



Foreword to Republication of “The Educational Benefits of Obscurity: Pedagogical Esotericism”

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“The poor man’s son, whom heaven in its anger has visited with ambition...”

So opens Adam Smith’s parable of the poor man’s son, consisting of three paragraphs (TMS, 181–185), the first the longest paragraph in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Ask a group of Smith scholars what the underlying message is, and you are apt to get a variety of answers. Did Smith fail to make himself clear? One common interpretation of the parable has fed into what German authors spoke of as *Das Adam Smith Problem* (see Tribe 2008).

But perhaps Smith brewed conundrum. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* was first published in 1759, and Smith published the sixth and final edition in 1790. Yet in *The Wealth of Nations*, published 1776, the word “sympathy” *never appears*, “sentiment” appears only twice, and likewise “spectator” (near the very beginning and the very end). Was it deliberate?

The closing words of the parable of the poor man’s son—“and the beggar, who suns himself by the side of the highway, possesses that security which kings are fighting for”—still inspire fresh commentary (e.g., Martin 2014; Matson and Doran 2017). Is there significance in the fact that the parable appears extremely close to the exact center of the final, 1790 edition?

The parable of the poor man’s son is an example of what Arthur Melzer calls “pedagogical esotericism,” in his landmark work *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (University of Chicago Press 2014; paperback 2017). Beyond the more obvious interpretation of the author’s meaning—the exoteric message—there is a less obvious interpretation, an esoteric message, one the reader has to work for.

Pedagogical esotericism is one of four purposes or motives to esotericism. The other three Melzer terms defensive, protective, and political. Among the four,

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pedagogical esotericism is somewhat special in that it necessitates, not only that the exoteric message is not to be taken at face value and as all there is to it, but, further, that there is a substantive esoteric message. All four categories can accommodate that, but only pedagogical necessitates it.

One chapter of *Philosophy Between the Lines* provides a wonderful guide to techniques and devices used in esoteric writing, a chapter that was republished in 2015 in *Econ Journal Watch* ([link](#)), along with a podcast interview of Melzer ([link](#)).

And Melzer's book achieves so much more. It establishes important historical claims, including: (1) up to sometime in the 18th century it was commonly known that most great writers wrote esoterically, (2) in the 18th century there was much lively discourse *about* esotericism, and (3) from about 1800 esotericism declined sharply as practice, and, moreover, people would soon neglect or forget how much it had been practiced in the past. Melzer's book richly explores the culture and psychology surrounding esotericism and antipathy to esotericism. The book provides an introduction to Leo Strauss, and also resources for separating esotericism from Strauss's wider view of things.

We are proud to republish this chapter on pedagogical esotericism (Chapter Seven), and grateful to Professor Melzer and the University of Chicago Press for permission. Professor Melzer has taken the opportunity of this republication to make one revision, that being the promotion of some text from note 21 to the main text, along with the movement of other text from note 21 into a new note 22, which required renumbering of the subsequent notes. The two lettered footnotes are ours; the numbered footnotes are Melzer's endnotes. Instead of completing the citation information in those notes that refer to material cited earlier in the book, the notes are left as-is, and a complete References section has been appended.

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The Educational Benefits of Obscurity: Pedagogical Esotericism^a

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[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

The words of the wise and their riddles.

—Proverbs 1:6

Of the four motives for philosophical esotericism, the pedagogical is the most genuinely philosophical. The other forms seek the avoidance of persecution, the prevention of subversion, and the promotion of political change. These are all worthy things that philosophers may pursue, but they are not philosophy. The purpose of pedagogical esotericism, by contrast, more directly concerns philosophy itself: the transmission of philosophical understanding. In this sense, it is esotericism's purest form.

Its essential premise is this: one must embrace obscurity (of the right kind) as something essential to effective philosophical communication. Naturally, this seems counterintuitive, not to say twisted and perverse. In addition, it involves the celebration of obscurity as a positive good—unlike the other forms that merely embrace it as a necessary evil.

For these reasons, pedagogical esotericism, while the purest form, is also the strangest. It is the one we find the most difficult to understand—and to stomach. But it is possible, if we reflect for a moment, to view it in an opposite manner.

If it is indeed the case that the practice of esoteric writing is a genuine and widespread historical phenomenon, that is largely bad news for scholars. It means a lot more work. It would be easier to accept this vexing fact, however, if there were also something good and attractive about this practice. And that is precisely what pedagogical esotericism—and it alone—promises. It claims that esoteric obscurity

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is not just an ugly obstacle to understanding, as we have been assuming up until now, but rather something engaging, even charming, and at any rate good for us—an important aid to our philosophical development. Thus, with its strange, positive promises (if borne out), pedagogical esotericism can make it easier for us to come to terms with the fact of esotericism and—who knows—perhaps even come to like it.

Stranger things have happened. Take the case of Alexander Herzen, the great nineteenth-century Russian writer and revolutionary. He knew at first hand the evils of czarist censorship, having been arrested several times, and he knew the difficult constraints of “Aesopian language.” He dedicated his life to the struggle for liberty in every form, above all freedom of the press. Still, as a writer, he also had a fine sensitivity to matters of rhetoric and persuasion, which led him to the following observations *in praise* of esoteric writing:

censorship is highly conducive to progress in the mastery of style and in the ability to restrain one’s words. . . . In allegorical discourse there is perceptible excitement and struggle: this discourse is more impassioned than any straight exposition. The word implied has greater force beneath its veil and is always transparent to those who care to understand. A thought which is checked has greater meaning concentrated in it—it has a sharper edge; to speak in such a way that the thought is plain yet remains to be put into words by the reader himself is the best persuasion. Implication increases the power of language.¹

Make no mistake, Herzen—who eventually emigrated to London where he founded the Free Russian Press—hated censorship with a passion fueled by bitter experience. But, impressively, he did not allow his hatred and personal suffering to prevent him from also recognizing—indeed, even coming to like—the many literary and rhetorical advantages of an esoteric style. He emphatically saw the positive side of obscurity.² We must strive, in the face of our own loathings, to

1. Quoted by Loseff, *On the Beneficence*, 11. Consider also this account by Lidia Vianu in her *Censorship in Romania*:

Censorship brought one good thing to literature: as Paul Valéry used to say, any obstacle in front of creation is a true sun. Not being able to say what you think was an excellent school of poetic indirectness, creating its devious writers and its eager readers who were always ready to probe between the lines. The conspiracy of writer-reader was a marvel of obliqueness and dissent at the same time. (x)

2. This is not to deny that he also celebrated the advantages of press freedom. As he remarks in his memoirs:

Two or three months later, Ogarev passed through Novgorod. He brought me Feuerbach’s *Essence Of Christianity* [an openly atheist and secularizing work]; after reading the first pages I leapt up with joy. Down with the trappings of masquerade; away with the stammering allegory! We are free men and not the slaves of Xanthos [Aesop’s master]; there is no need for us to wrap the truth in myth. (*My Past and Thoughts*, 2:407)

approach the phenomenon in a similar spirit.

In the end, however, should we still incline to doubt the purported benefits of pedagogical esotericism, it is important to remind ourselves once again that the decisive issue for present purposes is not whether we ourselves find the pedagogical argument persuasive, or even whether it is true, but only whether the writers of previous ages believed it and acted upon it. And about that, as I hope to show, there can be little doubt.

The modern ethic of literalness and clarity

In view of the strangeness of this older view and our deep resistance to it, let us begin by stating openly our current instincts on this subject. That is easily done: we find obscurity hateful. To be sure, there are fields so inherently difficult and counterintuitive that a fair amount of obscurity is unavoidable—as in contemporary physics. The thing we hate is *voluntary* obscurity. In almost all such cases, the source of unclarity is a desire to appear wiser than one is, to surround oneself with a cultish air of mystery or profundity, and to shelter oneself from criticism. Voluntary obscurity arises from vanity or insecurity at best, charlatanry at worst. Obviously, then, all decent and serious thinkers will strive to speak as precisely, openly, and directly as possible. They will say exactly what they mean. There is simply no valid argument for anything else.

That is what we want to say, especially we in the Anglo-American world, where philosophy is viewed as something that is—or at least ought to be—an exact and rigorous matter that should not stoop to “rhetoric,” ambiguity, or multivocal speech of any kind. We proudly stand by an ethic of literalness and clarity.

Yet as obvious and normal as this attitude may seem to us, historically speaking it is quite rare. As soon as one ventures beyond the narrow shores of our modern world—whether one looks to the ancient Greeks and Romans or to the Bible and the Koran or to the traditional societies of the East, of Africa, and of Native America—virtually everywhere one finds the same thing: “The words of the wise and their riddles.” It is the characteristic way of the wise to speak indirectly, to talk in figures, proverbs, and puzzles. All the sages of premodern cultures seem to share a belief in the ineffectiveness of open statements, the superficiality of direct communication. Wisdom, it seems, would not be so rare and difficult a thing if it could simply be “told” by one person to another.

We are aware of this view, of course, but dismiss it as primitive, irrational, or superstitious. But is it? Even the philosophers of the past rarely attempted to write in the precise and methodical way that, to us, seems so obviously necessary. They seem to have held to a more complex view of education and communication

than we do, granting a crucial role to the full range of human modes of expression, including the more suggestive and concealed ones, such as allusion, metaphor, parable, epigram, allegory, and riddle. For the same reason, they also employed a greater range of compositional forms: not just treatises, as today, but poems, aphorisms, dialogues, essays, commentaries, dictionaries, and epistles.

Indeed, classical rationalism at its peak (as distinguished from Enlightenment rationalism) regarded the issue of whether wisdom is teachable at all as a grave and open question. In Plato's *Protagoras* (319a–320c), we see Socrates arguing that wisdom and virtue cannot be taught (although they can be learned). There are profound limits, this great teacher held, to what one human being can explain to another. Somehow, philosophical education is inherently problematic.

Compounding this difficulty, classical thinkers were also very much preoccupied with the problem of writing. Can books ever be useful for such education, or must all genuinely philosophical instruction be oral and personal? In Plato's *Phaedrus*, this question was answered firmly in the negative by Socrates, who, like Pythagoras before him, eschewed philosophical writing altogether. And even Plato himself expressed serious doubts on this score in his Seventh Letter (341c–e, 343a, 344c–345a). Again, Thomas Aquinas in explaining the fact that Jesus—the other great teacher of the West—also did not write, argued that the most excellent teachers must follow the practice of Pythagoras and Socrates, for “Christ’s doctrine...cannot be expressed in writing.”³ In short, classical and medieval rationalism endorsed and explored the profound intuition—found everywhere outside the modern West—that the whole enterprise of using books for the transmission of philosophic wisdom is an extraordinarily difficult (and possibly futile) undertaking that, when pursued, requires rhetorical techniques extending well beyond the contemporary ethic of literalness and clarity.

It is manifest, then, that this ethic is anything but obvious and historically universal. It is, in fact, the creation of a very particular culture—the modern Enlightenment. As Donald Levine, the distinguished sociologist, writes in his important study *The Flight from Ambiguity*:

The movement against ambiguity led by Western intellectuals since the seventeenth century figures as a unique development in world history. There is nothing like it in any premodern culture known to me.⁴

Levine's book explores the great but—as we will no longer be surprised to learn—almost entirely unstudied transformation of our rhetorical and communicative

3. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, vol. 3, pt. 3, ques. 42, art. 4, p. 2243.

4. Donald Levine, *The Flight from Ambiguity: Essays in Social and Cultural Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 21.

culture that took place beginning in the early modern period.

This transformation may be attributed to a number of different factors. The whole reorientation of philosophy that one sees in Bacon, Descartes, and Hobbes, especially the harmonist effort to give philosophic reason a new level of power and control within the world of practice, gave new and fundamental importance to certainty and exactness. For in intellectual matters, rigor is power. Thus, modern epistemology in both its rationalist and its empiricist branches mistrusted the natural workings of the human mind and proclaimed the need for “method,” for the adoption of artificially redesigned ways of thinking and speaking.

Later, the striking success of the modern scientific paradigm encouraged the view that, in all fields, intellectual progress required the reform of language, replacing ordinary parlance with a rigorous, technical vocabulary. Again, in the economic sphere, the increasing “rationalization” of the world—the rise of bureaucracy, technology, commerce, specialization, and legal regulation—made clear and distinct communication a practical necessity.⁵ Similarly, in the sphere of religion, ascetic Puritanism, with its ideal of sincerity, its dislike of adornment, and its suspicion of arcane, priestly doctrine led to a call for plain, simple, and direct speaking—a kind of semantic prudishness.

Last but surely not least, on the political level, Bacon, Spinoza, Hobbes, and the Enlightenment thinkers emphasized that prejudice and superstition—and the oppressive political and religious powers they support—draw much of their strength from the human tendency to be fooled by obscure speech, by metaphors, rhetoric, poetry, and the other nonrational aspects of human discourse. Thus, for the sake of justice and the triumph over oppression, public discourse generally must become as literal and precise as possible.⁶

Through the sustained pressure of these factors and others, modern Western discourse has become forcibly purged and “rationalized.” Whether in scholarship, pedagogy, the workplace, or ordinary conversation, we believe in a controlled, no-nonsense, utilitarian kind of talk: unambiguous, literal, unadorned, frank, and to the point. Everything else strikes us as pompous, unctuous, or childish. This transformation is so pervasive that we have lost all awareness of it, but as we have seen, it is quite visible to non-Westerners and clearly described, over and over again, in the voluminous literature on intercultural communication. And of course this “flight from ambiguity” is also visible, as I have been suggesting, in the historical uniqueness of our noncomprehension of esotericism.

5. See *ibid.*, 2–8, 37–38.

6. See Gordon Wood, “Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 39 (1982): 401–41. See also Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

It seems obvious to us that philosophy should be a pure matter of propositions and arguments, rigorously laid out, as in a contemporary journal of analytic philosophy. But this attitude rests on a premise: the hyperrationalist assumption, inherited from the Enlightenment, that human beings can be addressed from the start as rationalists seeking the truth.

But as the tradition of classical rationalism emphasized, we may be “rational animals” in that we possess the faculty of reason, but we are hardly born rationalists. Rather, we are born in “the cave.” Illusion has very powerful roots within us, both social and psychological. We are moved by a host of passions, most of which are in tension with the love of truth. Thus, the primary aim of philosophic education must be less to instruct than to convert, less to elaborate a philosophical system than to produce that “turning around of the soul” that brings individuals to love and live for the truth. But precisely if the primary *end* of education is to foster the love of truth, this love cannot be presupposed in the *means*. The means must rather be based on a resourceful pedagogical rhetoric that, knowing how initially resistant or impervious we all are to philosophic truth, necessarily makes use of motives other than love of truth and of techniques other than “saying exactly what you mean.” In sum, the modern ethic of literalness and clarity—at least in the view of most earlier ages—is plainly too narrow and dogmatic. To be sure, the bad use of obscurity and concealment—which is ninety percent of it—remains hateful. But there really is a good use. The good use—pedagogical esotericism—is made necessary by two sets of problems: the natural difficulties of philosophic education and the inherent shortcomings of writing.

What, then, are these difficulties? A brief examination of the obstacles to a philosophical education that is conveyed through books will put us in a position to see why esoteric concealment has often been embraced as the solution.

Three dangers of reading

The invention of writing brought epochal changes to human civilization—most of them good. But books also made possible a whole host of intellectual vices and distortions unknown to preliterate, oral societies. With respect to philosophy, there is a real danger that, in the words of Voltaire, “the multitude of books is making us ignorant.” In a variety of ways, “book knowledge” is the death of philosophy—so much so that a “philosophy book” is almost a contradiction in terms.

In chapter 3 we briefly discussed the contradiction that exists between the univocity of writing and the duality of lives. The problem there was the potential harm done by a philosophic book when it falls into the hands of a nonphilosophic reader. This problem leads to the need for defensive and protective esotericism.

Here we examine the harm such books can do precisely to the philosophic reader—which is the root of pedagogical esotericism.

A book is a strange and unseemly thing. It delivers into one person's hands the distilled essence of another's thinking. It gives one things one has not earned. That is the core difficulty from which all the more specific problems flow, as we will see. And that is why the solution to all of these problems will involve some form of esotericism: some effort to give away less and to make the reader work more for what he or she is getting.

The first danger of reading books is that it allows you to skip too many stages, shortcutting the proper intellectual development. Especially harmful is that it prevents the humble confrontation with your own ignorance. Reading makes you prematurely wise. Before you have had a chance to face the questions and live with them a while, you have seen the answers. Books give a false sense of knowledge and sophistication based on borrowed wisdom, on the belief that you know what you have only read. Thus, they rob you of the proper state of mind for true education. As Socrates argues in the *Phaedrus*—putting these words in the mouth of an Egyptian god, Thamus, who is rebuking the inventor of writing—through writing “you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction, and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant” (275a–b). As we have seen, Plato himself gives this same explanation when he asserts, in the Seventh Letter, that he has not and would not ever commit to writing an open statement of his deepest thoughts. Reading such an account, he explains, would not help people but rather fill them with a “lofty and empty hope as if they had learned awesome matters” (341e). The false presumption of wisdom, which is generated by books, presents the greatest obstacle to the acquisition of the real thing. Whence the inner logic of Milton's description: “Deep versed in books and shallow in himself.”⁷

This same problem is elaborated very powerfully in *Emile*, Rousseau's book on education: “I hate books. They only teach one to talk about what one does not know.” And again: “Too much reading only serves to produce presumptuous ignoramuses.” The key point is that bookish presumptuousness is what makes people ignoramuses. “The abuse of books kills science. Believing that we know what we have read, we believe that we can dispense with learning it.”⁸ Intellectual humility and the keen sense of our ignorance are the necessary starting points for genuine philosophical development; therefore, books—even as they transmit brilliant philosophical insights—undercut philosophy at its root.

7. John Milton, *Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained*, ed. Christopher Ricks (New York: New American Library, 1968), 389 (bk. 4, line 327).

8. Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Bloom, 184, 450.

The most obvious way for an author to counteract this danger is to scrupulously avoid handing the reader any clear and readymade answers. One might also go further: make a point of including in one's books enough difficulty and obscurity to humble the reader and force him to confront his ignorance. Friedrich Schleiermacher, the nineteenth-century German philosopher, theologian, and classical scholar, attributes precisely such a rhetorical strategy to Plato. In his dialogues, the latter sought to "bring the still ignorant reader nearer to a state of knowledge"; but Plato also clearly recognized the very great necessity "of being cautious with regard to him not to give rise to an empty and conceited notion of his own knowledge in his mind."

[Therefore, it] must have been the philosopher's chief object to conduct every investigation in such a manner from the beginning onwards, as that he might reckon upon the reader's either being driven to an inward and self-originated creation of the thought in view, or submitting to surrender himself most decisively to the feeling of not having discovered or understood anything. To this end, then, it is requisite that the final object of the investigation be not directly enunciated and laid down in words, a process which might very easily serve to entangle many persons who are glad to rest content, provided only they are in possession of the final result, but that the mind be reduced to the necessity of seeking, and put into the way by which it may find it. The first is done by the mind's being brought to so distinct a consciousness of its own state of ignorance, that it is impossible it should willingly continue therein. The other is effected either by an enigma being woven out of contradictions, to which the only possible solution is to be found in the thought in view, and often several hints thrown out in a way apparently utterly foreign and accidental which can only be found and understood by one who does really investigate with an activity of his own. Or the real investigation is overdrawn with another, not like a veil, but, as it were, an adhesive skin, which conceals from the inattentive reader, and from him alone, the matter which is to be properly considered or discovered, while it only sharpens and clears the mind of an attentive one to perceive the inward connection.⁹

This kind of esoteric artfulness is essential, according to Schleiermacher, to avoid what I am calling the first danger of reading.

But book learning thwarts philosophic education by fostering not only a false presumption of wisdom but also an enfeebling passivity. "Much reading is an oppression of the mind," remarks William Penn, "and extinguishes the natural candle, which is the reason of so many senseless scholars in the world."¹⁰ As

9. Schleiermacher, *Introductions to the Dialogues of Plato*, 17–18.

10. William Penn, *Fruits of a Father's Love: Being the Advice of William Penn to his Children Relating to their Civil and*

Montaigne puts it: “We let ourselves lean so heavily on the arms of others that we annihilate our own powers.”¹¹ The same point is made by Schopenhauer:

When we read, another person thinks for us: we merely repeat his mental process. ... So it comes about that if anyone spends almost the whole day in reading...he gradually loses the capacity for thinking; just as the man who always rides, at last forgets how to walk. This is the case with many learned persons: they have read themselves stupid.¹²

The solution to this problem is to be found, once again, in employing a salutary obscurity that does not allow the readers passively to rely on the writer’s thinking, but forces them to think for themselves. Thus, Thomas Aquinas, in considering the question of why the Bible often uses veiled, metaphorical language, remarks: “The very hiding of truth in figures is useful for the exercise of thoughtful minds.”¹³ Augustine makes the same point: the disciples “have spoken with a helpful and healthy obscurity in order to exercise and somehow refine their readers’ minds.”¹⁴ Similarly, Sallustius, the fourth-century Neoplatonist, in discussing why the Greeks shrouded their religious teachings in myth, remarks:

There is this first benefit from myths, that we have to search and do not have our minds idle. ... To wish to teach the whole truth about the Gods to all produces contempt in the foolish, because they cannot understand, and lack of zeal in the good; whereas to conceal the truth by myths prevents the contempt of the foolish, and compels the good to practice philosophy.¹⁵

Somewhat similar is Rousseau’s description of his writing style in the preface to the *Letter to M. d’Alembert*. In this book—which he identifies as a popular work as distinguished from his other, philosophical writings, addressed to the few—he states: “I do not speak here to the few but to the public, nor do I attempt to make others think but rather to explain my thought clearly. Hence, I had to change my style.”¹⁶ In a striking reversal of our own attitudes toward writing, Rousseau

Religious Conduct (Dover, NH: James K. Remick, 1808), chap. 2, para. 19.

11. Montaigne, *Complete Essays*, trans. Frame, 101 (1.25).

12. Arthur Schopenhauer, “On Books and Reading,” in *Religion: A Dialogue, and Other Essays*, trans. T. Bailey Saunders (New York: Macmillan, 1899), 51.

13. Aquinas, *Summa*, vol. 1, pt. 1, ques. 1, art. 9, p. 6.

14. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 223 (4.61).

15. Sallustius, *On the Gods and the World*, in pt. 3 of *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, trans. Gilbert Murray (New York: Columbia University Press, 1925), 242–43.

16. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Politics and the Arts, Letter to M. d’Alembert on the Theatre*, trans. Allan Bloom (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1960), 6.

sets up here a strict disjunction between “making others think,” the task of his philosophical books, and “explaining my thought clearly,” the job of his merely popular writings. To get others to think, one must carefully avoid doing everything for them. A famous statement by Montesquieu—which may have been in the back of Rousseau’s mind—expresses the same idea: “One must not always so exhaust a subject that one leaves nothing for the reader to do. It is not a question of making him read but of making him think.”¹⁷

Still another danger of reading, closely related to that of mental passivity, is the development of an excessive trust and dependence on the author. Books—with their steadfast endurance over time, their unwavering repetition of the identical words and thoughts, and even (since Gutenberg) the more-than-human regularity of their type—inspire a kind of reverence. Writing has a tendency to become “scripture.” We undergo a curious distortion of the mind whereby we come to look for truth in books, not in the world. We replace thinking with reading. This is especially true when studying the great philosophers. To quote Montaigne:

We know how to say: “Cicero says thus; such are the morals of Plato; these are the very words of Aristotle.” But what do we say ourselves? What do we judge? What do we do? A parrot could well say as much.¹⁸

Cicero clearly describes the problem—as well as his particular solution:

Those who seek to learn my personal opinion on the various questions [of philosophy] show an unreasonable degree of curiosity. In discussion it is not so much weight of authority as force of argument that should be demanded. Indeed, the authority of those who profess to teach is often a positive hindrance to those who desire to learn; they cease to employ their own judgment, and take what they perceive to be the verdict of their chosen master as settling the question.¹⁹

As he goes on to describe here, Cicero’s solution was to frustrate the reader’s “unreasonable degree of curiosity” by ensuring that his own final position remained unclear. He did so by composing his philosophical writings in the form of dialogues or of treatises that merely surveyed the arguments both for and against the various schools.

In sum, there is an inherent tension between philosophy and books. The

17. Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Anne Cohler, Basia Miller, and Harold Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 186 (11.20).

18. Montaigne, *Complete Essays*, trans. Frame, 100 (1.25).

19. Cicero, *De natura deorum*, trans. Rackham, 13 (1.5).

philosophical writer stands in danger of harming his readers in the very act of trying to help them, by fostering an unhealthy presumption, passivity, and dependence.

The paradox of philosophical education

But this characterization of the problem of writing—along with the general solution: refraining from a full and open statement of one’s thought—does not quite get at its deepest level. For philosophical education requires not merely that one avoid discouraging the reader in these three ways from employing his own mind, but that one positively motivate him to think and, above all, to think authentically and for himself. One must somehow induce in him a new level of awakensness, inner-directedness, and self-ownership. But how can a book or even a live teacher do that? The central paradox of philosophical education, whether in writing or in person, is this: how can one transmit to others something that can never genuinely be given from without, but only generated from within? For that is of the essence of philosophy: it can never be done for you. It is our “ownmost” activity: you must do it all for yourself or you haven’t done it at all.

This is the case for a number of related reasons. By definition, philosophy aims, not at “right opinion,” but “knowledge”: not simply at possessing correct answers but at knowing how and why they are correct. It aims at truths the origin and grounding of which one completely understands. Thus, it does not help—it is often a hindrance—to be given the answers from the outside, when the truly essential thing is to begin at the beginning and reenact their discovery by and for oneself.

But this rediscovery, furthermore, is not simply a matter of retracing the logical sequence of arguments. For the “knowledge” at which philosophy aims is not purely intellectual or academic—like book knowledge. One must feel these truths from the inside, make them one’s own, and live them. The rediscovery, then, must start from one’s own personal perplexity, draw upon one’s own lived experience, and make use of the inner activity of one’s own powers of reasoning and realization. Amid all the far-ranging ventures of one’s thinking, one must maintain the concrete and vital connection of thought to life. In other words, “thinking for oneself” means not only that it is oneself that does the thinking but that one thinks for one’s own case, thinks from out of one’s own care, future, and fate.

Finally, it is only thinking for oneself in this deeply personal sense that produces a real and transformative effect upon the soul. It is only in this way that one undergoes what Plato speaks of as definitive of the truly philosophic life: a “turning around of the soul,” a fundamental reorientation of the objects of one’s longing and the manner of one’s being.

If this is the character of genuine philosophy, then it really *is* an open question whether it is teachable. Wisdom cannot be told. The central paradox of philosophical pedagogy, to say it again, is: how can one transmit from the outside what can only grow from within? Is there something that one can do for a person that will somehow make him do everything for himself?

This is the problem that the “Socratic method” (as we have come to call it) is intended to address. It has at least four elements, all of them making use of “esotericism” in one sense or another. The first, which we have now seen over and over again, is the negative imperative: Do not give away the answers. The Socratic teacher leaves the most important things unsaid or at least unclear. Yet, second, there is also something positive that the teacher or writer can do: he can stimulate the student to think for himself—while subtly guiding that thinking—by making artful use of questions, hints, and puzzles of the right kind.

But, third, for this thinking and questioning to maintain an authentic connection to the student’s life, it must be *dialectical*. This means (among many other things) that it must take its start from where the student is, from what he believes right now, and proceed through an internal critique. One cannot begin abstractly—from first principles or from a general statement of the big questions—if the student is truly to think for himself, with his own life on the line. For he does not begin as a blank slate. Whatever may be the situation at birth, by the time a student is old enough to be thinking about philosophical questions, he is already fully immersed in a world of beliefs and answers. He is trapped in a cave of illusions. Thus, his education must begin by lighting up and then questioning the things that he already believes, the foundations of the life that he is already living. He cannot jump out of his skin and make a new beginning: he must start from the inside and slowly, painstakingly work his way out.

But people draw their initial beliefs primarily from the worldview of their particular society. It follows, then, that a writer who seeks to educate philosophically through Socratic dialectics must make a special effort to enter sympathetically into the received opinions of his time and place—though he may consider them false—while pointing quietly to certain puzzles or contradictions within those opinions. This means that the demands of philosophical pedagogy largely parallel those of the defensive and protective motives for esotericism. On the surface of his writings, a philosophical author will embrace the views prevailing in his time, not only to defend himself from persecution and to protect society from harm, but also to help the student to begin his philosophical reflections from what, for him, is the necessary beginning point.

This idea is well expressed by Kierkegaard, who goes so far as to call it “the secret of the art of helping others.” In *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, an autobiographical essay devoted to explaining his technique of writing, he states:

One can deceive a person for the truth's sake, and (to recall old Socrates) one can deceive a person into the truth. Indeed it is only by this means, i.e., by deceiving him, that it is possible to bring into the truth one who is in an illusion. Whoever rejects this opinion betrays the fact that he is not over-well versed in dialectics, and that is precisely what is especially needed when operating in this field. . . . Direct communication presupposes that the receiver's ability to receive is undisturbed. But here such is not the case; an illusion stands in the way. . . . What then does it mean 'to deceive'? It means that one does not begin directly with the matter one wants to communicate, but begins by accepting the other man's illusion as good money.²⁰

This is necessary because "if real success is to attend the effort to bring a man to a definite position, one must first of all take pains to find him where he is and begin there. This is the secret of the art of helping others."²¹

In other words, to change a man's deeply held position, one must begin by joining him, not opposing him. For, as Kierkegaard further explains:

A direct attack only strengthens a person in his illusion, and at the same time embitters him. There is nothing that requires such gentle handling as an illusion, if one wishes to dispel it. If anything prompts the prospective captive to set his will in opposition, all is lost. And this is what a direct attack achieves, and it implies moreover the presumption of requiring a man to make to another person, or in his presence, an admission which he can make most profitably to himself in private. This is what is achieved by the indirect method, which, loving and serving the truth, arranges everything dialectically for the prospective captive, and then shyly withdraws (for love is always shy), so as not to witness the admission which he makes to himself alone before God—that he has lived hitherto in an illusion.²²

A fourth element of the Socratic method—actually, just a further aspect of its dialectical character—is that a proper philosophical education must proceed in *stages*. Just as education must begin by addressing the student where he is, so, as he learns and changes, it must stay with him. The internal or dialectical critique of received opinion takes place not in a single stroke but in a series of successive approximations to the truth, each of which will seem in its time to be the final one. The student must not be encouraged to race through these stages to the end,

20. Soren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author; A Report to History, and Related Writings*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 39–40.

21. *Ibid.*, 27.

22. *Ibid.*, 24–26. The point Kierkegaard makes here—that a refined and delicate modesty is often what stands behind the practice of esotericism—is extremely important for us since it helps to counteract our strong tendency to recoil from esotericism as something inevitably rooted in exclusiveness and arrogance.

but on the contrary made to settle down and live with each for a while, so that he has the time to truly take it in and absorb it—and to allow it to transform him. Our lives do not change as quickly as our thoughts. If the student tries to move too fast, he leaves his life behind, and his thinking becomes purely intellectual. He ceases to believe what he thinks and think what he believes. Tempo is everything. Prematurity—showing the student more than he is ready to understand or digest at the moment—is the great wrecker of educations. As Rousseau remarks in *Emile*, “never show the child anything he cannot see.” Again: the child “must remain in absolute ignorance of ideas . . . which are not within his reach. My whole book is only a constant proof of this principle of education.”²³

This principle—the need for proper tempo and stages, adjusted to the individual characteristics of the student, so that his thinking remains firmly rooted in his own experience and life—is why a perfect education would require what is depicted in *Emile*: a philosopher devoting himself full-time to the raising and education of a single student from birth. While this is hardly to be expected in practice, it highlights what is so terribly problematic about books: they are impersonal and fixed, saying the same thing to all regardless of their state of readiness. That indeed is Socrates’s primary objection to writing as stated in the *Phaedrus* (275d–e)—the *univocity* of writing. To the extent that there is a solution to this problem, it lies, once again, in esotericism—in writing on two or even more levels—so that the same book will say different things to different people, or to the same person at different times, depending on their stage of understanding.

To promote a genuinely philosophical education, in sum, it is necessary to write esoterically in at least four ways—to withhold the answers, to begin by embracing received opinion, to guide the reader by way of hints and riddles, and to address the different stages of understanding by writing on multiple levels.

The rhetorical effect of obscurity

In order to clarify and extend some of the preceding points—especially the core assumption that obscurity can and should be used as a stimulus to genuine thought—let us take up an obvious objection. Even if it is true that one hinders philosophic education in various ways by telling a student too much, still doesn’t one hinder it even more by saying too little? A writer who hides what he knows and fills his book with stumbling blocks will only frustrate and discourage the reader. Nobody denies that a pedagogically effective writing must above all stimulate the mind to its own efforts, but nothing is more deadening than obscurity.

23. Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Bloom, 183, 178.

When it is pointless and impenetrable, obscurity is indeed deadening. But the right kind of obscurity—the kind that, with the proper effort, can be deciphered and penetrated—turns out, in fact, to be the greatest stimulus to thought. Everyone loves a secret. Mystery is alluring. Hide something and we will seek it. This simple fact is the first premise of all pedagogical esotericism.

It is a fact that has been noticed throughout the ages. Jesus—who hides his thought in parables—gives this famous literary advice: “Do not give dogs what is holy; and do not throw your pearls before swine” (Matt. 7:6). The medieval *Glossa Ordinaria* on this passage elaborates: “What is hidden is more eagerly sought after; what is concealed appears more worthy of reverence; what is searched for longer is more dearly prized.”²⁴ Similarly, Augustine remarks: “Lest the obvious should cause disgust, the hidden truths arouse longing; longing brings on certain renewal; renewal brings sweet inner knowledge.”²⁵ Again, according to Nietzsche:

The misfortune suffered by clear-minded and easily understood writers is that they are taken for shallow and thus little effort is expended on reading them: and the good fortune that attends the obscure is that the reader toils at them and ascribes to them the pleasure he has in fact gained from his own zeal.²⁶

Clement of Alexandria, in a chapter of his *Stromata* entitled “Reasons for Veiling the Truth in Symbols,” observes that “all things that shine through a veil show the truth grander and more imposing; as fruits shining through water, and figures through veils.”²⁷ In short, the objection stated above has the rhetorical situation exactly backward: the right kind of obscurity is far more intellectually stimulating than is a plain and explicit statement. As Augustine puts it:

All those truths which are presented to us in figures tend, in some manner, to nourish and arouse the flame of love...and they stir and enkindle love better than if they were set before us unadorned, without any symbolism of mystery. It is hard to explain the reason for this; nevertheless, it is true that any doctrine suggested under an allegorical form affects and pleases us more, and is more esteemed, than one set forth explicitly in plain words.²⁸

24. Quoted by Aquinas in *Faith, Reason*, 52 (art. 4).

25. Augustine, *Letters*, ed. Ludwig Schopp and Roy Joseph Deferrari, trans. Wilfrid Parsons, vol. 3 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1953), 34 (letter 137).

26. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 92 (vol. 1, chap. 4, aph. 181).

27. *Stromata*, in *The Writings of Clement of Alexandria*, trans. Rev. William Wilson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1869), 254–55 (vol. 2, bk. 5, chap. 9).

28. Augustine, *Letters*, 1:277 (letter 55).

It may indeed be unfortunate, but surely that is how it is.

Yet once it is conceded that hiddenness and obscurity of the right kind do indeed have this stimulating power, one may go on to raise an opposite objection to their use in philosophical pedagogy. For if it should turn out that this stimulating power ultimately stems from irrational or immature impulses, one would hardly want to encourage it in serious writing. This would seem to be the real objection of those who hate the idea of pedagogical obscurity: not that such writing is too deadening but that it is too exciting in the wrong way, that it appeals to people's primitive, childish, and easily abused enchantment with secrets and mysteries. A proper education should endeavor to make people mature, sober, and clear-minded. Are we really to believe that the best means that the greatest minds of the past could find to educate people to rationality was to exploit their adolescent fantasies about buried treasure?

The question thus becomes: What is the true source of obscurity's rhetorical power? Is it simply childish? How does it work? And is there a legitimate role for it in a literature of philosophic rationality? Without aspiring to an exhaustive treatment of this complex subject, let us focus on three elements of obscurity's appeal.

Obscurity and reader involvement

The first and least controversial of these is that by withholding the answers and speaking in hints and riddles the esoteric text constrains the reader to think for himself. We have already seen that thinking for oneself is philosophically essential; the further point here is that it is a strong stimulant, a powerful source of motivation and encouragement for the reader. As Nietzsche has just put it, "the reader toils at [obscure writings] and ascribes to them the pleasure he has in fact gained from his own zeal."

This is not true, of course, for every reader or perhaps even for most—not for those who would rather be told the answers. But "if you have to be told everything, do not read me," Rousseau declares (for "if you have to be told, how will you understand it?").²⁹ That is the unstated maxim of all esoteric texts. As Jean d'Alembert, in his *Analysis of the Spirit of the Laws*, states regarding the famous obscurity of Montesquieu's work: "We will say of the obscurity that can be permitted in such a work, the same thing we said about the lack of order; what would be obscure for vulgar readers is not for those whom the author had in view."³⁰ To understand the workings of esoteric rhetoric, one must appreciate that

29. Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Bloom, 137, 111.

30. Jean d'Alembert, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: A. Belin, 1822), 3:450–51, quoted and translated by Pangle,

it is a frankly elitist practice. It is narrowly designed for a specific and relatively rare kind of reader: those who love to think, those who, from an early age, could always be heard to say “now wait...don’t tell me.” In a variety of ways, such readers will be stimulated by the puzzles the text poses: they will feel energized by the exercise of their faculties, feel pride in the progress of their understanding, and joy in the powerful sense of insight that accompanies a discovery one has made for oneself.

If this is a correct description, then it seems fair to say that there is nothing immature or irrational in the power of obscurity to generate philosophical motivations such as these. Indeed, it is a power that has been noted, praised, and employed by a long line of thinkers. Nietzsche, that master of the coy and aphoristic style, speaks of

The effectiveness of the incomplete.—Just as figures in relief produce so strong an impression on the imagination because they are as it were on the point of stepping out of the wall but have suddenly been brought to a halt, so the relief-like, incomplete presentation of an idea, of a whole philosophy, is sometimes more effective than its exhaustive realization: more is left for the beholder to do, he is impelled to continue working on that which appears before him so strongly etched in light and shadow, to think it through to the end.³¹

Montesquieu alluded to this same “effectiveness of the incomplete” in his famous remark quoted above: “One must not always so exhaust a subject that one leaves nothing for the reader to do. It is not a question of making him read but of making him think.” Indeed, Montesquieu’s artful incompleteness was finely calculated to tantalize and please the acute reader, as was beautifully described in Hippolyte Taine’s account of the *Spirit of the Laws*:

He seems to be always addressing a select circle of people with acute minds, and in such a way as to render them at every moment conscious of their acuteness. No flattery could be more delicate; we feel grateful to him for making us satisfied with our intelligence. We must possess some intelligence to be able to read him, for he deliberately curtails developments and omits transitions; we are required to supply these and to comprehend his hidden meanings. He is rigorously systematic but the system is concealed, his concise completed sentences succeeding each other separately, like so many precious coffers... He thinks in summaries; ... the summary itself often bears the air of an enigma, of which the charm is twofold; we have the pleasure of comprehension accompanying the satisfaction of divining.³²

Montesquieu’s Philosophy, 12.

31. Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, 92 (vol. 1, chap. 4, aph. 178).

32. Hippolyte Taine, *The Ancient Régime*, trans. John Durand (New York: Henry Holt, 1876), 4:260.

This statement is strikingly similar to the view of Theophrastus as approvingly described in *On Style*, a work on rhetoric attributed to the fourth-century BC orator Demetrius of Phaleron:

These, then, are the main essentials of persuasiveness; to which may be added that indicated by Theophrastus when he says that all possible points should not be punctiliously and tediously elaborated, but some should be left to the comprehension and inference of the hearer who when he perceives what you have omitted becomes not only your hearer but your witness, and a very friendly witness too. For he thinks himself intelligent because you have afforded him the means of showing his intelligence. It seems like a slur on your hearer to tell him everything as though he were a simpleton.³³

Again, Rousseau in his pedagogical work *Emile* emphasizes that, for the sake of heightening the student's interest and motivation, it is vital to leave things unsaid. He criticizes modern writers like La Fontaine who place an explicit statement of the "moral" at the end of their stories.

Nothing is so vain or ill conceived as the moral with which most fables end—as if this moral were not or should not be understood in the fable itself. . . . Why, then, by adding this moral at the end, take from [the reader] the pleasure of finding it on his own? Talent at instruction consists in making the disciple enjoy the instruction. But in order for him to enjoy it, his mind must not remain so passive at everything you tell him that he has absolutely nothing to do in order to understand you. The master's *amour-propre* [pride] must always leave some hold for the disciple's; he must be able to say to himself, "I conceive, I discern, I act, I learn." . . . One must always make oneself understood, but one must not always say everything.³⁴

A page later, Rousseau indicates that he has followed this pedagogical strategy himself in the composition of *Emile*, declaring: "I also do not want to say everything."³⁵

The ancient writers are the true masters of this technique of energizing incompleteness, as Rousseau emphasizes. He particularly admires Thucydides's pedagogical style: "He reports the facts without judging them, but he omits none of the circumstances proper to make us judge them ourselves."³⁶

33. Demetrius of Phaleron, *On Style*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902), 222.

34. Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Bloom, 248.

35. *Ibid.*, 249.

36. *Ibid.*, 239.

The other ancient historian most famous for his brevity and obscurity is Tacitus. The specific pleasure and encouragement produced by his rhetoric are nicely described by Sir Richard Baker (1568–1645), the English historian and writer. And his point is essentially the same as that made by Nietzsche, Montesquieu, Taine, Theophrastus, Demetrius, and Rousseau: Tacitus’s obscurity

is pleasing to whosoever by laboring about it, findes out the true meaning; for then he counts it an issue of his owne braine, and taking occasion from these sentences to goe further than the thing he reads, and that without being deceived, he takes the like pleasure as men are wont to take from hearing metaphors, finding the meaning of him that useth them.³⁷

Still another statement of the same point is made by Thomas Gordon, Tacitus’s eighteenth-century English translator. Tacitus

is remarkable for a surpassing brevity... He starts the Idea and leaves the Imagination to pursue it. The sample he gives you is so fine, that you are presently curious to see the whole piece, and then you have your share in the merit of the discovery; a compliment which some able Writers have forgot to pay their readers.³⁸

Again, the Roman rhetorician Quintilian recommends that when arguing in court, one speak elliptically and just let the facts silently point to your claim, because then

[t]his will ensure that the judge himself searches for something which perhaps he would not believe if he heard it, and then believes what he thinks he has found out for himself.³⁹

And later, he adds that with such speeches, “the hearer enjoys understanding it, thinks well of his own cleverness, and praises himself for someone else’s speech.”⁴⁰

Boccaccio, in his *Life of Dante*, declares: “Whatever has been gained by hard work has a certain pleasure... Therefore, in order that [the truth] should be more appreciated by being gained through labor and for that reason better preserved,

37. Translator’s preface to Vergilio Malvezzi, *Discourses upon Cornelius Tacitus*, trans. Richard Baker (London: R. Whitaker and Tho. Whitaker, 1642), quoted by Alfred Alvarez in *The School of Donne* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), 40.

38. Thomas Gordon, *Discourses upon Tacitus: The Works of Tacitus, With Political Discourses Upon that Author* (London: T. Woodward & J. Peele, 1770), 4:149–50, quoted by Rahe, *Republics*, 246.

39. Quintilian, *Institutes* 9.2.72.

40. *Ibid.*, 9.2.79.

poets hid it under many details which seem contrary to it.”⁴¹ And Samuel Butler, in his esoteric interpretation of the French naturalist Buffon, speculates that Buffon “intended his reader to draw his inferences for himself, and perhaps to value them all the more highly on that account.”⁴²

In sum, the right kind of obscurity energizes and pleases the right kind of reader by making him active and responsible. That is a forgotten piece of “reader response theory” with an extremely long history.

Love of the hidden and reverence for the obscure

A second general aspect of obscurity’s appeal is the well-known phenomenon that whatever is veiled strikes us as more alluring and desirable. As Emily Dickinson writes:

A Charm invests a face
Imperfectly beheld—
The Lady dare not lift her Veil
For fear it be dispelled⁴³

There are at least two reasons for this phenomenon. If something is completely present, available, and open to view, it gives no scope to imagination or longing. It is what it is. What you see is what you get. But whatever is partly hidden holds out a promise for more—an open promise onto which imagination is free to project all our hopes and longings. That is why it is absence that makes the heart grow fonder. Presence can be a bit dispiriting.

In addition, we have a natural tendency to value things by what they cost us. We despise what is too available. Obstacles arouse us and strengthen desire. Difficulty ennobles. We pursue most eagerly what is hard to get. Thus an esoteric text—suggestive and challenging, full of promises and obstacles—arouses the mind and charges it with strong hopes and vigorous striving.

Finally, obscurity motivates and inspires the reader in still a third way when it derives not merely from an intentional coyness but from an inherent loftiness that seems to surpass our understanding. Then it overawes us and makes us feel that we are in the presence of something greater than ourselves. Thus, as the *Glossa Ordinaria* quoted above states: “what is concealed appears more worthy of rev-

41. Boccaccio, *Life of Dante*, trans. Bollettino, 40.

42. Samuel Butler, *Evolution Old and New: Or, the Theories of Buffon, Dr. Erasmus Darwin and Lamarck as Compared with That of Charles Darwin* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1911), 87.

43. “A Charm,” poem 421 in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, quoted by Roger Shattuck, *Forbidden Knowledge*, 125.

erence.” The natural rhetorical effect of this kind of obscurity is to call us to attention and inspire us with reverence, awe, and wonder.

So are either of these latter two rhetorical effects—love of the hidden and reverence for the obscure—childish and irrational? They could not fairly be called “childish,” but they could be charged with appealing to our “irrational tendencies,” depending on one’s understanding of ultimate reality. If the “true world” is of a beauty and perfection that far transcends the sensory world, then the curious tendency of our imaginations to idealize what is hidden will come to light as a crucial divination of the truth. Similarly, if there is a God, then the reverence-inspiring tendency of scriptural obscurity is an appropriate and accurate effect that helps to put us onto the path of truth and righteousness. A more materialist or at least more skeptical thinker, on the other hand, will deny the rationality of these rhetorical effects.

But even such thinkers as find the rhetorical power of obscurity irrational may still judge that it is a legitimate and useful tool in the difficult task of philosophical pedagogy. After all, that task—the conversion to philosophy—would not be so difficult if one’s readers were already fully rational beings who could be motivated and instructed by purely rational means. In reality, one must often make artful use of the student’s irrational motives until one has succeeded in strengthening the rational ones—just as we use grades to motivate students until the hoped-for time when they come to see the inherent interest or utility of the subject matter.

Furthermore, if obscurity has so strong and irrational an effect on us, that can only be because we ourselves remain irrational. Obscurity has a way of tapping into the groundless hopes and fears that we continue to harbor within us. And the best way to purge ourselves of these may well be, not to ignore them or bury them in disdain, but precisely to stimulate them, bring them out in the open, and truly work them through. Only a person fully in touch with the irrational temptations buried within him has a chance of becoming genuinely rational. For this reason too, an effective philosophical pedagogy will not necessarily shrink from—indeed, it may positively require—an esoteric rhetoric that makes initial appeal to our irrational tendencies.

The rhetorical effect of the prosaic

One last point in reply to those who would reject the pedagogical use of obscurity or indeed of any kind of rhetoric as unphilosophical: Is there really an alternative? Is it *ever* possible to avoid rhetoric and its irrational effects? In practice, it seems the only real choice is between helpful and unhelpful rhetoric. The modern

rationalist, the believer in literalness and clarity, holds that by writing in a dry, neutral, and rigorous manner one appeals directly to the rational faculties, without any involvement of rhetorical bias. The problem is that such a style is not really neutral, for the *prosaic too* has a powerful rhetorical effect and not a simply rational or salutary one.

The flip side of our irrational idealization of the hidden is our irrational devaluation of the open, public, and familiar. That is the reason for what Nietzsche called above “the misfortune suffered by clear-minded and easily understood writers;” namely, that “they are taken for shallow and thus little effort is expended on reading them.” We have a curious tendency—regrettable but very powerful—to close our minds to what is open and available. It would seem that if the truth does not somehow hide from or abandon us, then we abandon it. With us, obviousness is insulting; clarity is a sign of superficiality; and familiarity breeds contempt. That is the powerful rhetorical distortion produced by the seeming avoidance of rhetoric. The open and prosaic is intellectually clear but existentially stunting: it conveys the right information but the wrong attitude; it puts the deeper reaches of the soul to sleep. It is fine for engineering, bad for philosophy. Profound ideas somehow evaporate when laid out openly for every passing eye. They become overexposed, discharged, profaned. They lose their power to move us. To maintain their potency, they need to be husbanded. “Silence is a fence around wisdom,” states Maimonides.⁴⁴ Indeed, Pythagoras was famous for imposing a lengthy period of silence on his students to prepare their souls for philosophy.

Many earlier thinkers were moved by this spirit of husbanding. They embraced the rhetoric of hiddenness, notwithstanding its involvement with certain irrational effects, as a necessary counterpoison to the still more irrational effects of the prosaic and open. For example, Diogenes Laertius, in his account of the notoriously obscure writings of Heraclitus, remarks: “according to some, he deliberately made it the more obscure in order that none but adepts should approach it, and lest familiarity should breed contempt.”⁴⁵ We have already seen a similar remark by Augustine: “Lest the obvious should cause disgust, the hidden truths arouse longing.”

Today, we have lost this instinct for husbanding. The open society is highly sensitive to the dangers of obscurity but blind to those of plainness and clarity. Ultimate reality, we seem to presuppose, is what exists in broad daylight and is accessible to everyone in his everyday mood. But many earlier thinkers saw the greatest obstacle to philosophic insight precisely in the deadening effect that the

44. Moses Maimonides, *Laws concerning Character Traits*, in *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, trans. Raymond Weiss with Charles Butterworth (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), 33 (2.5).

45. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. Hicks, 413 (9.6).

prosaic has on the soul: a kind of trivializing everydayness arising from our dispersal in the world, from our excessive garrulousness, from the grip of stale custom and convention, and from the loss of mystery, wonder, and awe.

In a number of ways, the rhetoric of hiddenness is helpful in counteracting these harmful effects of the rhetoric of clarity. It trains the spirit in the right attitude toward thought and the world. Terse and indirect communication concentrates the mind. It teaches caution, patience, delicacy, and respect. It makes every word count. At the same time, it awakens us from our sleepy everydayness, our casual contempt for the world, by showing, through its own example, that beneath the familiar and superficial there lies something mysterious and intriguing.

Finally, such writing both issues from and engenders a reverence for one's own soul and its rarer states, a sense of reserve and inwardness, a delicacy that shelters one's higher and more fragile experiences from the coarsening glare of the public as well as from the clumsiness of words and propositions. "Every choice human being," writes Nietzsche, "strives instinctively for a citadel and a secrecy where he is saved from the crowd." Again: "Whatever is profound loves masks... There are occurrences of such a delicate nature that one does well to cover them up with some rudeness to conceal them."⁴⁶ One cannot philosophize in public any more than one can make love there. Erwin Straus, the phenomenological psychologist, makes a distinction between two kinds of shame: concealing and protective. The former is the familiar impulse to conceal what is base, but the latter is the less frequently noted instinct to hide what is precious and vulnerable.⁴⁷ Cast not your pearls before swine. Pedagogical esotericism is, among other things, a very natural manifestation of protective shame, an instinctive taste for concealing, sheltering, and husbanding our higher spiritual states. And writing that exhibits this shame also inspires it in the reader.

While it is true, then, that pedagogical obscurity often makes appeal to our irrational inclinations, a plausible case can be made that the same is true of any alternative style of exposition and that, for the right kind of reader, it is in fact the best means for promoting philosophic rationality.

The burden of esoteric interpretation

One further dimension of pedagogical esotericism—and of the contemporary mind's instinctive resistance to it—will emerge from the consideration of one final objection. All the foregoing arguments notwithstanding, most people today

46. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Kaufmann, 37 (aph. 26), 50 (aph. 40).

47. Erwin Straus, *Phenomenological Psychology*, trans. Erling Eng (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 217–24.

will still find it implausible—because so plainly counterproductive—that the great philosophic writers of the past would have written esoterically for pedagogical reasons. This practice seems just too inconsistent with the practical requirements of philosophical learning. If past thinkers deliberately wrote their books in the manner suggested, they would impose on the reader the enormous burden of navigating artificial labyrinths, solving elaborate puzzles, and cracking obscure codes—and all of this effort would be needed just in order to arrive at an understanding of what the book's real argument is. The reader will then scarcely have time or energy left to do the real business of philosophy: to examine the argument, compare it with those of other writers (who must also be interpreted esoterically), and finally decide what he himself thinks of it. The task of interpretation will squeeze out that of philosophical reflection. Even under the best of circumstances, philosophy is almost impossibly difficult. Why would anyone choose to compound the difficulty by adding to it the endless and uncertain task of esoteric interpretation? Whatever the advantages might be of esoteric pedagogy considered in the abstract, in reality it makes no sense—there is simply no *time* for it. It is believable that past thinkers were sometimes forced to write esoterically in order to avoid persecution, but that they would have also done so voluntarily in an effort to *enhance* the transmission of philosophical understanding is implausible in the extreme.

There is no doubt that we feel this objection very powerfully. But, once again, we must remind ourselves that the issue is not whether we ourselves approve of and incline to practice pedagogical esotericism, but whether thinkers in the past did so. And by now we have seen a large number of explicit statements by past thinkers acknowledging and praising the use of esoteric writing for pedagogical purposes. What is perhaps even more striking in this context is that I have been unable to find *any* statements, prior to the nineteenth century, *criticizing* esotericism for the aforementioned problem. It would seem that earlier ages were, for some reason or other, much less troubled by this problem than we are.

Leisure and esoteric literacy

One likely reason for this difference is a change of historical conditions. Today we labor under the great burden of a philosophic tradition that now stretches back 2,500 years. There are hundreds of major philosophical works to master and—since the rise of modern scholarship about 150 years ago—there are also hundreds of secondary writings devoted to each one of these primary works. Indeed, in our time, it is hardly possible to walk through the stacks of a major research library and not feel, among other things, oppressed by the crushing weight

of so many books. The fact is that modern scholars find themselves in an impossible intellectual situation, which, though it is seldom thematically discussed, conditions all of their hermeneutical instincts. It strongly inclines us to dismiss as implausible—because simply unbearable—any suggestion that would increase our already overwhelming scholarly burden.

But of course this condition of overload did not always exist. In classical times, the heyday of pedagogical esotericism, intellectual life breathed a very different air. There were many fewer thinkers and books. Nor were books written for busy scholars and university professors who were constantly driven by the pressure to publish. Free from these burdens, intellectual life had a far more leisurely and focused character. And this greatly affected the whole manner in which books were written and read. Historians Rolf Engelsing and David Hall among others have spoken of a “reading revolution” that occurred in the mid-eighteenth century through which the traditional, “intensive” practice of reading a few books over and over again was replaced with the modern, “extensive” practice of reading a book once and moving on to the next.⁴⁸ Thus, a hundred years later, John Stuart Mill remarks:

It must be remembered that they [the Greeks and Romans] had more time, and they wrote chiefly for a select class, possessed of leisure. To us who write in a hurry for people who read in a hurry, the attempt to give an equal degree of finish would be a loss of time.⁴⁹

We find a similar observation in Tocqueville:

One ought to remark, furthermore, that in all of antiquity books were rare and expensive, and great difficulty was experienced in reproducing them and having them circulate. These circumstances came to concentrate the taste for and use of letters in a few men, who formed almost a small literary aristocracy of the elite of a great political aristocracy.⁵⁰

In such intellectual circumstances, Tocqueville continues, where the writer could

48. See Rolf Engelsing, “Die Perioden der Lesergeschichte in der Neuzeit: Das statische Ausmass und die soziokulturelle Bedeutung der Lektüre,” *Archiv für Geschichte des Buchwesens* 10 (1969), cols. 944–1002, and *Der Bürger als Leser: Lesergeschichte in Deutschland, 1500–1800* (Stuttgart, 1974); David Hall, “The Uses of Literacy in New England, 1600–1850,” in *Printing and Society in Early America*, ed. W. L. Joyce, 2nd ed. (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 1983), 1–47. See Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 16–18.

49. John Stuart Mill, *Inaugural Address Delivered to the University of St. Andrews* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, & Dyer, 1867), 34.

50. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Mansfield and Winthrop, 451 (vol. 2, pt. 1, chap. 15).

count upon the patient, sustained, and repeated attention of a highly cultivated reader, nothing is “done in haste or haphazardly; everything there is written for connoisseurs.”⁵¹ Books were written with extreme care to be read with extreme care. Therefore, there was no ingrained resistance—such as we feel very strongly today—to the very idea that a book should deliberately impose on the reader a significant interpretive burden.

On the contrary, that was precisely their taste and preference. The whole tendency of classical culture, in Winckelmann’s famous expression, was one of noble simplicity and quiet grandeur. This manifested itself in a literary style of urbane understatement and lapidary concision. As Mill puts it: “The ancients were *concise*, because of the extreme pains they took with their compositions; almost all moderns are prolix because they do not.” Modern prose tends to be wordy and overstated, he continues, “for want of time and patience, and from the necessity we are in of addressing almost all writings to a busy and imperfectly prepared public.”⁵² By contrast, the primary addressees of classical writing—a small, refined, exclusive, and homogeneous literary aristocracy with a dense background of shared taste and understanding—naturally delighted in nuance and economy of expression, taking joy in seeing just how much could be conveyed by the smallest of indications. This cultural ideal expressed itself in their conversation no less than their writing. In his “Life of Lycurgus,” Plutarch describes how Spartan children were educated to “comprehend much matter of thought in few words.” Therefore, “as their swords were short and sharp, so, it seems to me, were their sayings. They reach the point and arrest the attention of the hearers better than any.”⁵³ Yet not just the Spartans in Laconia, but the classics in general, were famously laconic. Thus, even apart from the issue of leisure, the marked classical taste for refined understatement would have made classical audiences naturally receptive to the idea of pedagogical esotericism in a way that modern readers—lacking this taste—clearly are not.

Furthermore, having a taste for literary subtlety and having grown up with a literature that practiced it, ancient readers would have learned the rudiments of esoteric reading almost along with the art of reading itself. They were socialized into a laconic culture. Thus, the burden imposed by esoteric interpretation would have impressed them as less onerous as well as less distasteful than it does contemporary readers, who have grown up, as it were, esoteric illiterates.

51. *Ibid.*, 451 (vol. 2, pt. 1, chap. 15).

52. Mill, *Inaugural Address*, 37–38 (emphasis added).

53. Plutarch, *Lycurgus*, in *Lives*, trans. Dryden, 64–65.

Esotericism vs. the modern ideas of progress and publication

But it is not only the pressure of unread books, the disappearance of a leisured culture of aristocratic understatement, and the want of socialization in esoteric ways that make us view pedagogical esotericism as so burdensome and thus improbable. Crucially important is also the central role played by the idea of progress in the shaping of modern intellectual life.

The idea of progress, which today seems almost too obvious to explain, holds that human knowledge tends continually to advance because each generation can build on the achievements of the preceding one. Yet there is an unstated presupposition here regarding the matter of transmission. Faith in progress is based on the (very un-Socratic) assumption that wisdom or knowledge can be not only taught but “published” in the modern sense: written down in books in such a way as to be easily and genuinely appropriated, so that the next generation, after a brief period of learning, can begin where the previous one left off.

A second, related assumption of modern progress-philosophy is that intellectual production functions in essentially the same way as economic production: the progress of both results from “teamwork,” from the division of labor or specialization within a group. And just as the essential precondition of the economic division of labor is exchange, so the precondition of intellectual specialization is the efficient exchange of knowledge—through publication.

In the modern period, the whole enterprise of philosophy and science has been organized around this idea of progress. The pursuit of knowledge has become uniquely “socialized,” become a team effort, a collective undertaking, both across generations and across individuals within a single generation. This has affected our whole experience of the intellectual life. The modern scholar or scientist ultimately does not—and cannot—live to think for himself in the quiet of his study. He lives to “make a contribution” to an ongoing, public enterprise, to what “we know.” He has externalized his intellectual life. His thinking has become a means to his writing. He lives to publish. Thus, the living core of this effort at collective knowing is the modern institution of publication, through which each can make his contribution and readily appropriate the contributions of the others. Writing and publication have a unique meaning for modern thought; they play a special role that was unknown to earlier thinkers, even though they too of course wrote books.

It is no surprise, then, that the modern intellect instinctively recoils at the very idea of voluntary obscurity and pedagogical esotericism: this practice and

its premises run directly counter to core modern assumptions about the easy transmission of knowledge through publication and thus to the whole collective organization of modern intellectual life. It inevitably appears to us not only as destructive but transgressive, a violation of the sacred ethics of publication that is the lifeblood of modern knowing.

But this reaction was wholly alien to the premodern world, which inclined to reject the basic assumptions behind the idea of progress. Whatever may be the case for certain limited, technical aspects of philosophy, genuine philosophical depth and insight cannot simply be written down and transmitted from one generation to another. Wisdom cannot be told. So each generation by no means starts where the previous one left off. The classics had no faith in progress because they had no faith in publication in the modern sense. Indeed, they were skeptical of books of every kind, as we have seen.

They also rejected the second pillar of progress-philosophy, the division of labor. The philosophic life—the radically personal effort to see life whole—can never be genuinely pursued as a collective enterprise of specialists who read each other's articles. This whole system makes sense only when philosophy has been externalized, when the original meaning of philosophy as a unique way of life and the achievement of some kind of internal clarity or enlightenment has been replaced by a collective, public enterprise, in which each individual's personal thoughts have become only a means to his external contribution. From the classical standpoint, progress-philosophy is self-refuting, as it were, since it itself constitutes a great decline.

To be sure, something like the division of labor has always existed. In every age people are strongly tempted to rely upon the thinking and findings of others. And this can often seem like a useful shortcut. But if philosophy is to remain internal and authentic and not degenerate into a "tradition," then above all it must resist this dangerous temptation—the very temptation upon which modern progress-philosophy seeks to build. It was precisely to counteract this temptation that, as we have seen, classical thought turned to the use of pedagogical esotericism: by hiding the truth in the right way, it hoped to force others to rediscover it by and for themselves, without the excessive reliance upon others. But this means that the objection stated above—through which we moderns tend to dismiss the practice of pedagogical esotericism as implausible because such a great hindrance to the ready transmission of knowledge—is precisely what led the classics to embrace that practice: it is a great obstacle to the easy appropriation of others' ideas.

The esoteric book as an imitation of nature

But even granting this huge difference in perspective, we might still try to reformulate, using classical premises, our modern objection to pedagogical esotericism. Let us assume with the ancients that the primary aim of philosophical writing is to promote, not the progress over time of a collective intellectual enterprise, but the philosophical authenticity of the rare individual. Still, is increasing the interpretive difficulty of a book really the best way to get the reader to think for himself? Granted, it may prevent him from adopting the author's views unthinkingly. But, as argued above, it will also burden him with a difficult interpretive task that will stand in the way of his main job of philosophizing. The author's artificial literary puzzles will serve only to mire the reader in textual minutiae and distract him from the great puzzle of the world. The most likely effect of this kind of writing, then, is to make the reader not authentically philosophical, but rather bookish and pedantic.

We have already seen a large part of the reply to this objection. Classical philosophical texts were written not primarily for scholars and other workers in a collective enterprise but for the "rare individual," the person of extraordinary philosophical and interpretive gifts, who, as such, would not be excessively burdened by its interpretive challenges. And, as we have just seen, both the taste for and the art of close reading were more highly developed in past ages.

But there is a deeper reply to this objection that also points to a crucial dimension of pedagogical esotericism that we have so far neglected. The objection assumes that the deciphering of an esoteric text is a task altogether different from—and therefore obstructive of—philosophizing. It assumes that the puzzles contained in the esoteric book are purely "artificial" and unrelated to the puzzles in reality that occupy the philosopher. But this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, one of the primary purposes of pedagogical concealment is precisely to train the reader for the kind of thinking needed to philosophize. But whether and how it is able to serve this purpose depend on how one understands the true character of philosophy and of the reality it seeks to penetrate.

If, for example, philosophy is able to know the world through a deductive system of some kind, then presumably "philosophizing" would have nothing in common with the practice of esoteric reading. But if, on the other hand, reality is hidden from us by a cave of opinion or convention, as Plato maintains, and if philosophy largely consists, not in a science of geometric deduction, but in the delicate art of freeing oneself from received opinion by detecting its subtle flaws and contradictions, then the art of esoteric interpretation might well be the best possible training for philosophy. In learning how to read the text, you learn how to

read the world. More generally, if the world is composed of appearance and reality, of a surface and a depth, then a book that consciously imitates that structure might best prepare one for comprehending the world.

Again, if true philosophy is dogmatic, system-philosophy that would banish all mystery from the world, then the human activity or posture of “questioning” would not be truly central to the philosophic life, and the open-endedness of an esoteric text would have no essential relation to philosophy. But if true philosophy is some form of skepticism—not the modern, Cartesian kind that is only a prelude to dogmatism, but classical, zetetic or erotic skepticism that puts the human stance of questioning, wondering, and longing permanently at the center of the philosophic life—then the elusive question-world of an esoteric book might be the most suitable training ground for philosophy.

Socrates, for example, who claimed to know only that he knew nothing, was a skeptic in this sense—to adopt here the interpretation of Leo Strauss. For Socrates, philosophy is knowledge of ignorance. But one cannot *know* that one is fundamentally ignorant without knowing that the world poses fundamental questions to which one does not have the definitive answer. Knowledge of ignorance, then, is not ignorance; it is knowledge. It is knowledge of the permanent problems, the fundamental perplexities that stimulate and structure our thinking. For the skeptic Socrates, then, these questions (and not the eternal Ideas) are the most fundamental and permanent beings that he knows, beings that continually summon him to thought. He experiences the whole as neither perfectly transparent nor perfectly opaque, but elusive and alluring. And this experience derives not simply from the limitations of human reason but from the character of the world: hiddenness is a property of being itself. Nature is esoteric. Now, if this is the case, then the puzzle-quality of an esoteric text would not be artificial and obstructive of philosophy but rather natural and necessary, being an accurate imitation of reality. Thus, according to Strauss, Plato wrote his dialogues so as to “supply us not so much with an answer to the riddle of being as with a most articulate ‘imitation’ of that riddle.”⁵⁴ Similarly, Thucydides’s history “imitates the enigmatic character of reality.”⁵⁵ A rhetoric of concealment would be most useful, perhaps even necessary, to disclose reality as it is in its hiddenness.⁵⁶

54. Strauss, “New Interpretation,” 351.

55. Leo Strauss, “Thucydides: The Meaning of Political History,” in *Rebirth*, 94.

56. For a discussion of these claims, see Strauss, “What Is Political Philosophy?” in *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 38–40. See also his “An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism” (in *Rebirth*, 43), where Strauss seems to follow Heidegger in maintaining that “*to be* means to be elusive or to be a mystery.” See Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), 61–62. And see Benardete who, on this basis, attributes to the ancients what he calls “metaphysical esotericism.” Seth Benardete, “Strauss on Plato,” in *The Argument of the Action* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 409.

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