic philosophers, like great scientists, build for eternity.”¹⁶ It is precisely this acknowledgement of generational or cultural contingency that situates edifying philosophers within Rorty’s conception of how we should approach philosophy.

We can now proceed with a more thorough exploration of what exactly Rorty is getting at when he talks about systematic philosophy and edifying philosophy as separate approaches. Both can be revolutionary; Rorty cites Bertrand Russell as an example of a systematic, revolutionary philosopher, who announced that logic was the essence of philosophy¹⁷ in an attempt to overturn the psychological paradigm that had taken hold in the early twentieth century. By arguing for a definitive essence of philosophy, Russell undertook the analytical project of building a permanent neutral framework for inquiry, thus instigating a new paradigm for normal discourse. Though his assertion began as abnormal insofar as it rejected or disregarded the then-normal paradigm, it ultimately sought to become the normal paradigm, and a permanent one at that. This, according to Rorty, is really the story of mainstream Western philosophy. He articulates the “mainstream philosopher’s” argument this way:

Now that such-and-such a line of inquiry has had such a stunning success, let us reshape all inquiry, and all of culture, on its model, thereby permitting objectivity and rationality to prevail in areas previously obscured by convention, superstition, and the lack of a proper epistemological understanding of man’s ability accurately to represent nature.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ p. 166

¹⁸ p. 367

This characterization, though a bit cartoonish, gets at the central idea of systematic epistemology as Rorty sees it—as the attempt to formulate a universally “correct” viewpoint or framework for discourse. It is important to note that not all systematic philosophy is revolutionary—systematic philosophers can work within a framework that a revolutionary has constructed—nor can revolutionary systematic philosophy *remain* revolutionary once it has instituted a paradigm change and become normal.

Rorty’s notion of edifying philosophy has its roots in Gadamer’s assertion that *Bildung*—education or self-formation—is the true goal of thinking, rather than “knowledge” in a foundational sense, which is really what the systematic philosophers are after. He reduces self-formation, though, to language, noting that “to say that we... ‘remake’ ourselves as we read more, talk more, and write more, is simply a dramatic way of saying that the sentences which become true of us by virtue of such activities are often more important to us than the sentences which become true of us when we drink more, earn more, and so on.”¹⁹ This is to say that, as we encounter material that encourages intellectual and critical interest, we find new ways of describing ourselves. In this way, there is no foundational truth to be found about individuals, only descriptions; these descriptions, too, are not permanent or essential, as they change and grow as the individuals read and write more. We do not “learn about ourselves” so much as we *create* ourselves. We approach objectivity within specific paradigms, taking the “objective” to simply be what a community agrees upon as “true.”

In the second section of chapter eight, Rorty begins with what appears to be an

¹⁹ p. 359

acceptance of the necessity of systematic philosophy as well as normal discourse. “Education has to start from acculturation,” he says. “So the search for objectivity and the self-conscious awareness of the social practices in which objectivity consists are necessary first steps in becoming *gebildet* [formed or learned, the goal of *Bildung*].”²⁰ He uses the Sartrean models of *en-soi* (being-in-itself) and *pour-soi* (being-for-itself) to illustrate this, claiming that we must first come to see ourselves as *en-soi*—that is, by descriptors that are objectively true within a paradigm—before we can see ourselves as *pour-soi*, as engaging in self-description. This means that we must have something to react against before we can react at all. Rorty takes “existentialism” (the quotation marks are his) as an example of an inherently reactionary philosophy that can only stand in opposition to a tradition; he says that “to adopt the ‘existentialist’ attitude toward objectivity and rationality common to Sartre, Heidegger, and Gadamer makes sense only if we do so in a conscious departure from a well-understood norm.”²¹

Rorty recognizes an inherent paradox in edifying philosophy: by taking up the mantle of “philosopher,” an edifying philosopher submits to “the business of offering arguments, whereas he would like simply to offer another set of terms, *without* saying that these terms are the newfound accurate representations of essences.”²² Rather than finding problems in the foundational truth-claims of normal discourse and submitting a new criterion for identifying objectivity, edifying philosophers retain a primary concern with the subjective, embracing an uncertain existence. In many ways, Rorty is here describing his own approach to philosophy and perhaps even anticipating objections to it.

²⁰ p. 365

²¹ p. 366

²² p. 370

Rorty's acculturation consisted of a deep experience with and knowledge of the analytic tradition, resulting in his ultimate use of the analytic paradigm—in particular a concentration on the analysis of language—to challenge the views of that system. In the course of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, he offers many arguments, but largely to the stated end of proving the problematic nature of such arguments. Herman Philipse notes this, arguing that had Rorty acknowledged the presence of traditional philosophical problems existing beyond the destruction of traditional philosophy, he could have “spared himself the game of hide-and-seek”²³ and made his arguments for the doctrines that he seems inclined to believe without claiming to espouse no doctrine at all. This criticism illustrates two points: first, that Philipse is firmly grounded in the analytic tradition and actively pursues normal systematic discourse; his frustration with Rorty's edifying approach seems to primarily stem from the fact that it is consciously nonsystematic. The second point here is that Rorty might be more bound to normal discourse and systematic philosophy than even he is inclined to admit.

Rorty can be construed to make the claim that traditional philosophy is over; indeed, he describes *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* as therapeutic in that its intention is to relieve us of the concerns of traditional philosophy, concerns which, to Rorty, have little bearing on how we live and are largely reducible to ways that we can describe ourselves. By recognizing the paradox of edification, it is possible that he saw Philipse's criticism coming; as such, he can respond with something to the effect of “that's the point.” Edifying philosophers are acculturated in systematic philosophy and

²³ Phillipse, Herman. “Toward a Postmodern Conception of Metaphysics.” *Metaphilosophy* 25.1. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994. p. 43

therefore must submit to it to some degree in order to argue against it. Because of this, systematic and normal discourse cannot be completely destructed or rejected; if edifying philosophy is intrinsically reactive, then it must always have something to react against.

To say, then, that Rorty is trying to rid the world of philosophy as a field or profession is an overstatement—one that he himself seems inclined to make for dramatic effect. He is, however, attempting to bring others to the view that there need not be a foundation for knowledge, the framework that systematic philosophers have tried to maintain, nor should the philosophical project focus on the discovery of foundational truths. In the final pages of *Mirror of Nature*, he states that “professions can survive the paradigms which gave them birth. In any case, the need for teachers who have read the great dead philosophers is quite enough to insure that there will be philosophy departments as long as there are universities.”²⁴

There is a definite tension in Rorty’s work regarding the revolution or overthrowing of normal discourse and systematic philosophy; revolution in the political sense often implies a sort of systematic paradigm shift—a government brought down, another put in its place (the alternative to this would be an anarchist revolution, which seems to be the most appropriate analogue to Rorty’s edifying revolution). When we experience an intellectual, edifying revolution, what remains? Can there be no new stasis or normal discourse? In this case, what will the edifying philosophers have to react against? One answer to this final question could very well be *nothing*. Because edifying philosophy exists only in opposition, the end of opposition results in the end of

²⁴ *PMN*, p. 393

edification. So when philosophy becomes purely edifying, as Rorty suggests it might,²⁵ philosophy *per se* will be negated entirely, or at least reduced to a study of historical thinkers. Rorty would suggest that we *not* attempt fill the void left behind after such a revolution, instead replacing the desire to fill it with desire for “continuing the conversation” and the furtherance of human solidarity, something he addresses explicitly in his later work *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*.

Even Rorty can admit that something called “philosophy” will exist on the other side of the edifying revolution. Just as peripheral philosophers have always existed as reactive to normal discourse, it seems that some people will always feel compelled to create normal discourse; we ourselves create a sort of normal discourse by submitting to and working within social norms. The upside, though, is that edifying philosophy cannot, or at least probably will not, negate itself by becoming the only conception of philosophy. By subscribing to epistemological behaviorism, Rorty preserves normal discourse within communities or individuated conversations. As he puts it: “If we see knowing not as having an essence, to be described by scientists or philosophers, but rather as a right, by current standards, to believe, then we are well on the way to seeing *conversation* as the ultimate context within which knowledge is to be understood.”²⁶ The interaction of people in conversation necessitates norms; as long as there are norms, there will be people who attempt to describe them as universal or permanent, and, conversely, people reacting against those descriptions. What is important is that, amid these interactions and reactions, we understand this “right to believe” and find interest in conversation with

²⁵ p. 394

²⁶ p. 389

others.

Rorty draws his distinctions between systematic and edifying philosophy from hermeneutics. He suggests that, in abandoning philosophy-as-epistemology, or the primacy of finding foundational knowledge about knowledge, we should move toward a view of philosophy-as-hermeneutics, an idea captured in his espousal of edifying philosophy. Hermeneutics, according to Rorty, “is not the name for a discipline, nor for a method of achieving the sort of results which epistemology failed to achieve, nor for a program of research. On the contrary, hermeneutics is an expression of hope that the cultural space left by the demise of epistemology will not be filled.”²⁷ This is rather vague. Rorty clarifies and extends this definition by characterizing hermeneutics as a view of understanding that entails conversation, which for him seems to designate the consistent development of ideas through discourse, without a finite goal such as establishing a permanent neutral framework for all inquiry or understanding the necessary conditions for the possibility of experience. As he puts it, “coming to understand is more like getting acquainted with a person than like following a demonstration.”²⁸

These articulations of hermeneutics generally support Rorty’s argument, though further exploration of hermeneutics seems necessary if we are to pursue a strong notion of interest—that is, the form of interpretation that considers the effect of meaning on the individual development of ideas. Gadamer provides a more in-depth look at hermeneutics and interpretation. He begins from the hermeneutic view of language itself:

²⁷ p. 315

²⁸ p. 319

The appearance of the concept “language” presupposes consciousness of language. But that is only the result of the reflective movement in which the one thinking has reflected out of the unconscious operation of speaking and stands at a distance from himself. The real enigma of language, however, is that we can never really do this completely. Rather, all thinking about language is already once again drawn back into language. We can only think in a language.²⁹

This view reflects the key hermeneutic notion of “always already,” which is a shorthand implication of the necessary situatedness of understanding; we are “always already” in the world, and so any account of experience cannot step outside individuated experience itself. The building blocks of this experience are language; in the hermeneutic view (and Rorty’s), experience amounts to the sentences that we use to describe it. This is not to say that language is fundamental to experience, but rather that experience, ultimately, *is language*³⁰ in its process of continual re-description.

Experience is myriad and varied. Rorty would attribute this to the wealth of contingencies that play a role in determining individual selves. Gadamer uses the language of “horizons,” characterizing “the way in which thought is tied to its finite determinacy, and the way one’s range of vision is gradually expanded.” He frames the notion of horizon within the context of historical determinacy—that is, the idea that our selves and our worldviews are at least partially determined by our historical situation—and notes that “‘to have a horizon’ means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it...working out the hermeneutical situation means acquiring the right

²⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer. *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. David Linge, trans. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976. pp. 59-68. p. 62.

³⁰ In talking about language, it is important to remember that we are not talking about a particular language, nor even an explicitly spoken language. Though words are the method that the vast majority of humans use in experience and communication, it seems entirely possible that other “languages”—based, perhaps, on images or scent or tangible feel—could be used to explain and communicate experience.

horizon of inquiry for the questions evoked by the encounter with tradition.”³¹ Gadamer, like Rorty, asserts the importance of conversation, positioning it as a vital aspect of the “fusion of horizons,” just as Rorty considers conversation to be the key to understanding. Conversation is not just a verbal exchange between persons; rather, it comprises the process of interest, the human movement of continual self-revision. This is inextricably tied to the basic hermeneutic view of experience, the hermeneutic circle, which is the idea that understanding occurs in a cycle of the familiar becoming foreign and the foreign familiar. Rather than moving through life and encountering alien objects, which are then added to a sort of permanent “library” of understanding, we encounter alien objects (or concepts or people) and come to understand them through our preexisting understandings of other things. The catch, though, is that our new understandings may obfuscate or change our previous understandings; experience consists of a constant process of learning, unlearning, and relearning—of interpretation. The notion of interest, then, seems to capture this cycle: we consistently lose ourselves and find ourselves in experience; moreover, it is this entire process, this “continually developing situation,” that constitutes truth.

In hermeneutics, truth is not so much a foundational or permanent understanding to be discovered, but a process of understanding. This means that the task of interpretation has no end in view; as we move through life we constantly come to new understandings of things. This process can be considered a sort of conversation. In a verbal conversation, we bring to the table our own set of beliefs and prejudices, as do our

³¹ *Truth and Method*, p. 302.

interlocutors, whose beliefs and prejudices might be altogether incommensurable with our own. In the course of conversation, we attempt to understand the other's viewpoint by comparing it to our own, and—if the interlocutor is convincing—synthesize the two. Something similar happens in the most basic sorts of interpretation: faced with something unfamiliar or concealed, we attempt to understand it on the basis of our understandings of other things, disclosing the thing and making it familiar.

Conversation, then, is an instantiation of the hermeneutic circle insofar as it facilitates the continual encounter of information and the subsequent revision of one's worldview—or, as Rorty describes it, one's "vocabulary." If we understand conversation as playing a role in hermeneutic experience, then, we can subsequently understand it as a medium for interest. Moreover, we can see how discussing conversation can illuminate the central concern of this paper, writing. A crucial aspect of face-to-face conversation is the presence of two people, both of whom are interested in what the other has to say. Gadamer explains this interaction: "it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says...we do not relate the other's opinion to him but to our own opinions and views."³² This is the process of interest at work; through conversation with others, we can more clearly understand our own views.

In *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Gadamer asserts that "whoever speaks a language that no one else understands does not speak. To speak means to speak *to* someone."³³ The

³² p. 385

³³ *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 65.

importance of at least two participants in conversation carries over to writing, albeit in a different manner. In his essay “Why Write,” Sartre establishes the central dichotomy of writing: the reader and the writer. He explains writing as the objective product of a subject; that is, the writer, as subject, creates the text, or object. However, he asserts that writing is never an individual activity; writers cannot have interest in their own work in the same way an external reader might, as each time they read their own writing they return to the act of creation rather than interpretation. In returning to one’s own production, one can only view it objectively if he or she is far enough removed from it to be unable to create it again; this is what we do when we read our own work: we create it again. We do not reveal anything; the text never becomes object for the writer, who cannot view himself as an objective aspect of the text.³⁴ The impossibility of both producing and having an interpretive interest in a text indicates that writing requires at least two agents—one to produce the work, and another to interpret it. To Sartre, readers are the most important part of the relationship because they create the meaning of the work. Writers’ roles are vital in that they produce the work itself; however, they are not essential to the revelation the work contains. Writers are guides, but readers are the ones who ultimately derive meaning from the work; assuming the reader role, then—as interpreter and meaning-maker—requires both investment in and responsibility to the creation of meaning.

Sartre describes reading as a sort of continuous formulation of hypotheses about the end of this sentence, the end of this page, and so on. As the reader moves through the

³⁴ “Why Write?”, p. 49.

text, the confirmation or denial of these hypotheses arises continuously. This is what lends the text objectivity, a dichotomy of prediction and anticipation. “Without waiting, without a future, without ignorance, there is no objectivity.”³⁵ The writer cannot experience this kind of ignorance because he already knows the timeline. Without the reader, the writer can only toil in the subjective. Moreover, reading does not simply imprint a disclosed idea onto the reader. To gain something from a work, the reader must diligently look for meaning:

If he [the reader] is at his best, he will project beyond the words a synthetic form, each phrase of which will be no more than a partial function: the ‘theme’, the ‘subject’, or the ‘meaning’. Thus, from the very beginning, the meaning is no longer contained in the words, since it is he, on the contrary, who allows the significance of each of them to be understood; and the literary object, though realized *through* language, is never given *in* language.³⁶

What Sartre is getting at here is that meaning must be created or projected from the text; the words themselves do not reveal anything; it is only through our interest in them that we disclose their meaning. Gadamer gets at the same idea when he states that “the poet must clearly realize that what he himself intends enjoys no special privilege. His own self-conception or conscious intention is guided by many different possibilities of reflective self-understanding and is quite different from what he actually accomplishes if the poem is a success.”³⁷ The author, then, while the creator or originator of a text, is not the ultimate determiner of the text’s meaning; this task falls to the reader, who must be interested in the text to derive meaning from it.

³⁵ p. 50

³⁶ p. 52

³⁷ Gadamer, Hans-Georg. “Composition and Interpretation.” *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*. Robert Bernasconi, trans. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986. p. 72.

If authors are not the true creators of their texts' meanings, then what function do they serve? In his essay "What is an Author?" Foucault claims that "in writing, the point is not to manifest or exalt the act of writing, nor is it to pin a subject within language; it is, rather, a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears."³⁸ This might seem to coincide with Barthes' infamous announcement of "the death of the author"; however, Foucault is not calling for an end to a recognition of the author as much as he wants to dispense with the author as the originator of meaning or the key to text. By limiting the potential meanings of a work to what we know about an author's ideas or life is to give both the work and ourselves as meaning-makers short shrift. Authorship is obviously important insofar as the text must be produced by someone; however, it is the reader that makes the text an object of revelation. To Foucault, the author serves more as a means of classification; based on a name we assign certain attributes to a text and situate it within culture: "The author's name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and a culture."³⁹ This might well be the difference between a "text" and a "work"; the latter term designates a unity between the text and the author. By clinging to an idea of authorship as the "indefinite proliferation of meaning," we actually *limit* what can be said because we feel compelled to tie the meanings of a "work" to a specific individual located within a specific historical and cultural context. In reality the *content*, the *idea*, is the object of interest, not the person who got it down on paper.

Between Rorty's emphasis on understanding cultural or historical vocabulary as

³⁸ Foucault, Michel. "What is an Author?" *The Foucault Reader*. Paul Rabinow, ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984. p. 102.

³⁹ p. 107

central to communication and Gadamer, Sartre, and Foucault's emphasis on individual meaning-making there is a tension; when interpreting a text, do we ignore completely the life and influences of the person who wrote it, concentrating instead on the our own subjective experience of the text; or do we approach the text from a historical perspective, attempting to understand the author's intent? The answer is *both*—to degrees. This is why I divide interpretation into two types: explication and interest. Through explication, we can come to understand the author's intent by situating the text within its historical and cultural milieu, thus allowing us to examine influence and contingency in the work itself. This sort of understanding forces us to realize the importance of other agents in shaping our individuated worldviews, inhibiting the naïve intuition of *sui generis* self-creation. Interest, on the other hand, allows us to experience texts within the context of subjective understanding, examining the individually produced meaning of a text in relation to our own vocabularies; this is what Gadamer means when he says that "To understand it does not mean primarily to reason one's way back into the past, but to have a present involvement in what is said."⁴⁰ Though an understanding of the author, movement, or historical period of a particular text can be useful for determining its cultural relevance or links to other texts, these things can all be known without the reader being interested the text itself; thus, they do not really add to its meaning, which can only arise from interest.

Jacques Derrida's essay "Plato's Pharmacy" is a very close reading and analysis of Plato's *Phaedrus* dialogue, concerned primarily with interpretation based on specific

⁴⁰ *Truth and Method*, p. 391.

word choices. The most relevant to our discussion is *patēr*, or “father,” which could be interpreted as a basic metaphor for authorship, but may actually have much deeper implications, which Derrida explores in detail. The idea of a “father of *logos*”—or understanding—is particularly compelling because, as Derrida explains, “the father is not the generator or procreator in any ‘real’ sense prior to or outside all relation to language. In what way, indeed, is the father/son relation distinguishable from a mere cause/effect or generator/engendered relation, if not by the instance of *logos*?”⁴¹ In this sense, the notion of a “father” or “author” is not as simple a state of being as “generator.” Fatherhood implies a much more direct relation to the so-called “offspring,” as Socrates explains in his description of writing as *needing* its father’s support or defense, detailed below. As such, fatherhood consists of an *understanding* rather than a basic cause/effect relation—meaning that the father is only a father in light of the *logos* he has engendered: “it is precisely *logos* that enables us to perceive and investigate something like paternity.”⁴² This means that Socrates’ conception of the author is of an originator of understanding, someone who holds the knowledge of epistemic truths. However, as Derrida points out, the relationship between author and text is far more reflexive, as the author is only an author insofar as he is connected to a text.

The *Phaedrus* details an interaction outside the gates of Athens between Socrates and Phaedrus, who relates to Socrates a speech prepared by Lysias. Upon hearing this speech, Socrates offers two of his own, which Phaedrus admits are better than Lysias’. This leads to a discussion of rhetoric, in which Phaedrus claims that, to be an effective

⁴¹ Derrida, Jacques. “Plato’s Pharmacy.” *Dissemination*. Barbara Johnson, trans. London: University of Chicago Press, 1981. p. 80.

⁴² p. 81

speechmaker, one need not know the truth of his subject, but rather the art of persuasion—a notion that Socrates quickly dissolves. This moves into the ultimate discussion of writing, particularly its opposition to “living, breathing discourse,”⁴³ or vocal conversation. In this section of the *Phaedrus*, Socrates relates to his young interlocutor the myth of writing’s creation by the Egyptians. The god Theuth presents his new invention, writing, to the “king of all Egypt,” Thamus (who is also a god) as “something that, once learned, will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memory...a potion for memory and for wisdom.”⁴⁴ Thamus rejects the invention, claiming that Theuth has “not discovered a potion for remembering, but for reminding; you provide your students with the appearance of wisdom, not with its reality.”⁴⁵ Socrates echoes Theuth’s sentiments, characterizing writing as a silent art, one that cannot stand on its own, and so needs its “father” to defend it:

When it has once been written down, every discourse rolls about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn’t know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father’s support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support.⁴⁶

Socrates claims that discourse properly belongs in the soul, “written down with knowledge.”⁴⁷ Writing simply serves to remind the person reading it of what they already know the text to communicate, and so Socrates reduces it to mere amusement. The key to effective discourse, he says, requires two specific understandings: first, a complete

⁴³ *Phaedrus* 275b

⁴⁴ 275a

⁴⁵ 275a-b

⁴⁶ 275e

⁴⁷ 276a

understanding of the subject of discourse; second, an understanding of particular sorts of souls, so that the speaker can tailor his speech accordingly. His only concession to any legitimacy of written discourse is his claim that any writer who has a knowledge of truth (*logos*), the ability to defend his work when attacked, and disdain for the work itself, can properly be called a philosopher, as the writing itself is not the focus of the work, which he considers to be the case with poets and speech writers.⁴⁸

Socrates' characterization of writing, then, is largely an extension of his characterization of speech or discourse as "living." Writing, as a fatherless discourse, is weakened because it cannot defend itself and, in being read, can only ever say the same thing over again. "The phantom...of living discourse is not inanimate; it is not insignificant; it simply signifies little, and always the same thing."⁴⁹ This amounts to a similar explanation of philosophy as the one I have presented thus far: philosophy is not a collection of texts, nor are philosophers simply writers. Socrates' philosopher is someone who composes text or speech "with a knowledge of the truth,"⁵⁰ which seems to be a preemptive way of saying that philosophers are primarily concerned with attaining knowledge of truth. The difference here is that the "truth" I have taken up is something much less foundational.

While Socrates positions the philosopher as a privileged "father" to discourse, I take a less patriarchal position and open philosophy to humanity in general, approaching something more anarchic or democratic. Derrida picks up on this tension as well: "From the position of the holder of the scepter, the desire of writing is indicated, designated, and

⁴⁸ *Phaedrus* 278d

⁴⁹ "Plato's Pharmacy," p. 143

⁵⁰ *Phaedrus* 278d

denounced as a desire for orphanhood and patricidal subversion.”⁵¹ Writing, as Socrates puts it, allows discourse to “roll about everywhere,” allowing *anyone*⁵² the opportunity to derive meaning from it, whether they are truly “qualified” to make such an attempt or not. For him, this is a bad thing. Spoken discourse can at least be directed toward a person, but writing runs the risk of being incompetently interpreted or attacked without the possibility of defense. While I will not deny the risk, it is precisely this democratization that gives writing its efficacy. When texts become metaphorically “orphaned” from their authors—as prescribed by Foucault⁵³—they are allowed to speak for themselves, a facet of writing that Socrates does not recognize, considering text to be limited to the representation of its author’s philosophical intentions. In adhering to a notion of writing as merely “weakened speech” rather than a valid contribution to the ongoing philosophical conversation, Socrates upholds his notion of “truth” as objectively knowable by preserving the superior position of philosophers as fathers of discourse and knowers of truth—lending further support to his ideal of the “philosopher-king.” In a hermeneutic approach to truth, we see the process of understanding as something both personal and unending; we find truth in our constant interest in discourse rather than within discourse itself.

The great irony of the *Phaedrus* is that it is written—though not by Socrates. This aspect of the narrative draws attention to authorship. Though Socrates was a real person who likely spoke on these very topics, within the context of Plato’s work he is a

⁵¹ “Plato’s Pharmacy,” p. 77.

⁵² It should be noted that “anyone” is quite a stretch, particularly during Socrates’ lifetime. To derive *anything* from a text, one must possess—at minimum—the ability to read.

⁵³ and dramatized by Foer, as evidenced in the following literary analysis.

fictionalized author surrogate—that is, if we take Plato’s beliefs to correspond to those that Socrates puts forth, which, according to Plato himself, might not be the case. If we grant this surrogacy, however, the written form of the *Phaedrus* has several ramifications. The first is that it disallows Socrates to defend his ideas; moreover, it disallows Plato to defend the work once its publication carries it beyond his grasp. Were Plato alive and able to defend the *Phaedrus*, he might well point to his own ability to defend as a defense of the argument itself, or perhaps suggest that the written works are really just a physical reminder of the living discourse he authored. He might even claim that the work has not been correctly interpreted since he was unable to defend it. In any case, the *Phaedrus* has been orphaned for centuries at this point, and much meaning has been derived from it; whether in line with Plato’s intentions or not, the value of these texts has been determined by their readers, not by their author.

Whereas literary narrative comes to its philosophical insights as an organic outgrowth of the characters, plot, and process of writing, the *Phaedrus* appears to begin from a concept and utilizes the narrative form to present and argue the concept itself. This is not to say that there are not elements of the dialogue that move it along; Phaedrus might well be the best-developed of Socrates’ interlocutors, participating in the discussion more than others, who sometimes amount to little more than yes-men. The star of the *Phaedrus*, though, is Socrates, and all other aspects of the text are geared toward his ultimate domination of the argument; plot, character, and dialogue are all outgrowths of the central argument. As such, the *Phaedrus* does not carry the same emotional heft that a novel might. The reader might be intrigued by the text, or even amused at Socrates’

sarcasm, but the interest that one has in such a work is ultimately an intentional, conscious one. This means that, though the text is certainly an interesting object, its mode of presentation does not reach the reader in the same way a novel might.

Having examined how the *Phaedrus* functions as a philosophically interesting text and considered its argument about how writing works, we should take a look at texts which exemplify the ideas and presentations of philosophy-as-epistemology. Descartes' works *Discourse on the Method* and *Principles of Philosophy* both deal with the "discovery" of absolute certainty. They differ, though, in presentation. The *Discourse* takes the form of a personal narrative, in which Descartes presents his "history" in an effort to explain the origin of his ideas. The first two sections follow his experience at school, his travels abroad, and his eventual decision to "rebuild" philosophy from its foundations. This results in the development of his method of systematic doubt, through which he seeks to discover that which is undoubtable—a certainty with which he seeks to ground his knowledge of everything else. This constitutes an argument that methodical, rigorous system-building will produce the philosophical certainty deemed so important in modern thought. The *Principles* are a formalization of this method, in which Descartes lays out—in propositional language—the "laws" of human knowledge, material things, the universe, and earth; these laws amount to Descartes' exhaustive conception of reality, from knowledge itself to the origin of the planet.

By presenting his philosophy in narrative form in *Discourse*, Descartes avoids categorically prescriptive claims, positioning his process of understanding as a personal appeal to reason: "I may be wrong: perhaps what I take for gold and diamond is nothing

but a bit of copper and glass... I shall be glad, nevertheless, to reveal in this discourse what paths I have followed, and to represent my life in it as if in a picture, so that everyone may judge it for himself.”⁵⁴ With this sentiment, Descartes is democratizing understanding by positioning reason as a universal basis for judgement, which constitutes a break from Plato’s notion that philosophical truths are only available to certain individuals. By retracing the steps of his personal history, Descartes presents to the reader the contingency or particularity of his situation—but not of the philosophical truths themselves, as these are “discovered” rather than constructed. Moreover, he issues many statements that seem compatible with a nonfoundationalist approach to philosophy:

It is good to know something of the customs of various peoples, so that we may judge our own more soundly and not think that everything contrary to our own ways is ridiculous and irrational... And even the most accurate histories, while not altering or exaggerating the importance of matters to make the more worthy of being read, at any rate almost always omit the baser and less notable events; as a result the other events appear in a false light...⁵⁵

These sentiments, interpreted outside the context of Descartes’ philosophical convictions, could be used to bolster arguments for the abandonment of epistemology as the search for absolute foundations for knowledge. However, Descartes takes them in the opposite direction, seeing the inability to discern absolute truth in a disordered world as reason to figure out exactly what could be considered true. He recognizes the problem of philosophy as a field that seeks to provide foundations for all other sciences, yet which cannot seem to agree on what these foundations are; rather than considering the possibility that multiple approaches to a single question might be true, he reasons that “it

⁵⁴ p. 21.

⁵⁵ p. 23

is impossible for more than one to be true.”⁵⁶

Descartes considers his approach to be radically different from the old foundations and old ways of thinking, comparing his philosophy to pulling down a house in disrepair and rebuilding it from its very foundations.⁵⁷ In this way he allows himself to doubt all the insights of preceding philosophers, casting them aside in favor of his new grounds for absolute certainty. In doing so, however, he neglects his own academic history, claiming that his travels did him more good than than any book. The problem, though, is that he *did* read many books, and his desire to “tear the house down” presupposes his experience of the house itself. Moreover, he seeks to build a new house in the place of the old one, presupposing even the *idea* of a house. In this way, Descartes perfectly fits Rorty’s description of a revolutionary systematic philosopher, seeking to “draw up new blueprints” for a newer, more well-appointed house. Revolution, even if it seeks the edifying goal of *not* rebuilding, must first have knowledge of that which it seeks to tear down.

Consider, now, the *Principles of Philosophy*. The *Principles* consists of a list of statements—about human knowledge, material things, and so on—with each statement followed by a short explanation. Beyond the first section, though, Descartes notion of “philosophy” becomes more general than the more modern conception of philosophy concerning the search for certainty—what Rorty might call “philosophy-as-epistemology”—applying to natural science and mathematics. This is somewhat modeled after Aristotle’s comprehensive works (i.e., *Physics* and *Metaphysics*), and, in keeping

⁵⁶ p. 24

⁵⁷ p. 26

with Descartes' revolutionary systematic approach to philosophy, intended to replace them. Unlike the *Discourse*, the *Principles* are clearly propositional, forgoing the attempt to explain the personal impetus for or reasons *why* Descartes undertakes such an endeavor; instead, it takes a much more universal angle, as "laws" are not meant to work on the personal level that the *Discourse* portrays. Descartes, having convinced himself of his certainty, positions this work as definitive.

Like the *Discourse*, the *Principles* contain many points that, when taken out of context, seem consistent with a nonfoundational approach to philosophy; these predominantly stem from his method of systematic doubt. Principles like "Our concepts of other things do not similarly contain necessary existence, but merely contingent existence" and "Preconceived opinions prevent the necessity of the existence of God from being clearly recognized by everyone"⁵⁸ could be perceived to present some very valuable ideas about contingency and situatedness. However, Descartes is bound again by his insistence upon ultimate commensurability—that is, the belief that there is but *one* correct answer to a given question, and by finding those things of which we can be absolutely certain we can build a system that will give us definitive answers to these questions. Within the context of Descartes' stance, these principles indicate a pronounced contrast with hermeneutic conceptions of truth, drawing their declarations from what Descartes believes to be irrevocably certain. Consider the sixteenth principle, quoted above; by explaining that "preconceived notions" limit our understanding, he attempts to discount arguments *against* the existence of God. However, it seems possible that his

⁵⁸ *Principles of Philosophy*, p. 165. These are the fifteenth and sixteenth principles, respectively.

assumption of the existence of God—particularly the all-powerful, all-knowing creator intimated by Judeo-Christian belief—is based upon a preconception itself, something he is not willing to admit due to his belief that systematic doubt and its implicit appeal to universal reason has allowed him to move beyond his own contingencies and preconceptions.

The narrative of the *Discourse* does exactly what a narrative should do: it presents a character's progression in thought and knowledge, explaining through the depiction of experience the reasoning behind Descartes' pursuit of certainty, the development of his method of systematic doubt, and the necessity of philosophy to bring him out from the *via negativa* and into universal understanding. Descartes reiterates the particularity of his situation, pointing out at multiple points that he is *not* an "everyman," nor does he expect this method to work for everyone. As such, the *Discourse* is altogether a more interesting text than the *Principles*. This is not to say that the *Principles* cannot be interesting; however, it does mean that they affect the reader on a different level—one that, in the context of the approach to philosophy outlined in this paper, is *less* effective due to its direct appeal to the universal without concern for the particular, especially insofar as Descartes bases some of his universal claims on perceptions that are particular to him. It seems, then, that to get the most out of Descartes' philosophy, the most effective route might be to read these two texts in conjunction, moving from the particularities of the *Discourse* to the universalities of the *Principles*.

In contrast to a postmodern, literary approach to "philosophy," Descartes and Plato both espouse foundational views of reality, arguing for the ultimate "rightness" of a

single conception or approach. In doing so, both philosophers adopt systems of meaning based on their own preconceptions—which is a model for the way that anyone might produce a system. In my readings of their texts, each hint at potentially compelling arguments for fostering knowledge of contingency, though neither would be inclined to admit that such knowledge would undermine the absolute. Additionally, both use a form of narrative to present their claims, which both allows closer interest in the ideas of the texts and suggests the subjective nature of interpretation; given my own contingencies, I derive a different meaning from these texts than what either Plato or Descartes may have intended, but that knowledge is nonetheless meaningful.

Postmodern narrative fiction deals with this tension between writer and reader in a very explicit way: the artifice of the work, the fact that these are words that someone else wrote that merely represent a sort of transcendent reality, can never be forgotten entirely. The author surrogate and implied author have nearly become ubiquitous in postmodern literature. When we read Roth's Zuckerman novels (or, going further into metanarrative, his Roth novels), O'Brien's pseudo-autobiographical short stories, or Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*—all of which include the author as a character in the text—how can we extricate the text from the author himself? The writing subject can never fully disappear if we are constantly reminded of his very existence. The point here, though, is to call attention to and examine the author *structure*, not the author himself, which is to say that we are more concerned with the ideas of authorship and the relation of creation to meaning than the facticity of the person who created the text. Furthermore, the postmodern practice of metanarrative may be interpreted as pointing out of the dichotomy

of writing as an object; when we read we *do* project beyond the work itself a synthetic reality that the words represent, but we are also looking at black marks on a page. As Gadamer notes, “Texts are ‘enduringly fixed expressions of life’ that are to be understood; and that means that one partner in the hermeneutical conversation, the text, speaks only through the other partner, the interpreter. Only through him are the written marks changed back into meaning.”⁵⁹ By reading these black marks, we readers—and the interpretive communities we find ourselves situated within—give them being and voice; by expressing interest in them, we give them meaning.

Before going much further, the question of this thing called “postmodernism” should be addressed. Delving into a lengthy discussion of what does or does not constitute postmodernism would likely prove unproductive given the openly shifting nature of the “movement” itself. Considering this possibility, I will limit my definition to this: “postmodern,” for the purposes of this paper at least, describes texts—philosophical or literary—which reject foundational belief, concerning themselves with examining contingent structures of meaning and raising questions of how humans should go about forming meaning within a nonfoundational outlook on reality.

Writers, though important insofar as they create texts, are secondary to texts themselves; by tying the meaning that we glean from the text to an individual, we limit the impact that meaning has on individual readers. Now we can consider how this relates to narrative as a philosophical tool. Writers bear responsibility for making content interesting. This is where modes of presentation come in. Though writing is intended to

⁵⁹ p. 387.

be interpreted, it seems that writers can influence how and why their work is interpreted by *how* they write. Propositional philosophy—and even explicitly philosophical narratives—are classified as philosophical (by their authors, their publishers, and often their readers) and will be read as such. In this way, the idea of a text being a “philosophical work” serves the same organizational function that Foucault assigns to authors’ names, a function that might not be necessary. Though literary narratives are not presented as philosophy *per se*, they can be read philosophically through the process of interest. When we approach a text as a narrative rather than philosophy, we will gain different things from it.

We can bring out the basic separation between narrative and propositional writing in considering not the way that we interpret them, but the role of the text itself in our interpretations and the sort of interest that it might promote. In both instances, meaning is derived from the reader’s interest in the text; however, narrative actively promotes interest due to its situational and emotive nature, drawing readers in without an explicit didactic or argumentative intention, whereas a propositional text might plainly lay out what it seeks to achieve or explicitly define the writer’s intent. By presenting particular situations, narratives compel readers to not only consider individuated events outside their own communities, but how these situations can represent their own lives and the communities within which they find themselves. Narrative allows for more widespread appeal simply in belonging to a less specialized classification of published text. Narrative avoids the stigma of difficulty that readers might attribute to philosophy despite its potential to be just as difficult—or, in some cases, more difficult than—explicitly

philosophical work. This does not mean that “the unwashed masses” should be “tricked” into reading philosophically interesting material—such a deception would depend firstly on drawing people away from their televisions and into libraries—but it does mean that there are people who already engage in the process of interest without the explicit knowledge that their coming to understand themselves by way of reading is something philosophical. This happens when the involvement that a reader has with a novel transitions from the simply visceral or emotive into critical, reflective interest—from mere entertainment to active and personal understanding.

Though propositional writing requires interest as much as narrative does, its mode of presentation is very different, and, subsequently, so is the sort of interest we have in it. Gadamer suggests that much “depends on the ‘art’ of writing.”⁶⁰ Sartre takes this one step further: “One is not a writer for having chosen to say certain things, but for having chosen to say them in a certain way.”⁶¹ The function of the narrative mode of presentation is to push the reader through and give value to the content of the prose, but not to be self-evident: content is what matters—language, style, and presentation change to fit the subject. Neither of these writers’ sentiments necessarily promote narrative over propositional writing, but both indicate a concern with style as an important aspect of writing. When Sartre asserts that one is a writer for having chosen to say certain things in a certain way, this can be read as explaining a divide between philosophy and writing. Philosophers are often writers, yes. But their status as “philosophers” is not contingent upon their ability or proclivity to write so much as their investment in argument; Socrates

⁶⁰ p. 393.

⁶¹ Sartre, Jean-Paul. “What is Writing?” *What is Literature?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988. pp. 25-47.

never wrote a word. Philosophy is a conscious interest in ideas, a continual participation in what Rorty calls “the conversation.” The real difference between propositional and narrative philosophy, then, is that the interest we take in propositional philosophy amounts to a concern with argumentation, while the interest we take in narrative is concerned with something beyond argumentation: the conversational project of human solidarity.

Part II: The liberal, literary project of solidarity

In a foundational system, propositional writing works well because it can methodically—almost mathematically—appeal to specific groundings for claims, thus formulating conclusive arguments within the context of so-called “absolute certainty.” If we abandon foundationalism, this sort of approach to philosophy seems less necessary. When we consider the development of self and being as historically contingent, we are naturally drawn into a very real narrative—the story of our own histories and cultures. Fiction allows us to take this further; by detaching narrative from factual data, we can understand that “truth” is not a point of knowledge, but the entire process of interpretation and understanding. Even history is a sort of fiction if examined objectively; we cannot have a comprehensive, wholly factual understanding of past events because the events themselves are filtered through human experience and perception. By fictionalizing events, we can get at the truth of them—not in the sense of epistemic certainty, but in the sense of understanding the human processes at work. Narrative fiction is about what it is to be human; rather than presenting an argument for how or

why humans experience things, simply attempts to present experience itself through the arrangement of a particular sequence of events and interactions among characters. This is not a universal experience, but a very particular one. Through understanding particular experiences that are separate from our own, we can better understand our own experience, our own humanity. This echoes the hermeneutic circle; as we encounter the foreign, our understandings of the familiar change, and vice versa. In encountering a seemingly alien experience in a novel, our own experiences are cast in a different light, and we can come to understand the similarities and differences between our own vocabularies and others'. In this way, literature serves a highly important social function.

In *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, Rorty explains the position of the liberal ironist, which entails two distinct concepts. The first, liberalism, is the view that cruelty is “the worst thing we do,”⁶² and something that we should attempt to eliminate. The second, ironism, is a bit more complex, but ultimately amounts to the acknowledgment of one’s “final vocabulary,” or understanding of the world, *never* being final. An ironist *does not* subscribe to a foundational view of reality, instead embracing the contingency of self and perception on socialization or (as in Rorty’s case) language.⁶³ Rorty calls this *ironism* because such thinkers are “never able to take themselves seriously because [they are] always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves.”⁶⁴ As such, ironists may act as though their vocabularies are final, but with the

⁶² Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1989). p. xv.

⁶³ Rorty spends the first three chapters of *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* exploring the contingencies of language, selfhood, and community, all of which we will explore more fully within the context of *Everything is Illuminated*.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73-74

constant intention of comparing it to other vocabularies and changing it accordingly. This can be called the project of self-perfection, though the word “self-perfection” carries with it the potential connotation of *attainable* perfection. I instead take up a view of the process of updating and refining our final vocabularies as *self-revision*. In this regard, there is never a defined point at which we have completed our revisions and produced a truly final vocabulary; a writer, when returning to a work, will always find flaws. The ironist is constantly engaged in the process of revising the words and sentences he uses to describe himself and the world around him, and this task never reaches completion.

Rorty directs us away from traditional philosophy and toward literature, claiming that it has the propensity to draw attention to—among other things, like contingency—cruelty. The task of the liberal ironist intellectual, then, “is to increase our skill in recognizing and describing the different sorts of little things around which individuals or communities center their fantasies and lives.”⁶⁵ This means that, rather than attempting to develop a framework that universally describes *all* humans, we should recognize that we can gain a better grasp of a non-universal “humanity”—and therefore a better sense of solidarity—by reading about particular, individuated human being. These accounts do not disclose generalizable truths about humanity so much as they allow us to understand alternative vocabularies and expand our notions of what constitutes the “we” of humanity. “The ironist takes the words which are fundamental to metaphysics, and in particular to the public rhetoric of the liberal democracies, as just another text, just another set of little human things.”⁶⁶ Rorty furthers his claim by asserting that “novelists

⁶⁵ *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, p. 93.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

can do something which is socially useful—help us attend to the springs of cruelty in ourselves, as well as to the fact of its occurrence in areas where we had not noticed it.”⁶⁷

Again, literature—in being both written and read—shows us what it is to be human.

In “Why Write?” Sartre offers a similar argument for cruelty-conscious literature. He spends much of the essay establishing the relationship between reader and writer, which, somewhat reductively, amounts to a view of the reader as ultimately responsible for creating the meaning of a written work insofar as they must be individually and interpretively interested in the work; the writer is not immediately present to explain his intentions, and so the responsibility for understanding falls to the reader.⁶⁸ The important thing to note here is the implication of freedom: “Since this directed creation [the interpretation of a work] is an absolute beginning, it is therefore brought about by the freedom of the reader, and by what is purest in that freedom. Thus, the writer appeals to the reader’s freedom to collaborate in the production of his work... The book does not serve my freedom; it requires it.”⁶⁹ The act of writing—and, subsequently, the act of reading—is a free one; therefore, Sartre suggests, a literary work “can be defined as an imaginary presentation of the world in so far as it demands human freedom.” As such, Sartre claims that there are “only good and bad novels,”⁷⁰ and a novel can only be considered good insofar as it takes into account and even celebrates human freedom. Rorty echoes this sentiment in stating his hope for literature to draw negative attention to cruelty and further support human solidarity.

⁶⁷ p. 95

⁶⁸ “Why Write?” pp.50-55.

⁶⁹ “Why Write?”, p. 54-55

⁷⁰ p. 67

By taking on the project of mitigating cruelty against other humans we subscribe to a notion of human solidarity. Solidarity is a bit tricky; because Rorty, as an ironist, does not subscribe to an essentialist view of humanity, the attempt to create some sort of interconnectedness between humans seems futile. However, Rorty derives solidarity from the recognition of some sort of commonality: “When history is in upheaval and traditional institutions and patterns of behavior are collapsing, we want something which stands beyond history and institutions. What can there be except human solidarity, our recognition of one another’s common humanity?”⁷¹ This view does not seek to articulate an essential nature; rather, it considers our current view of “humanity” as contingent on a host of historical, social, and linguistic factors and admits that this view is not permanent or universal. We can create solidarity based on our current vocabularies—our present answers to the question of “who are ‘we’?”—and work from there with the hope of diminishing cruelty. We achieve this by constantly evaluating and revising our own final vocabularies, in particular our definitions of “we” or “us.” Rorty denies that a claim of “one of us human beings”⁷² carries more weight than a comparatively constrained sample, asserting that a claim of “us” usually has a correlate claim of “they,” a group that typically comprises other human beings. So when we seek solidarity, we do so with the aim of consistently expanding our individual notions of “us,” to encompass larger portions of humanity. Embracing solidarity allows us to be ironists among other people. Considering ourselves to be a part of a larger group humbles us and makes us recognize that we—as wholly individual or theoretically “autonomous” beings—are not all that

⁷¹ *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, p. 189

⁷² p. 190

important in the long run.

Narrative has power, particularly within a worldview that rejects absolute truth or certain foundations for knowledge. By looking to literature, we can better understand both other people and our selves. In considering the *Phaedrus*, we come to understand that this clearly argumentative sort of philosophy is not predisposed toward the project of solidarity; in both its explicit argument against writing or fatherless discourse and its implicit argument against democratic understanding, it rejects the potential use of literature to foster solidarity, instead bolstering an image of the philosopher as enlightened and superior—the very idea of Plato’s philosopher-king. By accepting texts as orphaned speech, we totally democratize access to meaning, situating humanity as the caretakers or surrogate parents of these orphaned texts. This makes the determination of “truth” or “correctness” a much more difficult undertaking; however, we should consider the journey down this rocky path to be the most vital aspect of understanding, as we are unlikely to reach its endpoint.

Up to this point, this paper has been predominately concerned with propositionally written philosophical work; to get a better idea of how narrative really functions, we should turn our attention to a narrative text. In the next section, I analyze Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel *Everything is Illuminated* in light of the approach to philosophy that I have outlined above.

Part III: *Everything is Illuminated*

Jonathan Safran Foer’s 2002 novel *Everything is Illuminated* serves quite well as

an example of narrative literature that functions as a philosophically interesting medium, as well as one that directly involves itself with questions of interpretation, contingency, and the author function. Though many other works might deal with similar themes,⁷³ this particular novel works well in the context of my project due to its recent publication, direct appeal to postmodernist ideas, and its commercial success. *Everything is Illuminated* contains a plethora of postmodern literary devices (i.e. nonlinear narrative, revisionist history, stream of consciousness, etc.) and deals with vital aspects of postmodernism's commencement: the second World War and the Holocaust. Regardless of its origin, the success of *Everything is Illuminated* demonstrates the possibility for literary, philosophically involved fiction to reach a broad audience and serve as a viable object of widespread interest. The novel was a financial success *despite* its entrenchment in postmodernism and its readers' consciousness of its philosophical content. Postmodern fiction is not always—or even often—commercially successful; the characteristics that made the novel a success are not necessarily postmodern. *Illuminated's* popularity indicates the possibility for fiction to make intellectual demands of its readers while retaining its immanent structures of plot, characterization, and so on. Moreover, it demonstrates how these structures are vital to the interest the novel engenders—and its subsequent philosophical value. By providing an analysis of the text, I hope to show the practicality of using literature in a philosophical context and to use the content of the work itself to lend literary support to my previous claims, which have—up to this point—

⁷³ In preparation for this paper, I also read *The Counterlife* by Philip Roth, *Pale Fire* by Vladimir Nabokov, and *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien. All of these works—apart from being fantastic reads—can be interpreted as philosophical treatments of authorship and the social function of fiction, among other subjects.

been grounded in explicitly philosophical, propositionally written work.

Everything is Illuminated is the story of a young, Jewish-American writer—also named Jonathan Safran Foer⁷⁴—who travels to Ukraine to find a woman who had supposedly helped his grandfather, Safran, escape to America during the Holocaust. His search is aided by a young Ukrainian translator, Alex, and his grandfather. The novel contains three interconnected narratives: the main story of Jonathan’s search for Trachimbrod—the shtetl, or village, from which his grandfather escaped—narrated by Alex; a fictionalized history of Trachimbrod narrated by Jonathan; and letters written by Alex to Jonathan after the trip takes place and Jonathan has returned to America. These letters act as a connective tissue between Jonathan’s fictional history and Alex’s narrative; they also offer commentary on both narratives, drawing attention to details that may have been embellished, exaggerated, omitted, or entirely made up. The ultimate result, then, is the reader’s consciousness of the fictional nature of the novel, which nonetheless feels like a very real, very personal account of dealing with one’s personal history as a result of Foer’s use of author surrogates; while we readers must consistently acknowledge the fiction of the text, we still see the account as “real” insofar as the characters and writing are structured in a convincing and interesting manner. This dichotomy lies at the root of the novel’s effectiveness as an example of narrative philosophy.

To begin, we should first address the issue of authorship presented at the start of the novel: a primary character and occasional narrator—though, it should be noted, not the only one—is explicitly a version of Foer himself. This is not a wholly new or original

⁷⁴ To avoid confusion, I will refer to Jonathan-the-character as “Jonathan” and Jonathan-the-writer as “Foer.”

device, particularly in postmodern literature,⁷⁵ but one that is nonetheless intriguing and useful for examining the relationship between author and work. However, by distancing himself from the narration through having Alex narrate the present-day plot, Foer allows a sense of self-deprecation to enter the text, using his doubled position of character and writer to engage in externalized, humorous self-reflection and criticism. Indeed, what the reader knows of Jonathan-the-character (and, presumably, Foer himself) comes from outside of the character's perception of himself; from Alex we gain external descriptions of his actions and speech, his responses to Ukrainian culture and—through Alex's letters—his reactions to Alex's account of the journey. In the fictional history of Trachimbrod, we also find an occasional reference to Jonathan himself—partly as author of the history, but also as a descendent of the characters involved. By restricting the character's author surrogacy to indirect narration, Foer complicates the autobiographical elements of the novel, using these complexities to reflect on contingency and cultural identity. From a Rortyan perspective, Foer spends the bulk of the novel dealing with contingency, primarily of language and selfhood. Two key themes come to prominence: first, that history is not determined by factual happening, but by the subjective telling of what happened. Second, that our lives—in this case, Jonathan and Alex's lives—are not really *our lives* in the sense of *sui generis* self-creation, but rather the culmination of many other lives.

The contingency of language and its ties to history arises in both Jonathan's history of Trachimbrod and Alex's account of their journey. The story of Trachimbrod—

⁷⁵ Consider Philip Roth's *oeuvre*, which includes both author surrogates—Nathan Zuckerman—and more blatant self-fictionalizations.

and therefore Brod, Jonathan's earliest known ancestor—begins with the confusion of “what happened” and “what we think happened.” A few residents of the then-nameless shtetl witness a wagon sinking into a river. Sofiowka, a character referred to as “the mad squire,” insists that he knows the facts:

I have seen everything, he said hysterically... The wagon was moving too fast for this dirt road... and it suddenly flipped itself, and if that's not exactly the truth, then the wagon didn't flip itself, but was itself flipped by a wind from Kiev or Odessa or wherever, and if that doesn't seem quite correct, then what happened was—and I would swear on my lily-white name to this—an angel with gravestone-feathered wings descended from heaven to take Trachim back with him...⁷⁶

Sofiowka goes on to claim that he had managed to see Trachim's face as the wagon sped by. Though the other villagers have their doubts about Sofiowka's claims—“But we can't leave the matter entirely to his word,”⁷⁷ one says—the only other witnesses were two young girls, who had “been through enough,” and were not questioned about the accident. In this way, a vital moment in the history of the shtetl was decided by the assertions of a madman. As the years pass, the actuality of the event becomes less important than the legacies that came from it—the name of the shtetl; the upbringing of Brod, a baby girl who floated to the top of the river amid the wagon's wreckage; the Trachimday festival that serves as a backdrop for several later events. Did Trachim drown in the river? Was it even Trachim's wagon that flipped? The absolute certainty of what happened in a physical or actual sense is not at stake here; rather, what matters is what the people of the shtetl *think* happened, and thus what they choose to believe. It is this tension between actuality and belief that moves the novel forward, reflected in the

⁷⁶ Foer, Jonathan Safran. *Everything is Illuminated*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002. p. 9.

⁷⁷ p. 12

fictional/nonfictional structure of the text itself. The shtetl's history, and therefore Jonathan's family history, is largely predicated on the supposition that what Sofiowka saw was what actually happened. This does not seem to be an instance of a group being "wrong" so much as an instantiation of a view of history that takes phenomenal, subjective experience as the deciding factor of history.

The present-day plot line displays its concern with the contingency of language from the very first paragraph. Alex, the narrator, writes in a mangled form of English that represents his limited knowledge of the language, often using awkward phrasing and misplaced synonyms. Take, for instance, the first three sentences of the novel: "My legal name is Alexander Perchov. But all of my many friends dub me Alex, because that is a more flaccid-to-utter version of my legal name. Mother dubs me Alexi-stop-spleening-me!, because I am always spleening her."⁷⁸ "Flaccid" is an antonym of "hard," incorrectly used here instead of "easy." "Dub" is an archaic way of saying "call," and "spleening" appears to mean something like "exasperating." This sort of misuse serves a comedic function as well as illustrating the problems of translation. Alex consistently embodies the contingency of language throughout the novel, often as a mediator between his wholly Ukrainian grandfather and the thoroughly American Jonathan: "'Tell him to shut his mouth,' Grandfather said. 'I cannot drive if he is going to talk.' 'Our driver says there are many buildings in Lutsk,' I told [Jonathan]."⁷⁹ Alex often intentionally mistranslates his grandfather's words to Jonathan, either softening their harshness or fabricating unrelated "translations." This is the contingency of language at its most literal: Jonathan

⁷⁸ p. 1

⁷⁹ p. 57

must assume that Alex understands English in order to communicate at all with most Ukrainians—when Alex does not understand, a discussion of language typically follows. Moreover, Jonathan must assume that Alex faithfully translates Ukrainian to English, which is not always the case.

Language's contingency extends beyond the literal sense, though; in Rortyan terms, "language" or "vocabulary" often refers to the system that grounds belief—most often within particular cultural groups.⁸⁰ *Everything is Illuminated* deals with this sort of contingency in multiple ways. The two most apparent are the clash between Jonathan's personal beliefs and Ukrainian cultural beliefs, and the rivalry between Trachimbrod's religious and secular inhabitants. In an early scene, Jonathan, Alex, and the grandfather stop at a restaurant to eat. Upon being informed of Jonathan's vegetarianism, Alex, his grandfather, and the server cannot understand how a person could eat no meat whatsoever. They list different sorts of meat—from sausage to veal—in an attempt to find one that he will eat, to no avail. Alex and his grandfather consistently refer to Jonathan as "a Jew" or "the Jew"; at one point a waitress finds out that Jonathan is Jewish and asks to see his horns. These situations reflect an imbedded anti-Semitism that results from these characters' situatedness within a historically anti-Semitic culture; Alex can reconsider his beliefs only after realizing that they are contingent upon the beliefs of his community rather than his actual knowledge about Jewish people. Again, Alex is the bridge between Ukrainian and American cultures, not only as a translator, but also as a Ukrainian deeply influenced by American culture. His letters to Jonathan reflect his desire save up enough

⁸⁰ For Rorty, this sort of system is actually reducible to language—the sentences that we use to describe ourselves.

money emigrate to America to live in “a luxurious apartment in Times Square,”⁸¹ emphasizing both his enthusiasm for and his mistaken notions of American life. In these instances, we see that Jonathan and Alex’s respective vocabularies—both literally and in an epistemic sense—are vastly different, though they each make attempts to learn each others’ “languages.” These attempts are not insignificant; this is the sort of learning that Rorty positions as central to the project of solidarity, seeing “traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant... to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of ‘us.’”⁸²

In Jonathan's Trachimbrod narrative, religion divides the shtetl into the “Jewish Quarter and the Secular Three-Quarters,” physically indicated by the position of the synagogue, which “in 1983 [had] wheels... attached, making the shtetl's ever-changing negotiation of Jewishness and Humanness less of a schlep.”⁸³ The shtetl's religious community is further divided into “the Uprighters” and “the Slouchers,” designating the difference between the traditionally pious and the secularly inclined inhabitants of the village. In this dichotomy, we again see the contingency of language: “The Upright congregants looked down on the Slouchers, who seemed willing to sacrifice any Jewish law for the sake of what they feebly termed *the great and necessary reconciliation of religion with life*.”⁸⁴ The Uprighters take an absolutist view of Judaism, viewing the scripture as a foundation for reality—in linguistic terms, its “vocabulary”—thus shaping their lives around what they view to be the “truth.” The Slouchers take a less foundational

⁸¹ p. 101

⁸² *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, p. 192

⁸³ *Everything is Illuminated*, p. 10

⁸⁴ p. 18

stance, applying scripture to their lives rather than their lives to scripture. This does not mean that they have rejected Judaism; it simply suggests that they view religion as a facet of life, an ongoing description, rather than its essence.

Beyond the problems that the contingency of language poses, Foer seems primarily concerned with the contingency of his self, which he approaches by having Jonathan face the long family history leading up to his own being. In the section of his Trachimbrod history concerning his grandfather, he writes, “Wasn’t everything that had happened, from his first kiss to this, his first marital infidelity, the inevitable result of circumstances over which he had no control?”⁸⁵ Safran, the fictionalization of Jonathan’s grandfather, experiences the same sort of confusion about his selfhood; because we are made aware of the fictional nature of this setting and Jonathan’s personal investment in it, we can see Safran’s thoughts as an extension of Jonathan’s own feelings about himself in relation to historical circumstance. Alex also grapples with his contingency: “Everything is the way it is because everything was the way it was. Sometimes I feel ensnared in this, as if no matter what I do, what will come has already been fixed.”⁸⁶ Both Alex’s and Jonathan’s (via Safran) sentiments reflect the feeling that, because their very beings seem so dependent on what came before, they have no hand in the creation of their selves. However, as demonstrated before, Foer understands how history itself is contingent upon language. At one point in the Trachimbrod narrative, Safran looks upon a bronze statue of his great-great-great-grandfather and notes that he himself looks “unmistakably like” his ancestor, drawing the conclusion that “he was granted a place in a long line... He was not

⁸⁵ p. 165

⁸⁶ p. 145

altogether free.”⁸⁷ However, Jonathan later reveals that, “For each recasting, the craftsmen modeled the [statue’s] face after the faces of his male descendants—reverse heredity... His revelation was just how much like himself he looked.”⁸⁸ This is a physical representation of the relationship between ourselves and history; though our lives and beings are determined to an extent by the contingencies of our family histories, social classes, and so on, we also have some power over history; we can determine which aspects of the past to remember, forget, or emphasize. Jonathan’s fictionalization of his own family history appeals to this idea of revision—not only of the self, but of one’s own history.

In his exploration of cultural and linguistic contingency, Foer gets at what Rorty expresses as his hope that “the process of de-divinization...would, ideally, culminate in our no longer being able to see any use for the notion that finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings might derive the meanings of their lives from anything except other finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings.”⁸⁹ By de-divinization, Rorty is referring to his project of putting forth an ideal for an enlightened, wholly secular liberal culture. Viewing “divinity” or the belief in such as a surrender to foundationalism, it stands to reason that Rorty would be suspicious of any concept of humanity that includes as a major tenet the existence of divine being. Though Foer certainly deals with religious themes in *Everything is Illuminated*, he ultimately presents a view of reality that considers much of experience, even religion, to be a social outgrowth of culture and history rather than foundational belief.

⁸⁷ p. 121

⁸⁸ p. 140

⁸⁹ *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, p. 45.

From here we can return to the novel's consciousness of its own artifice. Foer accomplishes this through synecdoche; just as Jonathan represents Foer himself as writer and researcher of family history, the Trachimbrod narrative represents the larger work of which it is a part. Alex's letters to Jonathan serve as a running commentary of both Jonathan's work and the contemporary journey to Trachimbrod; Alex works as a sort of alternate author-surrogate, bringing up questions about the novel that Foer wants to emphasize. In one such letter, Alex writes:

We are being very nomadic with the truth, yes? The both of us? Do you think that this is acceptable when we are writing about things that occurred? If your answer is no, then why do you write about Trachimbrod and your grandfather in the manner that you do, and why do you command me to be untruthful? If your answer is yes, then this creates another question, which is if we are to be such nomads with the truth, why do we not make the story more premium than life? It seems to me that we are making the story even inferior. We often make ourselves appear as though we are foolish people, and we make our voyage, which was an ennobled voyage, appear very normal and second rate... I do not think that there are any limits to how excellent we could make life seem.⁹⁰

By positioning the revisionist history itself as fiction, Foer aims for us to view it as a work in progress rather than a completed text; this means that it cannot be decontextualized from its author. Jonathan is writing this to help himself understand his family's history and subsequently his own being. Furthermore, Alex fictionalizes his account at Jonathan's request, even drawing attention to the details that he has invented or the ones that Jonathan has requested he omit. By making the two central figures of the novel writers themselves, Foer directly addresses the contentious author function in literature. Rather than positioning himself as the dispenser of meaning, Foer uses his

⁹⁰ pp. 179-180

author surrogates to illustrate the idea that the author might be involved in the same meaning-making activity as the reader, particularly within the writing process itself. Foucault describes the traditional conception of the author role as “so different from all other men, and so transcendent with regard to all languages that, as soon as he speaks, meaning begins to proliferate...indefinitely.”⁹¹ Here, Foer is rejecting this conception, moving toward a view of authorship which holds the writer as a participant in meaning-making rather than an arbiter.

Everything is Illuminated is a successful example of philosophical narrative fiction, getting at issues of being, contingency, interest, and authorship without necessarily forming an argument about them. It would be possible to read the novel without “getting it” in an analytical sense; the sort of close reading provided here is not indicative of a less targeted reading. That is, *Everything is Illuminated* did not become a bestseller because its legions of readers found it philosophically stimulating in a direct or obvious manner. An appeal to postmodernism does not connote financial success; the opposite is often true. In any case, the novel thrusts the reader into a conversation, provoking us to lose and find ourselves within it through its presentation of a very particular but nonetheless *human* account. We follow the examples of Jonathan and Alex, leaving behind what we previously understood and moving toward new conceptions of interconnectedness, belief, history, and culture. This could not have happened within a propositional, argumentative text, because these ideas are not arguments so much as presentations of instances of human being.

⁹¹ *What is an Author?*, p. 118

Conclusion

As my approach has emphasized the subjective nature of interest and the central role of the individual reader in meaning-making, it stands to reason that, as Descartes admits of his approach in the *Discourse*, this might not work for everyone—though not because of any incongruous access to reason. This is why I have framed the process of interest with an explicitly nonfoundational, predominately ironist approach to philosophy. Within this approach, literature works by showing us what it is to be human, encouraging us through emotional and intellectual interest to consider the text in relation to our own preconceptions and beliefs. This approach to literature does not mean that we cannot find interest in propositional texts, but it admits that we will probably derive different things from these texts than their authors might have intended.

In considering novels as viable modes of presentation for ideas, we fully democratize the proliferation of meaning, allowing philosophical thought to “roll about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it,”⁹² a prospect that Socrates might have abhorred but one which positions the process of human understanding as evolving, progressive, and largely unconcerned with the discovery or development of epistemic certainty. This does not, however, mean that any text can mean anything. To a degree, the value of an interpretation is largely determined by the individual interested in the text. However, we would do well to remember that our interpretations are not a wholly individual process;

⁹² *Phaedrus* 275e

they result from the cultural and historical situations that allow us to consider ourselves as individual beings. Moreover, the text itself is indispensable in the process of interest, so any interpretation based on a cursory or mistaken reading (in the sense of having misread a word or phrase, thinking them to say something different) could be considered “bad.” Finally, the *cultural* value of an interpretation—as opposed to personal—is determined by the culture in which the reader experiences the text. If the interpretation takes on a new vocabulary or otherwise falls outside the individuated epistemology of a particular community, that interpretation will, more likely than not, be considered “bad,” unless the interpreter can make this new vocabulary legible in translation.

The implication here is that, as texts might be orphaned from their creators, we readers are compelled to take care of them. This does not mean that we become their new “parents”; however, it *does* mean that we must take responsibility for the meaning we derive from them. Because we are each allowed to interpret texts based on the criteria of our own contingencies, we must understand that, regardless of the importance we might find in the meaning of a particular interpretation, the fact that we have found this meaning does not bring the text wholly under our jurisdiction. Though we should certainly make cases for our particular interpretations and provide reasons for others to take up the same understanding, we must understand that humanity does not purely consist of members of our respective thought-communities, cultures, genders, or religions. Ideological divides should not hinder our efforts to move toward broader and broader understandings of what constitutes “us.”

As evidenced by Rorty in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, “philosophy” in a

traditional, systematic sense will not likely end anytime soon; as long as the conversation continues, there will be those who attempt to formalize their individual vocabularies and apply them categorically. Our best course of action, in this case, is to continue to be critical of the validity or usefulness of such systems and attempt to continually revise our own vocabularies as we continue the conversation. Above all, we should *keep reading*. Though other modes of presentation such as film, visual art, or music also offer the possibility of interest, writing maintains a continuous presence in these artistic communities. Reading allows us to explore the depths of our own minds and formulate our ever-changing “final” vocabularies or universal beliefs by experiencing the particularities of humanity manifest in writing. This surrogate communication with humanity allows us to expand our horizons, merge them with others’, and in general come to think of humanity as something changing, something profoundly communal, and something that we, as individuals and communities, have a role in shaping.

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