

## The making of a Philosopher

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When you read biographies when you are young, the perspective is very different from when reading them when you are old. In the former case they can provide inspiration and impress upon you how little you know of life, and how much is still ahead; in the latter case it becomes more of a retrospection and a sad contemplation of lost opportunities, yet with bittersweet consolations of its own. Understanding, honed by experience is deeper, there will be flashes of recognition, and a growing awareness that time is measured out, and that this might not be such a bad thing after all. A life is like a narrative, and as such not only in need of a beginning (of which there is little controversy) but also of an end.

In particular when you read about great men, or at least those enjoying fame and recognition, you may in younger years identify with their youths, which seem on the face of it not so distinct from your own, thereby being lulled into the easy complaisance of inductive continuity. Yet, as a friend of mine once explained, all those narratives of success hide some very important fact. The sharp transition from obscurity to achievement. What happened? Or was it always present, being played down by the narrator in the ambition of appearing like a regular guy, just like yourself? A good story of a life contains a few turning points when fate seemed to balance on a sharp edge, liable to go either way, down into obscurity, the lot of everyman, or further catapulted into the sky. Could it be that those people who made it into the eyes of the world and more important posterity, whose names will not be easily forgotten, tied as they are to crucial events of the mind or matter, are but a minority of those who could have been, but were not? Failing either to make a mark through catastrophic misfortunes like early death or madness, or more commonly by missed opportunities, no lucky-breaks, or simply by inertia, content as they were with life, not egged on by ambition and drive. In the latter case we can indeed argue that they lacked an essential element of what it took, for others there will be lifelong devotion and commitment not lacking in brilliance and originality, but nevertheless (or because of that) neglected by fashion. Do all those that deserve it make it? It is often argued that those that make it in the end initially encountered much opposition they had to overcome, on the other hand a systematic study of biography probably would yield that such cases are in the minority, most successful people, especially in the sciences, when talent is of a more universal kind and hence more easily recognised and awarded, did excel also in conventional ways. Being good at school, without that questionable distinction necessarily warping their minds.

McGinn is no overtowering genius, at least one surmises he would be both alarmed and amused by such a characterization, yet the story he sets out to present is a story of success. The beginnings, in view of his ultimate fate, were not auspicious. Had I met the author in the summer of 1968, (and the thought-experiment is impossible to resist as we are born the very same year) the contrast between us would have been great. On one hand, according to his own account an almost illiterate waif, mostly interested in sports

and drumming (and what is not explicitly stated - girls) and having had no ambitions of an academic career, in fact having had no conception of such a thing at all; on the other hand a student with top marks, not only a participant in a mathematical olympiade but even a gold medal winner of the same, and with his eyes set on a definite academic career (and of a brilliant kind to boot, anything else would have been a severe disappointment), in fact unable to conceive of any other alternative. Six years later the roles are reversed. On one hand a successful Oxford graduate, a winner of a prestigious philosophy prize, and well set onto an academic career; on the other hand a lost Harvard graduate student, with no hopes of ever finishing his Ph.D. (In fact with no hopes of ever even getting started on one either!)<sup>1</sup>. What had happened in between? What exactly did this marvellous transition consist in?

First, how did the transition come about? And after all, this is not meant like an ordinary autobiography chronicling the vicissitudes of life, but to present not only a story of intellectual awakening but one with an ulterior didactic motive, of presenting the case for philosophy to a general public. The question has a neat answer, or at least a succinct response. Namely the ontological proof of Gods existence<sup>2</sup>. I certainly encountered it, and my reaction was one of amusement. It was a good joke, a very good joke, and to this day it remains my favourite proof of Gods existence. McGinn took it far more seriously, to him it became a revelation. A revelation of the power of thought. This revelation had come to me some years earlier, in connection with the deductive reasonings of Euclidean Geometry<sup>3</sup> and also, by the bolt I received when being told of Descartes well-known dictum. McGinn was touched, and rather than discard it as a mere joke, he mulled over it in his mind, as a true philosopher, and to this day he admits that he cannot find anything obviously wrong in it<sup>4</sup> Another impetus to philosophy was the the possible illusion of a real world, and ultimately with its implications of Solipsism. This is supposedly a very common conclusion by adolescents, at least those of a reflective temperament, and while I also had shared in the experience a few years earlier, the experience for me was so harrowing as to divert my interest away from philosophy permanently. To McGinn though, the effect was the opposite. As he notes ironically, the power of thought is equally capable of convincing you of the existence of the most unlikely and abstract (God) and the non-existence of the most tangible and undeniable (the external material world). (And should not this make you deeply sceptical of that very power, as well as very fascinated?)

Yet for our obvious differences in background and ambitions, there are striking simi-

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<sup>1</sup> This would rather abruptly change, within the span of a few months, which will need an explication by itself

<sup>2</sup> To many readers no doubt familiar. Define God as the perfect being, and observe that existence is one of the attributes of being perfect.

<sup>3</sup> This might also have been the case with McGinn, for reasons of dramatization, I do not think that he is entirely honest about his lucklustre school-career, not in details anyway. His reference to having been good at English and Mathematics, also would need some explication.

<sup>4</sup> The audacious way the proof asserts the existence of God is quite in the spirit of the existence of many mathematical concepts are imposed with impunity. Sometimes, as in the infamous Russell paradox, the proper limits are overstepped.

larities. A fondness for the books of Dr. Dolittle<sup>5</sup> on a trivial level, and a fascination with Bertrand Russell. The elderly philosopher did at the time publish his autobiography, a book both of us devoured. In his case the devotion must have been even stronger, as he actually wrote to the old bard (and was thinking of visiting him) and started to smoke a pipe just like his idol. The fascination is not hard to explain, at least to young guys of a cerebral bent. Russell showed that the life of the mind could be exciting and rewarding in all kinds of ways, and that it did not preclude emotional anguish of the kind the adolescent is so familiar with. In my case, at least, the towering age of the sage, added a further source of fascination and admiration. The life of the mind could not only be intense but long as well, tying up by my first conscious ambition ever. In the case of McGinn, he is able to put a succinct spin on it. Russell was simply the philosophical rockstar<sup>6</sup>.

Yet his teen-age experience, like that of most English speakers, lacked a crucial component present in that of mine. Namely the acquisition of a foreign language<sup>7</sup>. You learn your mother-tongue instinctively by the time you start to have conscious memories. Your language ability then slowly increases to reach its plateau of excellence by the time of puberty. To learn other languages you use your own as a template. This makes it both easier and more difficult, not unlike the renovation of an old house, where the old house keeps getting in the way. For those people who pick up other tongues with ease and as a consequence typically master half a dozen, and in exceptional cases (like that of freaks performing on a circus) even more. One traditionally characterizes those people as being language proficient, possessors of a skill not unlike that of music, (or mathematics for that matter); the idea being that the rest of us are reduced to monolinguality. This might very well be true in the English speaking world, where the majority of the population may at best learn a smattering of a foreign tongue, enough to supply a few phrases sufficient in touristy exchanges, but never really getting to appreciate that other languages can be natural, and not just malicious obstructions thrown at the hapless monoglot by sadistic foreigners. But it is not true in the rest of the world. If you grow up with a small language you are isolated, especially if you have wider ambitions. Learning English then becomes a matter of survival and an opportunity to create a new and alternate persona<sup>8</sup>. This was certainly the matter with me, possessing no natural talent for language acquisition. As I learned English, taking complete responsibility for the project after the first few initial years of being taught it, a new world opened up, learning to read and write for a second time in my life. This process is in many ways reminiscent of the emigration across class-barriers that education can infer on those commonly referred to as the academically

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<sup>5</sup> Actually not such a big deal, I read a lot of books as a child and it stands to reason that his favourite books would also have been read by me and appreciated

<sup>6</sup> I have always been contemptuous of the vulgar adulation of celebrities. But clearly the instinct is basic, only the object of adulation differs. And to this we will have occasion to return.

<sup>7</sup> In the case of McGinn it was a requirement for university studies, and by mistakingly choosing Italian as an easy way out he found himself transported from the frying pan into the real fire, scraping by by his teeth. Most of it was later forgotten

<sup>8</sup> The phenomenon, with English replaced by Russian, Chinese or whatever, is quite common historically, and one which I believe most people are capable of, when finding themselves growing up at the edges of an empire.

underprivileged. It is a process of conscious remaking, and as a consequence it can only be performed once, in exceptional cases maybe twice, in your life. Thus the concept of multilinguality is a myth. Bilinguality is a possibility, but there is a limit to the number of well-rounded personalities you may have<sup>9</sup>.

The 'rag and riches' story of McGinn has certain morals. In political educational circles there is much concern about the disproportional amount of students of academic backgrounds entering universities. The working-class is clearly being disadvantaged. From an egalitarian viewpoint this clearly points to a fundamental flaw in the system (because to claim that working class people would on the average be less academically proficient than other classes is clearly a most pernicious point of view with clear racist and fascist undertones). Those from underprivileged backgrounds simply do not have the necessary habits inoculated. As a consequence there have been lowering of standards, universal admissions, and the pious (not to say desperate) hope that things will eventually work out allowing students to continue to the next level without proper preparation. The flaw of this approach, however well-meaning, is that education after all is directed at individuals not at populations<sup>10</sup>. Lacking proper academic rolemodels at home, he was lucky enough to find at least one (and one is enough) at school. The exemplary teacher is not necessarily the one with the best teaching skills (whatever is meant by that), but the one who is truly dedicated to his subject, as well as having an interest in students. (Thus it is important that teachers should have real academic backgrounds, and not just be the products of teaching institutions, which is the current trend). A potentially bright student should be encouraged on the level of being an individual not as a representative of a class. This is, or should be simple.

McGinn suffered a few failed attempts to be admitted to Oxford<sup>11</sup>. As a consequence he ended up studying for a psychology degree at Manchester. Eventually he got into Oxford through the back-door. His account of entering this august place back in 1971 has definite parallels with my own encounter with Harvard the same year. The same excitement, the abundance of courses, the austere faculty, the brilliant fellow students. This can be quite a heady experience. But here our paths diverged. McGinn had no baggage of unreasonable expectations, he was the underdog, failure would for him be the norm, success the exception. He had nothing to lose. In my case the psychological situation was more complex<sup>12</sup>. I had high expectations of myself, and at the same time, and not unusually, severe doubts as to my intrinsic ability<sup>13</sup>. In a sense I was caught in a philosophical problem of my own. Did I have it in me to be a mathematician? Was it in my

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<sup>9</sup> It is considered a miracle when somebody writes in a different tongue than his own, especially in the English speaking world, for reasons obvious from above

<sup>10</sup> This clearly reveals a sociological approach with political agendas

<sup>11</sup> Admittedly his background certainly played a role; but as he admits, admission needs to be based on available information, and eventually he was being vindicated

<sup>12</sup> This is easy to say. I know of my own situation intimately, while that of the author only fragmentarily, consisting of what he would chose to say in a light-hearted memoir. Still I am quite convinced that his situation was easier and sounder.

<sup>13</sup> Getting admitted to Harvard was not an unqualified encouragement and confirmation of worth. Having applied to half a dozen of the top graduate schools in the States, I was only admitted to Berkeley

soul so to speak? Mathematical prowess was certainly a very important part of my personal identity, without which I feared I would be nothing. Thus what I really wanted was to have some mathematical authority pronounce me blessed, just like God has the power to divine the goodness of a person, and thus able to separate the sheep from the goats. But above all was this uncertainty, not really knowing where I belonged. I wanted by be judged one way or another. There is this sense of rough diamonds and glittery glass in the matters of school-children. Some do well in school, because they are supposedly conventional. They do their lessons, they work hard, they keep up good relations with their teachers, and are thus favourably assessed. All appearances and no contents. Receptiveness and no creativity. The other kind are indifferent scholars but devoted to their own interests, going their own ways, not concerned with grades and such worldly things. Awkward, shunned by teachers, neglected by school, but the world will eventually appreciate their gifts. The point was that I was both. Out of vanity and self-respect I wanted to be the best in the class, hence I kept attention during lectures, and constantly saw to it that I was prepared for tests, just doing the minimal to stay ahead, while devoting most of my energies to my own thing, intellectual matters of course, but with no direct relevance to grades. I resented being classified in the first category, a resentment also fuelled by my teacher-parents division of those that merely worked hard and those who were intrinsically smart<sup>14</sup>. So was I really gifted, or was I simply the case of a mediocre talent having been pushed way out of my depths? This conflict raged for the better part of my years at Harvard, which can be seen as mathematically wasted<sup>15</sup>. I tried desperately to convince myself that I was no good, as after all I had been told that it was a common experience for people common from local circumstances, being best in their class and then finally having to confront and come to terms with brutal reality. But I failed, no matter how much I would liked to have succeeded in persuading myself that I was deep down a mediocrity. I sensed that succeeding and giving up would be a deep betrayal to my innermost identity, my soul so to speak. After all is such anguish not a manifestation of uniqueness and hence worth? Such a conflict is engrossing to the individual, but seen from the outside it is rather pathetic (unless of course among those truly great) and far more common than the self-centered sufferer would like to admit. The classical term for it is 'narcissism'<sup>16</sup>

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and Harvard, and the latter only as a reserve. Admissions being to a large extent based on letters of recommendation, and Sweden having a good reputation, at least at the time, this counted in my favour. Yet I suspect, without the participation in the Olympiades, I might not have made it, especially as I suspect that the letters on my behalf were rather luke-warm, there being a general consensus at the department at Stockholm that my departure was premature.

<sup>14</sup> Contrary to popular opinion, teachers do not always applaud those who work hard and follow their instructions

<sup>15</sup> In other ways it ws not. I had a lot of catching up to do, social and also intellectual, and I did meet people with whom I could have intellectual exchanges the likes of which I had never had before in my life. My interests expanded, as did my reading habits (and book-acquisitions). My conception of myself changed drastically, this also being the effect of emigration and the conquest of another language and hence the construction of a new persona, to which I have alluded above

<sup>16</sup> Which far more often displays itself as an exaltation in worthlessness rather than placid complacency, the distinction sometimes being quite fine.

Success is a matter of forgetting all of this, not entirely, as ambition is a driving force; but it should not get in the way. Success is similar to falling in love, it involves an act of abandonment, and it was exactly this kind of abandonment I could not bring myself to take. As it turned out the very last year I relaxed. Being trapped in an American marriage, I saw my last year at Harvard as being the last in fairy-land. After that the dream would dissolve, and I would return to Sweden and reality and start all over again. A very potent dream, that dream of reality just being a dream, and the sense that real life is not here and now, but there and later. A dream that would fortify me for much of my American tenure. As a consequence everything fell into place. The thesis I had hardly not started took form in a few weeks. I received effusive praise from my advisor, I was exalted, everything went well. I was no fool after all, even if I felt that my renewed confidence and external appreciation was in the nature of an Indian summer coming too late in the day (I was always of an optimistic temperament). I am sorry to say that this provided a pattern of my entire mathematical career. Long stretches of boredom characterized by lack of discipline, discouragement and ennui, no doubt fuelled by arrogance; interrupted by brief moments of work and achievement. What has been lacking has been this sense of love. Love meaning a willingness to abandon yourself to a task. Instead the feeling that life is too beautiful to be spent on details, and committed and confined, and thus closing so much out. And also the sense that there is no death (a typical illusion of hypochondriacs) and hence there is always the possibility of procastration. But apart from that there also have been the sense that mathematics is not enough, that I would like to do other things, yet the sense of duty that prevents me from casting loose and try those things. In an ideal world I would have been spared a spurious mathematical precocity, and spent a less focused youth, trying out all kinds of other interests; maybe gradually settling down to something congenial. But we live in no ideal worlds, we have to make the best out of our pasts, which sometimes simply means to forget about them.

This digression may explain the change of fortunes. What happened to McGinn remains basically hidden, as each agony has its own scream, while soundness and health keep quiet<sup>17</sup>. McGinn clearly worked hard, did a lot of discussing, and slowly built up a good foundations. He was not brilliant, at least when compared to his fellow students. He could not compete with their erudition and confidence. To compete for the prestigious John-Locke prize, not even awarded each year due to the lack of worthy candidates, was in many ways a desperate step. During the examination itself, the author was tempted to give up, but persevered. In the end he was asked to pay for the typing of his exam-paper, it being too illegible to judge. He did so with misgivings, yet the result was unexpected. He won, won by a great margin to boot, and his very lack of erudition had worked to his advantage, his efforts being less of a show-off of acquired characteristics, but the result of a more original approach. It was his lucky break, without which his career might in all likelihood have foundered. It amounted to a short-cut, a by-passing of ordeals. We all deserve a lucky break, but it is never to be seen as a closure and a consolidation, on the contrary as a repositioning for continued efforts. He moved to London, yet within

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<sup>17</sup> An old Swedish proverb - *Var plga har sitt skri, medan hlsan tiger still*, reminiscent of the opening lines of Anna Karenina

an easy trainride of Oxford, had to suffer the indignities of giving regular tutorials<sup>18</sup> something I was spared (and thus being spoilt). But drudgery can stimulate your habit of discipline, and while McGinn was never an exemplary schoolboy, he turned into an exemplary academic, doing what academics is all about, steadily churning out papers. Of course mere productivity is no guarantee, too often it reflects nothing more than obsession and specialization; yet it is almost always a necessary component. You need to choose your problems with care, yet not to be paralysed by making the most exquisite of choices. The habit of publishing, means a habit of systematically collecting your wits, thus being prepared for the great discovery that might land in your lap, as well as cultivating your mind, when the imagination may run dry. Squeezing it out if needs be in order to feed a habit. In a few years he had established a modest but solid reputation that he discovered was exportable.

At 1980 McGinn was ready to take the next big step into the world, that of leaving for the States. At the very same time, I had taken my great step backwards, aborting an American career out of a deeply felt sentimentality. In his case there was continued expansion, in mine a kind of retraction back into the womb. Still I should be careful not too resent that step, because after all I felt so deeply about it. I simply did not want to become an American, I felt it would mean losing my soul. (Always this 'soul', which after all may be nothing but a kind of internalized religiosity). In 1980 we were still young, with life ahead; although at the time I may not have been properly aware of it<sup>19</sup>. Los Angeles. Video-games. A backlash to a Blackpool youth? Some obsessions are not so bad after all, provided that they are indulged in whole-heartedly and with abandon. They they will rage and burn themselves out, instead of slowly poisoning you. And philosophy was not enough. The writing of novels ensued, one of which actually found a publisher, although sharing the fate of most first novels, making no splash and drifting out of print. Yet it had to be done, and the ambition I can share<sup>20</sup>, in this case being so much more common and generally understandable than a passion for philosophy or mathematics. Then there followed a stint, as it would turn out to be, back at the alma mater of Oxford. A joint position at philosophy and psychology, primed to pursue the project of mind and brain. It was a position that he did not expect to be offered, nor had any particular enthusiasm

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<sup>18</sup> Grumbling about the poor students, (poor in the sense of academic ability of course, not necessarily in pecuniary senses or universally worthy of pity). It never ceases to surprise me, that people should voluntarily chose subjects like philosophy and mathematics, without the proper fascination, because after all it is only this fascination that justify their study.

<sup>19</sup> I recall pictures of myself at the time. Long hair, a long unkempt beard and a wild look. Surely not the picture of a brazen youth.

<sup>20</sup> It was a childhood dream, and once unabashedly pursued. It was in the academic year of 73-74, when I put a small typewriter on the box that had once contained my speakers, seating myself in a run-down sofa in our Ware-street apartment, proving to myself that I could do it. It all poured out of me, page after page, it was indeed as exciting as I had expected it to be. Yet there was no plan, just a flow with no attempts of polish or rewriting, and what resulted would not have been publishable by any stretch of imagination. Yet it did not matter. And I still keep this juvenile effort in a drawer. The sad thing though is that I doubt that I would ever be able to come up with anything comparable in my old age. If you try too hard to build up momentum, without taking the plunge, you will simply have all the power dissipate.

for accepting, being engaged in other things of sweeter nature than philosophy, the steady academic pursuit of which was taking its toll, exhausting him, running itself dry. Yet academic instincts prevailed, and discipline and duty led him back to the beaten track. A few years later, a call to the States. A trying out maybe (because who is prepared to burn their ships?), yet not allowed by Oxford. This resulted in a definite breach with his old university, which once had appeared so glorious and now felt insular and spent, the old magic long since gone. The excitement was elsewhere, in the New York area. Columbia of course, but also surprisingly Rutgers. And at the same time another lucky break that would catapult him out of the obscurity of academic philosophy, into the life of semi-celebrity<sup>21</sup> What gave him the opportunity to pursue a second career?

Mind and brain had become a contentious issue during the 80's. For a long time it was a subject of taboo. Behaviourism being the predominant paradigm of psychology. Only the observable was the proper subject of scientific study. To some extent this was a sound anti-dote to the flights of fancy enjoyed by the psychoanalysts, yet in the long run it was too constricted, too sterile. In science as in life you have to take risks. But with the increasing computational power of computers, the age old ideas of artificial life and intelligence got to be revived as there seemed to be long last an opportunity to try them out. For some time AI (Artificial Intelligence) was fashionable. The awesome potential in algorithms pursued far beyond what the human alone could sustain, offered a new avenue of inquiry into the secrets of the mind. But the initial success translating into overblown claims started to erode the trust, and in a few years the first excitement was gone. And it was here that the claims of McGinn of intrinsic limits to human reasoning were so timely.

Philosophy allows itself to be expressed as powerful slogans. 'Life is but an illusion', 'Philosophical difficulty is about misuse of language', 'There are no absolute truths', 'God is dead'. But almost anyone can come up with a slogan, the interesting point is to make deeper sense by connecting to the unexpected and to point to unsuspected consequences. After all what is so great about claiming that man has limited understanding? Is this not the favourite gambit of preachers? Succinctly expressed as 'How can we doubt the wisdom of God, when our intellectual powers are like those of insects (if even that) compared to his?' Also why should we expect mankind to come up with explanations of the riddles of the universe ?(and what is meant by an explanation anyway?), when we do not expect dogs and rats to do them. Because we men are divinely inspired? This is hardly an original thought. I admit that I find the idea very sympathetic, but philosophical ideas are not like religious ones, they may be conceived in revelation, but they also need to be buttressed. Religion is intellectual dogma, and any opposition is resented, if not quenched (or worse). While philosophy, just as science should thrive on being contradicted. Thus you need to elaborate to become technical. This means being more precise, supply many different examples, preferably startling and ingenious ones. Show that your viewpoint provides a unification, illuminating already known phenomena as well as pointing to unexpected consequences. One may retort that this is what you expect from science, and philosophy is not science. Good and fine, but what should you expect from philosophy then? Something more than mere wind? McGinn has written a few popular books on

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<sup>21</sup> In the sense of hob-nobbing with those universally recognised, without having to suffer the attention of popular recognition itself.



those ideas. And although I am in sympathetic agreement I have not so far felt that his arguments have been that compelling. Obviously I am missing out on something. Some subtle technical points, exactly the kind I am looking for but have been too blind to see, either because of reading too fast, or just being congenitally unable to grasp? (The limits of human understanding do vary from individual to individual. And after all I am not a professional philosopher.) McGinn returns to his CALM characterization of his 'problems in philosophy' by trying to capture the essence of reasoning. To me it seems like a variation of the old description of initial analysis and subsequent synthesis. The breaking into parts, each of which can be logically linked to others. The real point seems to me of McGinn's approach is to posit some kind of super-rationality, of which human intelligence is but one aspect, but for which there are many other aspects, all limited in their own ways, for which we can have no inkling<sup>22</sup>. In this way he can escape being trapped in mysticism.

But as a mystic was exactly the way he was projected on the popular scene, having stalked out a specific position for himself. One thing led to another. Media exposure, invitations to write in prestigious non-academic journals, the approach of celebrities, intellectual as well as those of glittering star-dome. It was a heady experience, and he makes no beans about not enjoying it whole-heartedly<sup>23</sup>. It is easy to make fun of such delight, and many academic colleagues naturally see it as despicable superficiality. But such disparagement is clearly nothing but sour grapes. I admit that I would probably be just as delighted as McGinn, and if the truth come out, probably even more so, had I been accorded such attention<sup>24</sup>. After all academics is an obscure profession, not all of your colleagues are so brilliant as to compensate for this neglect by the big world outside. This irrelevance is frustrating, especially if you think of yourself as smart and worthy of much more attention. And to every scientist there is the spectacle of Einstein, who is a symbol of gratification, and from out of this (seemingly inexhaustible) fame, he would like to appropriate a proper share. McGinn thinks of it as his second career. A career that expanded his professional concerns from the dry academic domains of analytic philosophy to the wider world of literature and letters, including ethic crusades. In this he surely must feel that he is living up, not to Einstein, but to the far more relevant (and accessible?) exemplary life of his first philosophical role model - Russell. And indeed I myself, be it on a far more modest and local scale, have, if ten years later, made a similar transformation. Not significant enough to invite comparison, but real enough to generate sympathy, in the

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<sup>22</sup> In my review of his 'problems of philosophy' I suggest the example of infinite reasonings. We all have a very definite idea of infinity, yet when we come down to it, it is simply beyond us.

<sup>23</sup> The reader is treated to some young woman celebrity (whose achievement consists in being on the cover of many magazines and being married to prenatually handsome Brad Pitt) asking him about his favourite philosopher. Bertrand Russell cutting no ice, even Kant being totally unknown, only Plato producing a faint glimmer of recognition. And the author is treated to a facial inspection by Anthony Hopkins in order to assess the precise amount of similarity.

<sup>24</sup> And by reading the last pages of the book, with all that name-dropping, how delightful would it not have been to encounter my own, with its implications of time-warps and logical contradictions, in addition to the more lowly ones,(but yet so sweet) of petty vanity. This is of course exactly the kind of thing that would happen in a dream, and where the egregious violations of ordinary causation would be taken in stride.

original sense of putting yourself imaginatively in somebody's else shoes.

Finally it is hard to resist the temptation of contrasting philosophy with mathematics and more generally science. Does philosophy really amount to anything? They seem to get nowhere, each generation instead of building on the achievements of their predecessors, tear everything down, in order to start anew. And indeed many hard-core scientists, especially those of the empirical kind leading lives of intellectual drudgery, tend to dismiss philosophy as so much wind, with their practitioners having their heads in the clouds, and their feet detached from the ground. Philosophy is not science, even if it sometimes strive to achieve such recognition. I would describe philosophy as the poetry of science, not in order to denigrate it, but to try and capture its essence. In fact meaning it as a tribute. Philosophy is like mathematics abstract, and just as in mathematics this infatuation with abstraction is a hazard, as it can lead to vapidness and triteness. Philosophy, like mathematics in particular and science in general thrives on argument. But no philosophical edifice is as elaborate as a scientific one; and no philosophical argument is as intricate as a mathematical one can and usually is<sup>25</sup>. The essence of philosophy is clearly not in its elaborate structure, but the fact that it imposes itself onto you. Anyone engaged in any kind of cerebral activity (or any kind of activity for that matter) needs to reflect, and is as such inescapable. The essence of philosophy is not so much argument as such, but evocation; and it also concerns itself with things we cannot know about, but still not ignore, as the scientist chooses to do<sup>26</sup>. And it is also harder than it looks. The retired scientist, feeling his intellectual power waning and thus the need to set his sights higher, seldom produces something beyond the risable, McGinn remarks. As in poetry, according to the dictum of Houseman, your nose is your guide. Further literary presentation, unlike the case of the dry reports of science, is an integral part of its thought. To paraphrase the mathematician Hardy, there is no place for ugly philosophy in the world. But above all philosophy is a celebration of thought, its purpose to clarify issues, but its adventure to discover unanticipated areas of inquiry. As such it has a freshness, exemplified by its tendency to tear down and start anew, so regretfully referred to above. Science pays a price for its accumulated success, namely that of alienation. Things that you cannot understand becomes boring, and in a highly technical sophisticated discipline you are reduced to apply ready-made gadgets. This is why elementary mathematics can be so refreshing and of which you may never tire, as opposed to the more accomplished one. In philosophy, apart from certain technical developments, frowned upon by those with a true philosophical temperament; this freshness of the elementary is always there. Any true delight in thinking must solely involve understanding; and when the chains of understanding become too long and complicated to be humans graspable, that delight and joy withers.

It may be instructive to digress briefly on moral philosophy, to more clearly emphasize the nature of philosophy. From an exalted perspective, moral philosophy is parochial: while philosophy of knowledge concerns itself with what is, and in particular the inescapable wonder that there is something rather than nothing; moral philosophy does not have the

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<sup>25</sup> A mathematical proof can literally depend on thousands of logical steps, although this is exceptional. But what is not exceptional is that mathematical arguments rest on previous results, and taken everything from scratch involve chains of reasoning that taxes the understanding of the individual.

<sup>26</sup> Thus pragmatic philosophy, as opposed to a pragmatic approach, is an oxymoron

same chilling universality, concerning itself with questions which would be meaningless without man. But we are human, and thus we cannot escape the particular problems such a status infer. And here philosophy acquires a normative role making it imperative that it comes down to earth and perform some practical roles. And in fact it has done so in the past, and still does. But once it involves itself in quotidian affairs, it loses its charm as disinterested reflection, and becomes just another actor among many, straddled with the same moral restraints, accountability as well as needs to compromise. And the poetry goes out of it<sup>27</sup>.

It would be pretentious of me to assert that I should ever expect to have anything philosophically valuable to contribute, although I have touchingly not been entirely free of such conceits in the recent past, still that does not prevent me from engaging in it, be it so only on a conversational level.

McGinn is happy in New York, a place he cannot conceive of ever leaving. Life, real life, as opposed to the dry academic channels, surrounds him everywhere, he only needs to stick his head out of the window, to be engrossed by it. Its bustle, its smells, and forget all of philosophy. And not too far away is the beach, with the waves and the surf. What more can you demand? But what the author does not know, but the reader does (or at least some of them), is that the affair with New York would come to an end. Miami beckons. More surf, more sun, more fun....

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<sup>27</sup> Not such a bad thing after all, many may think.