
Richard Prensner
Trapped in a Columbarium of Concepts?

(A Philosopher's Self-Help Guide)

Richard Prensner

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Advised by Timothy Schoettle

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We might sense that some philosophers are not giving us a philosophy that can be lived in. We see this type of philosopher as acting in the role of a mechanic, constructing abstract artifacts. Calling a philosopher a mechanic is in some sense pejorative; we think that the philosopher must be more than a mechanic, since what he describes has more import than mere utility. This paper is intended to describe how the individual can decide whether a philosophy is more than an abstract artifact. In this paper, I will emphasize the importance of approaching philosophy not just as thinkers but as perceivers, subjects that experience the world. In order to do this, we will look at why philosophy must move from the philosophical workshop to lived experience.

1. We can compare the task of philosophy to a train. A train must be set on tracks if it is to be of any use. Philosophy must use as its starting point logical consistency. If the tracks that the train is on cross themselves, then the train will knock itself off the tracks. If philosophy contradicts itself, then it defeats its own attempts. A train, though, if it is of any good, must do more than simply rest on tracks that do not interfere with themselves. The train must also be able to carry passengers. So to in philosophy; if philosophy is unable to make a place within the philosophy for the perceiver, the thinker, the cogito, then once again it undermines its own possibility, since it undermines the possibility for its own conception and birth. Now a train that is on its tracks, and can hold its passengers, is still not worth much if it cannot take its passengers to places with being, worth seeing. If philosophy takes us to someplace desolate, limiting lived experience to a narrow peninsula, then we should distrust the philosopher.
2.

Let’s imagine instead of a stack of books with the names of Plato, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, we see these three men in front of us. Each of these men is either dealing honestly with us or dishonestly. If they are dealing honestly, this does not mean that their philosophy is right, rather it expresses their relationship to their philosophy. The philosopher who is a liar has no existential relationship to his philosophy. He creates distance between himself and his philosophy; consequently his philosophy is a train that circles its tracks; he is not a passenger; he is only a mechanic who will defend his philosophy, not because it is true, but because it cannot be refuted. For this philosopher, nothing is at stake.

If the philosopher is honest, there is no distance between him and his philosophy. He is a passenger and his philosophy is taking him to a certain vista, a view, an orientation on life and the world; something is at stake, since he bares an existential relationship to his philosophy. Now if a philosopher is honest, as said above, this does not mean that he right. He could be mad; we call him honest because what he argues for, he believes; he is existentially engaged. Bearing this existential relationship is essential to coming to know the philosophy.¹

We can bare existential relationships to all sorts of things; in fact, we do on a daily basis. To understand what this means, let’s use the example of a student who is searching for a career. In this process, she will take on various existential relationships as she “tries on” each career she is interested in.

Let’s suppose that this student has a complete knowledge of the job descriptions of an accountant, a hairstylist, and a teacher. If she wants to know which of these careers to choose,

¹ The idea of an existential relationship is in part born out of the beginning of Concluding Unscientific Postscript by Soren Kierkegaard (Kierkegaard, Existentialism BR, 87-92).
she will likely imagine herself as one of them. She will essentially play out each career in her everyday life as if she is playing out a role. In the act of taking on this role, her view on the content of the job description is given a new significance. It no longer shows up as something separate to her, but rather bares an existential relationship with her.

For example, let’s say she dawns the orientation of a teacher for a week. During this trial period, her self-awareness will heighten; when she teaches something to a friend, perhaps a math concept from class, she will experience her efforts not merely as a means by which to transmit her knowledge to this friend, but rather, she will experience her efforts at teaching as an ends unto themselves. She will notice the way she feels, what parts of her light up as she describes this math concept, and what parts of her remain unaffected. She will be more critical of herself when her “pupil”, remains glossy eyed despite her best attempts. When she is in class she will imagine herself in the teacher's place; when the teacher starts to lose his train of thought, she might even his experience his lapse as her own, perhaps feeling a bit of embarrassment, before realizing the ridiculousness of that. After a week or so, she might decide that being a teacher is not for her. The next week she is an accountant.

What this girl is checking for is whether each of these careers suits her. In order to decipher this, she occupies the role in a very different way than if she was merely aware of the role. What she comes to know after she has “tried a career on”, is something apart from the role, that which is prior to the role: that is, her own perspectival makeup. We will call this, her form of existence. Now, we would like to think that this is very different from philosophy since philosophy speaks in a universal voice; it informs the way the world is, and not merely as it is for me.
However, the same structure is at play in philosophy for the philosopher. His existential relationship with his philosophy is the added note that completes the chord and makes the philosophy become real for him, rather than just logically consistent. In this relationship he learns something new about his philosophy, namely how it shapes the world from an existential point of view.

3.

In the process of adjudicating between different philosophers, it is possible that they could all be saying something that is internally consistent. In this case, we cannot adjudicate based on formal errors. For example, if we assume that the philosophies of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard and Plato contain no errors on a formal level, we would then need a new way to assess them. These philosophers in particular are trying to give us a view on the world. Instead of asking which philosopher is right and which is wrong, we could instead ask, which is sane and which is mad. When we shift the question from right and wrong to sane and mad, we are implying a different approach to deciding between these philosophers.²

We are moving ourselves into the framework they have given us and are now asking, how does the philosophy frame the world on an existential level. How does the world appear to me from this orientation. In order to accomplish this, we will need to imagine that the philosophy is true through forming an existential relationship to it. We can occupy each philosopher’s philosophy in a similar way to the girl seeking a career; in this sense, the philosophy truly becomes a way of seeing the world.

² Thinking of philosophy in terms of mad or sane was taken from G.K. Chesterton’s book Orthodoxy, specifically from the chapter titled “The Maniac”.
What this means for us, is that in taking up a philosophical perspective, we can look for the ways in which the world shows up differently than another philosophical perspective. It is important to note that within this taking up, there are two layers of meaning at play. Let’s return to the student; the two layers at play in this relationship, as alluded to earlier, are the girl’s perspectival makeup and the job she tries on. The job she tries on will bring out her perspectival makeup, while at the same time limiting it in certain way. In asking whether the career is right for her, she is in part asking whether or not the career, as acted out in her life, animated her form of existence.

However, as said earlier, philosophy seeks to speak in a universal voice. It attempts to reveal not what is merely perspectival but what is constituted universally. At this point, it is important to note that we do in fact encounter what we take to be universal forms of experience in our own experience of the world. For example, if the student considered, God forbid, becoming a prostitute, we would want to say that, in principle, she should have dismissed this possibility in light of something universal—such as human dignity— and not something merely perspectival—such as her own preferences due to her own situatedness. If there are universal forms of existence, then when that layer is brought into contact with a philosophy our system of meaning, it will, similarly to the student looking for a career, either be constrained or brought out.

This might seem like a good way to adjudicate between competing philosophies, each of which contain no formal error to disqualify them. However, it is an open question whether universal forms of existence do in fact deliver the world to us in a meaningful way. Plato and Nietzsche take opposite positions on this. Plato says we can only know the world meaningfully
through universal forms of existence, whereas Nietzsche thinks that forms of existence are mere fabrications and do not inform the world in meaningful way. Let’s turn to these two philosophers to better understand why they move in opposite directions and why this is important for us.

4.

Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” starts with an image of prisoners who are staring at the wall of a cave observing shadows that are cast on it. The prisoners are in chains such that they have never seen the outside world or even seen their own bodies. Because of this, the prisoners think that these shadows comprise reality. However, as we know, these shadows are mere imprints of a much fuller reality. The shadows on the wall are produced by men and animals walking on a road which is behind the prisoners; there is a fire burning on the far side of the road which casts the shadows. Plato describes how one day, one of the prisoners is taken from the cave, forcefully, and into the external world. Here he realizes that what he had mistaken for reality, the shadows on the wall, bore merely a faint resemblance to reality itself.

The world outside the cave, for Plato, is known as the intelligible realm. In the intelligible realm the forms exist. The forms include universals such as Beauty and Justice and Piety and the Good. The forms are what allows us to make sense of our experience of the sensible world—the empirical world. Plato thinks that our souls once existed in the realm of the forms. However, our bodies have darkened our ability to grasp the forms. Through philosophy and reflection on experience, we are able to recollect what we have forgotten. In the Symposium, Plato gives an example of what this process of recollection looks like:

… starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs: from one body to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, then from beautiful bodies to beautiful customs,
and from customs to learning beautiful things, and from these lessons he arrives in the end at this lesson, which is learning of this very Beauty, so that in the end he comes to know just what it is to be beautiful. (Plato, *Phaedo*, 318-319, 211c).

At the end of this dialectic, what the individual comes to know is the form itself—and not merely what examples of the form are exemplified in the world.

This point is clarified in the *Euthyphro*. In this dialogue, Plato asks his interlocutor the following: “Is the pious loved by the gods because it’s pious? Or is it pious because it’s loved” (Plato, *Euthyphro*, 106, 10a). We would expect what is pious to at least be loved by the gods; Plato insists that at bottom, the pious is more than merely what is loved by the gods; if it was merely what is love by the gods, then the pious would be arbitrary, since the love doesn’t correspond to something about the pious which is deserving of that love. Thus, what Plato wants to know is if there is a reason the gods love the pious. This reason is what we come to know when we come to know the forms. In knowing the forms, to put this in the language of what was said above, we come to know a universal form of experience, whereby the world shows up as meaningful.3

Plato describes the moment of coming to know the forms as an act of seeing. He says that “the power to learn is present in everyone’s soul and that the instrument with which each learns is like an eye that cannot be turned around from darkness to light without turning the whole body” (Plato, Republic, VII, 518c, 508). Now, if something like the forms exist, then we can take on a form of existence that is universal. This means, that instead of all the forms of existence operating in a way that is similar to the girl’s perspectival form of existence when she considers

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3 This way of thinking of the Euthyphro dilemma comes in part from Stanley Cavell’s collection of writings, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, pg. 21.)
a career, it is possible to take on forms of existence that pull out universal qualities: such as the Beautiful, the Good, the Just. What this also means is that when the girl considers and rejects becoming a prostitute, she does so on the basis of something that is universal and informs her decision, irrespective of what anyone else thinks.

5.

One way to position Nietzsche in this discourse, is that once we try to move from the shadows to the forms, we inevitably lose any meaning that the forms could have. Because of this, and other reasons, he is radically against the possibility of universal forms of experience. For him, each form of experience is manufactured, not-separate from the bearer of it. For him, all forms of experience are like the perspectival form of experience described for the girl.

As said above, he makes this move, in part, because he notices that phenomenologically, the shadows show up as nearer to us than the forms. We come to know the forms, or recollect them, through the dialectical process of philosophy and reflection on experience. He thinks that by the time philosophy has done its work, we are left with “the final wisp of evaporating reality” (Nietzsche, *Existentialism BR*, 178). This is because as he puts it, we confuse “what is first with what is last” (Nietzsche, *Existentialism BR*, 178). We are confused, in his eyes, because we think that after we have dialectically parsed reality, we are left with something more meaningful than what was first given in experience.

He thinks that, in regards to Plato, the criteria for “true being”, the forms, is the same as the criteria for “not-being” (Nietzsche, *Existentialism BR*, 180). He says that what Plato sees as the true world, the realm of the forms, “has been constructed out of contradiction to the actual world” (Nietzsche, *Existentialism BR*, 180). Nietzsche is referring to the way in which Plato’s
dialogues go about the process of recollecting the forms. Socrates starts with asking someone what justice or goodness or beauty is, and then goes on to introduce counterexamples. The dialogues continue in this way until the interlocutor is frustrated. In this process, Nietzsche would say that we are not coming to know what justice is, but at best, conflating a series of individual and perfectly unique cases until all we can say about what makes something beautiful is what Socrates says to Phaedo, “...all beautiful things are beautiful by the Beautiful. That, I think, is the safest answer I can give myself or anyone else” (Plato, *Phaedo*, 267, 100d).

Nietzsche would scoff at this. And say that the form is empty and only represents a “unknown X”, which is the result, of a whittling down of experience to a formless nub. Nietzsche says at one point: “Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions—they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins” (Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*).

For Plato something like honesty corresponds to a universal form of experience by which the honest action shows up as such. Nietzsche, on the other hand, thinks that there is nothing we know about the universal form that could make experience show up as meaningful through it. Nietzsche describes this point in the following way:

We call a person ‘honest,’ and then we ask ‘why has he behaved so honestly today?’ Our usual answer is, ‘on account of his honesty.’ Honesty! This in turn means that the leaf is the cause of the leaves. We know nothing whatsoever about an essential quality called ‘honesty’; but we do know of countless individualized and consequently unequal actions which we equate by omitting the aspects in which they are unequal and which we now
designate as ‘honest’ actions. Finally we formulate from them a qualitas occulta which has the name ‘honesty.’ We obtain the concept, as we do the form, by overlooking what is individual and actual; whereas nature is acquainted with no forms and no concepts, and likewise no species, but only with an X which remains inaccessible and undefinable to us” (Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*).

Nietzsche in forming this view gives up universal forms of experience, in a Platonic sense, and leaves us with forms of experience that can only represent the perspectival form of existence, as when the girl checked to see if being a teacher matched her individual form of existence.

6.

If we take both Nietzsche and Plato seriously within this discourse, and agree that there are forms of existence, how do we choose who is right? Nietzsche denies universal forms of existence while Plato affirms them. To choose, we should form an existential relationship with each position. We view the world through it. We are trying to observe what it is that Plato saw and what it is that Nietzsche saw. In this determination, we are looking for which view is more sane than the other. We are hoping that the view that is most sane is also what happens to true.

To return to the train analogy at the beginning, if each of them is consistent within their positions, then we need to move from assessing their positions as mere mechanics, and instead, become passengers within their thought and ask if the philosophy train has taken us to places worth being, worth seeing.
Works Cited


Friedrich Nietzsche. *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*.


Works Consulted


