

PHILOSOPHY AS CONVIVIALITY



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THE TRUTH of philosophy is measured, in the end, by its contribution to the good life. The purpose of philosophy rests in that pursuit. As a discipline, philosophy is instrumental for clarity of thought, expansion of the horizons of reason, contact with the ideas of the past, appreciation of the ebb and flow of rationality, guidance in judgment, a foundation for law, and a common forum for dialogue among cultures and moralities. But its crowning purpose is the pursuit of the good life, which itself is useless.

To describe the pursuit of truth as a way of life may seem parasitical on the philosophical tradition, a kind of pale shadow, even misappropriation of the traditional meaning of the word, especially to the academic specialization that has appropriated the name. The exact opposite is the case. If thinking clearly about what it means to live a good life and looking to that thinking for motivation to pursue it are the purpose of philosophy, then the entire wisdom of humankind, accumulated in the past and still in the making, is the final judge of the contributions of certified professionals who monitor philosophical traditions proper.

Now without some idea of what we mean by “the good life,” we have no way of judging what contributes to it and what does not. On the face of it, we only really seem to understand what it means in hindsight of having achieved it, or at least of acknowledging the achievement of others. This is hardly to be wondered at. Like any ideal, the idea of the good life is not a certitude that can be defined in the abstract and then inflicted on behavior. It is explored, identified, criticized, and refined in its practice, expressed in conviction but forever out of reach of certitude.

And yet, like Plato's Idea of the Good, it remains more real than any of its concrete realizations—almost transcendental.

What makes the good life good is not only determined by *how* we define the good but also by *why* we choose to pursue it. For my part, I believe that the quest of the good life is an essential part of being human, a natural impulse of the conscious mind. If it were merely a matter of submitting to the demands of coexisting in society with other individuals, whether out of rational conviction or trust in a higher authority, or through some combination of the two, the choice to practice the good would have to be seen as an imposition on our inborn human desires, a regulation of instincts that, left to themselves, would corrupt the social order at every opportunity. The only way the quest of the good life can itself be embraced as a good is if it is seen to be so deeply rooted in the desires that define us as human that it can neither be eradicated nor satisfied once and for all. The aboriginal goodness of that ambiguous and inconsistent jumble of impulses that make up our humanity is a different kind of goodness from the moral restraints put on the baser of our instincts. It is an unwavering trust in the goodness of our nature, a fundamental option without which our provisional ideals of the good, however critically reasoned, would never amount to more than an imposition.

The idea of a good life is universal but not uniform. A good life can never embrace the completeness of *the* good life. Its universality is not a fixed concept; it reveals itself only in a plurality of changeable forms, all of them culturally and epochally specific. Whether one speaks of it as the triumph of reason over appetite or the flourishing of the self or social harmony, as *eudaimonía* or *beatitudo* or living according to nature, these generalizations do not constitute an objective "good" that can be defined, codified, or maximized in cultural institutions. They point to an ideal whose truth resides in their continued practice and refinement.

I have settled on the word *conviviality* to describe the ideal of the good life. I do so without any intention of removing the ambiguities in the idea of the good life, to substitute one working definition with any other, or to make a composite of traditional descriptions of the concept. This would only express something unknown with something still more unknown, *ignotum per ignotius*. Rather, I will take conviviality as a guiding fiction whose truth is entirely dependent on whether and how far it guides us or distracts us from aligning the philosophical vocation with the pursuit of the good life. In short, I mean to reclaim the purpose of philosophy as the pursuit of conviviality.

The academic captivity of philosophy has threatened its primordial vocation. The combination of training for careers in existing institutions and standards of accreditation for publication have constrained the style of philosophy so tightly that whole libraries of the classics of the intellectual history of the West, not to mention that of the wider world, can be denied admission. Where philosophy

survives and flourishes, it is not because of such institutionalization but in spite of it. That said, my primary frame of reference here remains the philosophical traditions with which I have some familiarity. The problem is that, again and again, questions about the good life overflow that frame. It may help us refine a language for structuring our thoughts, but ultimately philosophical expression has to be translated into more vernacular discourse if we are to measure its truth. Literature, art, folk wisdom, ritual, scientific exploration, technological developments, and the evolution of common sense are not mere resources for philosophy to reinforce its architectural ambitions. Nor are they mere objects for philosophical principles to rearrange into some kind of general order. They are the building materials for which philosophy is only a cornerstone. They point to “more things in Heaven and Earth” than are dreamt of in our philosophies. Without attention to the vernacular, any ideal of the good life is no more than an irrelevant distraction, a castle in the sky. The good life cannot be the measure of a philosophy’s truth if the measure is not taken in the first place.

These past weeks I have been browsing the bookshelves scattered around my house looking for hints of how to proceed with reclaiming the vocation to philosophy. As I looked over the titles randomly, I realized that there is hardly a single book that I have considered important in my life that does not have something to say about conviviality. From the ancient world of the Mediterranean and East Asia, to the medieval scholastics and mystics, to the poets and novelists I admire most, to the idealists and post-industrial social critics—all of them have something to say about what it means to pursue a good life, each in their own idiom and mode of thought. Their different models for structuring society and educating its institutions to the service of the good life are as varied as can be. But the impulse behind their ideals of the good life is as common as can be.

Conviviality, then, is not a single idea but a scattering of ideas reflecting off one another. Like a constellation in the night sky, its composite image is specific to the cultural and historic circumstances of those who contemplate it. What the Greeks saw as Orion’s Belt, the ancient Egyptians linked to the dying and rising god Osiris, the Inuit to a legend of three hunters who got lost and perished in the ice, and the Lakota saw as a great hand reaching across the sky. As a way to navigate the complex domain of philosophy’s quest of the good life, I would like to triangulate the notion of conviviality from three thinkers: Pierre Hadot, James Hillman, and Ivan Illich. Their different perspectives are more than variations on a single theme. Not only does each point of view alert us to blind spots in the others; it protects the notion of conviviality from captivity to any one point of view. When Jaspers highlighted *Kommunikation* as the hallmark of philosophy, he meant to reject the idea of a shared horizon or a common authority in favor of a joint struggle with

uncertainty. The three thinkers I have singled out are of one mind in this regard: certitude is the grave of the good life.

I begin with Pierre Hadot, whose 1987 book *Philosophy as a Way of Life* is an eloquent challenge to redirect the theoretical discourse of philosophy away from its self-containment towards “spiritual exercises” aimed at transforming one’s way of seeing the world and appropriating the gift of human life. He was critical of the evolution of the primary role of the philosopher from that of representing an exemplary style of life to that of a specialist who trains other specialists in a carefully studied language and logic. He considered it historical vandalism to represent the philosophers of the past as career professors.

Hadot’s frame of reference for philosophy’s contribution to the good life is a careful analysis of varieties of diagnosis and therapeutic regimens for regulating the human condition as found in ancient Hellenistic philosophy from Socrates to the Epicureans, Stoics, Skeptics, and Neoplatonists. The “spiritual exercises” he had in mind went beyond the external asceticisms and cathartic contemplations of the Orphic rituals that thinkers like Pythagoras, Empedocles, and Plato had woven into their philosophies. What interested him above all were practices like the discipline of *prosochē*, the intense efforts continually to be “aware” of *what* one is doing and *where* in the cosmic scheme of things one is doing it; or meditation on death and the rehearsal of evil and misfortune; or the continued examination of conscience and regulation of desire. He was particularly drawn to the cultivation of detachment from self-importance, an expansion of one’s ordinary habits of thought by means of what he called a “view from above.” Through the exercise of imagination particularly evident among the Platonists, Stoics, and Epicureans, one’s perspective is opened to the vastness of the universe where one’s thoughts can soar freely into multiple possible worlds, where the interconnectivity of all things reveals itself, where one can break free of the superfluities of life and leave behind our crippling preoccupation with the weakness and shortcomings of human existence. This was the sense in which the Cynics referred to themselves as *epískopoi*, the “overseers” who sought to place themselves above the absurdities of life. All of this lay in the background of the surprising exhortation of the normally rationalistic Aristotle at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to the good life as the flourishing (*eudaimonía*) of contemplation (*thēoría*) and practical wisdom (*phrónēsis*).

For these thinkers of the Hellenistic period, philosophy was an art of living, a way of being. Hadot traces the consideration of philosophy as primarily philosophical discourse from modern times to the Middle Ages. Early Christianity, he argues, did not hesitate to present itself as a philosophy precisely because “philosophy” had been conceived in antiquity as a way of life. As Christian philosophy evolved into a “servant of theology” and provider of conceptual, logical, and metaphysical foundations, it became increasingly abstract and theoretical. Exiled from philosophy,

spiritual exercise found its home in Neoplatonic and Christian mysticism. In time, the classroom became the temple of philosophical education, professionals training professionals, or, as Schopenhauer put it in his wonderfully acerbic wit, “a mere fencing in front of a mirror.” Philosophy as a way of life was degraded to the way of a professional career.

For Hadot, the renewed emphasis on transforming one’s perspective of the world that we see in thinkers like Bergson and Husserl, the insistence on bonding theory to practice in Hegel and Marx, or the existentialist attempt of Heidegger and others to engage freedom and action in the philosophical process, is primarily a matter of manicuring philosophical discourse. And unlike Foucault’s project of the “care of the self,” which drew directly on his work, Hadot was not simply concerned with a reconstruction of the *withinness* of the individual person but also with its overcoming and opening to the totality of the *withoutness* in human society, nature and the cosmos. He pursued the good life, we might say, as a transformation of the convivium.

Hadot himself was not overly optimistic about redirecting the focus of academic philosophy from the study of doctrines and techniques of argumentation to questions about the good life. Nevertheless, in addition to guiding students to imitate the “spiritual exercises” of exemplary thinkers of the past through inquiry, dialogue, and silence, he felt it necessary to remove career certification from its dominant position and replace it with ethics in Descartes’s sense of “the practice of wisdom.”

This brings us to the second philosopher in our triangulation of the notion of conviviality, James Hillman. For a few short months while Hillman was finishing up his Yale University Terry Lectures, published in 1975 as *Re-Visioning Psychology*, I was living in Zurich and had ample opportunity to discuss his assault on established psychology and its views of human nature. Those hours sitting around the Spring House or nursing a beer in a local café had a stimulating effect I remember to this day. I found the dizzying pace of his mind and the unconventional vocabulary in which he expressed his ideas at once suggestive, perplexing, and liberating. I still do.

Hillman was appalled at the tendency of psychology to envision itself as a kind of metaphysical *regina scientiarum* into which all other disciplines could be collapsed without remainder. He set out to re-vision such psychologism by “seeing through” the fanciful assumptions it imposes on the primal mystery of “soul.” To psychologize, he countered, is to engage in “soul-making” or seeing through the things of life as windows to a fuller and more genuine experience of life. This has two important consequences. First, it exposes the perennial “nominalism” in philosophy as it disempowers language by turning it into *nomina* that erase soul from the language of the psyche and turn its words into “implements in the hand

of specialists.” He cites Bergson to the effect that the flowing, mythical dimension to life is frozen solid by the ruling modes of psychological thought, condemning the very symbols that metaphysics had set out to replace but which are needed to relate sympathetically to the world and to others.

Second, soul-making frees itself of the shackles of the monotheistic “heroic ego,” the more freely to roam the borderlands of conscious and unconscious mind, that uninhibited realm of the imaginal whose multidimensional productions give depth and resonance to human interiority. For Hillman, the good life is not grounded in a reassurance of order and harmony and meaning through unassailable concepts but an awakening to the indefinite and chaotic unreason by which soul reveals itself. The psychologizing he advocated seeks to appropriate the imagery of this twilight world by “personifying” it. That is, rather than seeing the inner figures of fantasies and dreams as projections of the ego or a scrambled residue of its memories, he insisted on their autonomy as windows to the diversity of the psyche. It was not a question of positing multiple egos, but rather of rejecting the very idea of a governing or unifying ego. In this regard, he refused to dismiss the polytheism of the ancient Greeks as a primitive and literal theology, approaching it instead as an imaginative map of a dark and mysterious inner life that no monotheistic principle could express.

Hillman’s explicit critique of all forms of philosophical “personalism” entailed not only a dethroning of the imperial self but a “dehumanizing” of soul, a rejection of the assumption that the inner life can be evaluated primarily in terms of human interests, personal development, and individual happiness. Ironically, he later came to acknowledge the pressure of thinkers like Frege, Russell, and the early Wittgenstein to distance philosophy from human flourishing in favor of truth and logical clarity—but with one important difference. Hillman would restore the good life as the measure of truth precisely by disassociating it from *exclusively human* good.

Re-Visioning Psychology was focused on freeing the idea of therapy from the model of medical diagnosis and treatment in order to reinforce contact with the imagery and myth-making functions of the psyche. But in subsequent writings he came to recognize a shadow of anthropocentrism hanging over his ideas. Therapeutic obsession with the individual had tended to privatize what in fact were more collective pathologies in the social and ecological spheres. To express the shift, he turned to the classical notion of the *anima mundi* to mark a break with the bonding of soul to the skin-bound individual in order to reconsider the depth of the outer world of nature and expose the shallow glitter of efficiency in the way societies reconstruct their habitat.

Ten years after *Re-Visioning Psychology*, Hillman published a book he called *The Soul’s Code* in which he proposed the presence of an inner *daimōn* to persons and

things, an innate impulse to realization. Whatever is so ensouled, he argued, can never be seen as a mere resource. He turned Kant's maxim that human beings must never be treated as a mere "means" on its head, inviting us to draw a straight line from the psychology of persons to the psychology of things. He came to see the pathology of persons reflected both in the pathology of the clinical institutions that were entrusted with their care, as well as in the institutionally sanctioned desecrations of the temple of the natural world. Therapy, accordingly, must be more than an instrument for private self-cultivation or the manipulation of cultural development by self-appointed experts. It must be directed toward a renewed attentiveness and response to the call of the *anima* that guides fate the way an acorn guides the emergence of the oak, and away from the temptation to *animus* that fractures and isolates. (I write this with a smile, because it reminds me of the words he used to advise me to revise a manuscript I had submitted to him for a series he was editing.) To Hillman's way of thinking, the good life was the pursuit of soul in the whole of the convivium.

It was Ivan Illich, a contemporary of James Hillman and one whom he considered "such a beautifully radical thinker," who gave the word *conviviality* its currency in the 1970s and 1980s. I choose him as the third triangulating point for considering the restoration of philosophy's service to the good life. His lifelong critique of modern institutions was aimed at their role in diminishing our capacity for living well by organizing the entirety of the social economy toward the advertisement of a "better life," whose definition was a function of the survival and growth of those very institutions. It was only through a deliberate renunciation of their modes of valuing and disvaluing the tools for managing things and persons and the natural world that we will be able to return to the gratuity and blessings of a life made to the measure of the ordinary freedoms of ordinary people.

Although Illich was convinced that the special way in which philosophers express the mentality and the cultural certainties of their age merits close attention, he maintained a healthy skepsis towards the abstractions and conceptualizations that from the time of the ancient Greeks served to isolate philosophy from the concrete imagery and feelings towards the body and the sense of cosmic belonging they were seeking to replace. He set out to examine the slow evolution from direct and autonomous contact with the things of life to their transformation into utilities best managed by experts certified by the institutions who profit from their providence. In the Christian West, that process is reflected both in the development of an increasingly disembodied, dogmatized theology and in the turn of manufacturing to industrial production. These are huge generalizations, of course, which gloss over the more careful pace at which Illich takes them. Behind it all is his puzzlement over how we have come to live in a world that people of an earlier age would have considered "unfeeling brutality and absolute nonsense."

In his 1973 book, *Tools for Conviviality*, Illich defined conviviality in terms of our relationship with tools and other human beings. It was for his criticism of social control over the tools that manage the demand for learning, health, and the consumption of natural resources that he is best known. He saw schools, hospitals, and transportation in post-industrial society as subject to the same degeneration into “counterproductivity” as Latin Christendom had undergone from the Middle Ages through the Reformation: the institution grows beyond a certain threshold and it begins to promote the opposite of what it was founded to promote, and to diminish the ordinary capacity it was designed to supplement. In this way he set up a confrontation between tools that liberate and systems that dominate the pursuit of a good life. His target was a spiritual malaise deeply rooted in modern civilizations’ relationship to its own institutions. He called this a “radical monopoly” in the sense that it was not bound to any particular enterprise but to modes of thought elevated to the level of unassailable certitude.

Although Illich was aware that the solution lay in the political will to bring technology under control, he did not offer much in the way of a blueprint for change. But beneath the surface and between the lines of his social criticism flowed a spirituality that many critics have confused with a bleary-eyed romanticism. He understood it rather as the hallmark of philosophy’s commitment to the good life. In the end, the change he hoped for would not come through legislation or the regulation of institutions but only through a transformation of perspective—a contemplative conversion. The locus of such conversion is always personal but never private. Hence the frequent reference in his final writings and interviews to the ideal of *philia* and the importance of the *convivium* or *symposium* as a commons where friends gather to discuss the things that matter to them the most. It is there, he hoped, that we might cultivate the common sense about the good, which he came increasingly to understand as what “fits,” what is appropriate. He was skeptical of shared values as a universal coin, as well as of the institutions that minted them. He, too, was pessimistic about the possibility of reforming the modern university and came to consider gathering around a podium less suitable for philosophy than gathering around a bottle of wine.

In addition to friendship, a second theme that Illich turned to late in life was that of protecting the notion of ecology not only from the temptations of mass consumption but also from the control of experts. He resisted the idea of reducing the study of the relationship between living things and their habitat to a system to be analyzed and regulated uniformly across cultures. As I understand it, this was the motivation behind his renewed interest in the body. When he and his colleague Barbara Duden visited the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture in 1986, Illich had begun to question the ways in which the senses had lost their direct connection to the good life. On a long walk, we envisaged a series of seminars to be held in

Europe and Japan on the “expropriation of the senses” and the involuntary asceticisms of modern life. I offered to write a working paper on the topic, which I in fact finished some years afterwards. But as the sizeable tumor on his neck, already evident at the time of his visit, worsened, our plans evaporated.

I had first met Illich in 1963 in Cuernavaca, Mexico, where he had opened an “open university” that was just finishing its first round of courses. I had qualified for participation in a national anti-illiteracy campaign and was living in a poor village to the north of Mexico City. He took the time to sit down with me and vent his frustrations with the Peace Corps and other initiatives for “developing” the “underdeveloped” cultures of Latin America. I knew at once I was in the presence of an extraordinary mind. Aside from a few letters exchanged over the years, we only met briefly again in London in 1970 where we discussed, of all things, a sixteenth-century alchemical text. To this day, his image is still fresh in my mind when I read his writings, which retain for me a freshness all their own.



The three points of triangulation from which I have tried to survey the idea of philosophy as a contribution to the good life may, I am afraid, present a muddled picture without any clear outlines of what the proper role of the philosopher might look like in the concrete. If anything, I may have made it seem that philosophy’s failure to engage its own *Lebenswelt*, which Husserl had identified as the crisis of the modern age, is mainly an issue for the *scriptorium* and the *oratorium*. But here is the problem. The reason we have trouble conceiving philosophy as the pursuit of the good life in the concrete is that the scholarship that speaks to that pursuit has wrapped itself up in an idle sentimentalism. The philosophical tradition as we have inherited it is an accumulation of ideas *about* the “reality” of life that does not actually *acquaint* us with philosophy as part of life itself.

To reattach philosophy to everyday experience through personal discipline, to restore the expectation of mystery to a pathologically demystified world, to campaign for greater autonomy from the institutions that superintend the tools governing our relationship to ourselves, society, and the natural world—all of this begins to sound like one set of impotent abstractions replacing another when we turn from the criticisms of modern life to our efforts to address them. Between our everyday perceptions and feelings and habits of engagement with life and our aspiration to a good and truly convivial life there stand immovable, inescapable, and monstrously controlling structures that philosophy is powerless to alter. The pessimistic wisdom of Will and Ariel Durant’s verdict that nature and history define the good as “that which survives” haunts our every effort. It seems that the

more light social criticism sheds on our condition the more our ideals are washed out of the picture.

The idea of unraveling the immense interlocking of forces that keep modern civilization in place, or even simply opting out of it, is delusional in the extreme. The systems we depend on for day-to-day existence are the very systems we depend on to criticize that dependency. The thick walls of the stronghold close in about us, and the best we can do is pelt it with petty complaints that crumble to dust when they strike the wall. There is nowhere to hide and no choice but to give in.

In this context, the argument that philosophy had best keep its distance from ethics collapses as a generalization, but not before exposing the structural faults of traditional normative morality. We cannot further risk capitulation to the diffusion of a tacit, unexamined ethic in the political action that continues to distort our relationship to the things of life. Rather than purify philosophy of ethics, we can no longer afford not to reconstruct a more convivial approach to morality. It is becoming increasingly apparent that a simple faith in the capacity of the ruling institutions of technological society to cure their own disorders and reverse their own excesses is a naïve superstition that endangers the whole of the convivium, both human and ecological.

I am not talking about further policing private morality or reinforcing international legal systems and universal ethical principles. It is not a morality of rules, embedded in technical vocabulary, that will guide philosophy back to its pursuit of the good life, but a renewed attentiveness to the “ought” or sense of “obligation” as a normal human sensitivity. This is not a private affair but a thoroughly convivial one that sets its sights on chastising the varieties of public immorality that pass as ethically neutral “mores” in the ongoing “progress” of civilization. Without boundaries, ethics is meaningless. Still, the establishment of uniform boundaries engraved in maxims that pretend to transcend the epochally and culturally specific conditions of the human community is more prone to abuse than an ethic grounded in spontaneous moral sentiment whose awareness cannot be legislated or acted on vicariously by one segment of society for another. The spontaneous impulse to convivial good is a discovery that is made personally or it is not made. The tempering of universal norms and their imposition through law or custom are grounded in a distrust of such impulses. Philosophy’s commitment to the good life comes down, in the end, to a question of a love of human wisdom and a trust in its guidance to regulate our counterconvivial impulses.

The language of conflict resolution, individual rights, and litigated justice becomes instrumental for maintaining a deliberately constructed competitive society that requires them to protect itself from imploding. The philosophical release of ethics from the captivity of social law entails the freedom to encourage alternative modes of thought about how to structure society without the inbred aggressions

that threaten simple conviviality. It is only through a plurality of experiments that the definition of “needs” can be liberated from the idea of “affordability.” What we *need* is to explore ways to replace involuntary asceticism with deliberate renunciation of excess and a return to the importance of “sufficiency.” Without viable and more convivial alternatives to the addiction to betterment through greater consumption of the latest goods, services, and information, moral sentiments of the good life will float higher and higher into the ether of sentimentalism.

Aside from the broadside assault on modern civilization implied in what I have been saying above, I would like to target a more specific threat, namely, artificial intelligence, a microcosm of the institutional resistance to associating philosophy with the good life.

AI has already sounded the death knell for the monopoly of the lecture hall where teachers face learners as donors to recipients. The direct and critical engagement with ideas that philosophy relies on is sabotaged when the audience already has a whole library history of philosophical texts and arguments, positions and counterpositions at their fingertips. No attempt to outlaw the use of AI, even on a limited scale, is likely to survive the appeal of such a resource. The solution will have to be sought elsewhere.

Perhaps the only realistic reform of society available to individuals is what the Zen farmer and philosopher Fukuoka Masanobu called a “one-straw revolution.” In his case, this meant renouncing “green revolution” technology and the complexity of modern agricultural science with its chemicals, machinery, and deployment of labor, and learning to feed ourselves by leaving nature alone as far as possible. His idea of setting up alternatives for specific tasks by disestablishing them from any kind of corporate control and making them a better fit for autonomous control on a smaller, if more fragile and less widely broadcast scale may be applied to the practice of philosophy as well. For the professional academic, trained to teach philosophy and contribute to its advance, any break with the established curriculum and its mechanisms of peer-evaluation may seem too great a risk to job security and career advancement. The mere hope of contributing to the good and convivial life seems rather watery gruel compared to the hearty buffet of options available within a university career. Despite the pressures to postpone that hope or confine it to academic venues like this, the vocation is available for those who have the courage to follow it.

For the philosopher, the task at hand is to rescue intelligence from its captivity to information algorithms. Boethius’ distinction in *De consolazione philosophiae* between *ratio* and *intellectus* can help us here. *Ratio* is the discursive, syllogistic mental labor of moving sequentially from premise to conclusion. Its idea of truth is a function of argument and inference operating at the periphery of reality. *Intellectus*, in contrast, is the simpler achievement of insight that comes to rest in the

stillpoint at the center of the circle, the moment of eternity in time. Rather than scanning the landscape rationally piece by piece, it views it as a constellation of the whole of its parts, both the outer landscape of the world as reconstructed in mind and the inner landscape of our feelings towards the world.

The convivium I have tried to triangulate is aimed at the restoration of *intellectus* in this sense through discipline, attentiveness to the *anima mundi*, and the disestablishment of institutions that menace the autonomy of relationships within the social order and to its ancestry in the natural world. The “intelligence” of AI, on the other hand, is achieved through the coordination and manipulation of “data” extracted from scientific measurement, rational concepts, and factual history. Insofar as it is incapable of human insight in its fuller sense, AI amounts to a kind of *artificial insemination*. Unable to reach the stillpoint of *intellectus*, it is designed to reproduce itself through the constant and chaotic turbulence of more data and more analysis. The errors of “hallucination” that creep regularly into AI’s remittance of data are not corrigible through more data or more complex methods of resolving problems and rationalizing the chaos it creates. At a more basic level, they are symptomatic of the absence of the stillpoint of reasoning that William James referred to as the “sentiment of rationality.” Any philosophical truth disassociated with *intellectus* by design is as far from the pursuit of the good life as philosophy can get.

In addition to experiencing firsthand how AI can create and simplify computer scripting with alarming efficiency, I have conducted enough experiments with retrieving and evaluating philosophical texts from AI to convince myself that the young generation of scholars in the field and their students will never return to writing essays and consulting the sources the way I have my entire life. As larger and larger libraries become digitally “searchable,” the intimate relationship to a personal collection of books scribbled in the margins and dog-eared from reading and rereading is already becoming a relic of the past.

The greatest promise, but also the greatest peril of AI is its pretense of a total democracy divorced from external governance and censorship. The widespread assumption that AI is simply a tool whose utility and limits depend on the person who wields it is an empty shell of a promise. AI is not simply a new development of software that one can access through a personal computer or digital device. It is an institution in the sense that Durkheim and Foucault used the term, namely, that it has already begun to redefine the contours of what it means to “know.” It is, we might say, a mental institution without walls. As we watch companies joust for financial control of the profits of this “new technology,” consuming astronomical amounts of electricity and budgeting a well-paid but increasingly expendable workforce, we assume that this is just another example of corporate enrichment at the expense of the stability and security of the lower strata of the social order,

whose dependence on the technology finances this caricature of democracy. What we do not take seriously enough is the *institutional* dependency and colonization of these very corporations by a mass superstition that they feed and at the same time feed on.

Thinking of AI as a mere tool with revolutionary potential for supplementing the acquisition and application of knowledge is no less a conceit than the belief that the structural changes brought about by the industrial revolution would one day democratize the consumption of goods and services by optimizing access for all to everything from food and clothing to literacy and health. Unless we recognize AI as an institution that transcends the control of the economic systems that develop and monetize it, we have little hope of assessing its moral and political consequences. This includes its consequences for the pillar institutions that sustain the corporations providing the means for a modern civilization to feed, clothe, educate, medicate, and police its citizens as well as the means for nations to engage each other economically and militarily. At some level, the cures that AI provides will introduce their own diseases. The challenge is to identify the point at which the logic of the algorithm becomes too toxic and claims too many fatalities. It is not enough to outlaw certain uses of AI and limit access to certain blocks of its storage. The technology is too persuasive for such measures to last very long. As a technology it has its own internal demands, which have no loyalty to corporate demands. I suspect that the political forces that monitor the institutionalization of AI and scramble to adjust their laws to protect it from its dark side will come to their senses only after disaster strikes. And strike it will.

Think of it. If the individual mind is subject to deterioration, forgetfulness, and emotional breakdown that can hamper one's ability to think clearly, a mind whose memory is tethered to dependency on the immediate accessibility to vast banks of digitized information growing vaster by the second is subject at any moment to the crippling dementia of an electronic shut down or criminal interference with the authenticity of the data stored in corporate banks by siphoning confidential data or erasing data essential to everyday life. The history of libraries destroyed by accident or willful barbarity will pale in comparison.

To repeat, the control of AI is no more firmly in the hands of those who commercialize it and legalize its use than the world view that rooted the industrial revolution in the modern imagination was. At the surface, it includes a wealth of data for self-evaluation and critique. Beneath the surface, its coding is immune to change as long it is embedded in the imagination as a comprehensive tool for managing the social order down to its smallest units. The ways in which AI has begun to threaten the fundamental structures by which the history of philosophical thought is transmitted as well as the credibility of the expertise that keeps academic philosophy academic, oblige the philosopher committed to the pursuit of the good life to seek

alternatives ways to communicate and restore respect for philosophical thinking outside the confines of peer review. My colleague Kim Seung Chul has convinced me that the captivity of theological style by the Christian West has had a paralyzing effect both on the pluralism of theological expression that marked the greatest advances in the openness to world to religions, and on the possibility of alternative modes of theology in the lyrical traditions so important to the intellectual history of the East. It strikes me that the same may be said of philosophy, whose survival depends on preserving the variety of literary forms that have been its life's blood.

It no longer matters that this sense of urgency did not arise from within the profession itself, any more than it matters that philosophy was shaken into awareness of its moral responsibilities to the natural world by thinkers at the fringes of the academy. What matters is that philosophers find the will to do more than monitor the changes theoretically. Not that exposing the collective modes of thought behind AI is unimportant. If anything, critical vigilance becomes even more crucial as the current role of the academic philosopher accedes to a predictable rise in unemployment among its ranks. The attention span of that vigilance needs to embrace the dominant modes of thought woven into our entire social fabric, beginning with the way in which they are passed on to children through the marketing of toys that prepare them for the certitudes of the prevailing social order. Still, theoretical debate is no substitute for political action at a non-governmental level through experimentation with alternative, more convivial lifestyles.

Viewed in terms of our triangulation of conviviality, AI's pursuit of truth brackets the moral concerns of the good life by treating them as a collateral benefit for those who feel they need them. In so doing, it devalues spiritual exercise; it removes the soul and mystery from life by translating the uncontrollable into manageable problems; it converts human relationships into instrumental tools that are subject to institutionalization. Defending the philosophical vocation requires putting AI in its place, and this is not possible without an awakening to the impulse to conviviality and the will to reclaim its guidance.



To return to where we began, the pursuit of the good life is not the same as the desire for moral guidelines. It is rather, I should say, a return to the origins of morality. The role of the philosopher is crucial here only if it is exercised in the public forum outside of the academy. The survival of religious traditions from internal corruption relies not only on its keepers but also on the ability of believers to rehearse the origins of religious faith, to recover the native spiritual needs of our humanity that give rise to images of the unknown, uncontrollable forces that envelop our lives, and to the myths that weave them into stories of the invisible.

The same may be said of the origins of our impulse to conviviality, no less natural and irrepressible than our impulse to speak of a world of gods and spirits beyond our control. Just as the doctrines and practices of a particular religion can darken the way back to the origins of religion, so, too, moral precepts that aim to guide the way to the good life can overshadow the way back to the birthplace of the ideal in the “sprouts” of goodness that Mencius recognized in all human beings. The idea of the good life is, after all, a cipher of impulses that none of us can see clearly enough but to which every soul of us on earth has access.

If conviviality is the summit of wisdom, the certification of its pursuit cannot be entrusted to the keepers of any tradition of ideas or mental discipline. Philosophy, to reiterate, is not the achievement of conviviality but its constant quest. Its goal cannot be mapped and measured any more than the goals of love and peace and selflessness can. The story of conviviality is not a history that can be carved in stone and then piled up into a sturdy edifice for the future. Its wisdom is that of the twice-told tale, never the same and never definitive, never with a clear plot and never with an end.

Just how the impulse to the good life is to be embedded in culture and law is the stuff of debate and experiment. But the fundamental trust in that impulse beyond our understanding and control comes down, in the end, to a matter of philosophical faith. Put another way, trust in our impulse to conviviality is where even the most delicately argued and rigorously rational systems in the history of philosophy are driven to acknowledge a fundamental orientation whose origins are as dark as they are real. In one sense, we don't really know what we're talking about; in another, we know too much to know how to talk about it. This is because the knowledge of the impulse to conviviality is learned by *living* the good life, not by *thinking about* living the good life.

In his *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, Tanabe Hajime argued that philosophy can only be reborn through the collapse of its current state, and this collapse can only take place by overturning the habits of thought that sustain it, that is, through *metanoia*. Insofar as philosophy is in peril of disestablishment as an academic specialization, the authority of its professionals in the public sphere may be expected to decline further. AI has had a big role to play in exposing philosophy's failure to find alternative ways to carry on a tradition and transmit it, but the basic malady has been chronic for too long to lay the blame on advances in information technology.

Nishitani Keiji made much the same point in his last book, *The Cold Mountain Poems*, by citing Wuzu Fayan's kōan of the water buffalo whose head, horn, and legs pass through a window while its tail end gets stuck. “The kōan presents a situation,” he says, “where orthodox reasoning fails, revealing an irrational residue that logic cannot fully explain, a tail, an integral part of the thing itself that protrudes through the mesh of ‘law’ and the lattice of ‘reason.’” We have come to a point,

according to Nishitani, where the intellectual life needs to “stretch beyond the bounds of its internal logic.” And to do this, it needs to rediscover its inner mystery in the “perfectly ordinary life of day-to-day experience.” The image of philosophy climbing into the academy with its tail end hanging out the window seems just right. The paralysis will not be relieved by widening the window or pushing harder on it from behind. The unmasking of AI as a kind of uroboros slowly but inexorably choking on its own tail is one best handled in the open space where the ordinary mind can understand what it is philosophy has to contribute to the good life.