# Why the Great Philosophers Aren't that Great

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Abstract: The important philosophers in history aren't all that great. First, their works are full of bad arguments, confused concepts, falsehoods, implausible claims, and lack of clarity. We can see this by using a "peer-review test," which asks us to evaluate these claims and arguments as if they were submitted to us as anonymous work. Second, I make the case that canonizing some philosophers as great is damaging to the philosophical project of seeking truth regardless of its source. I suggest an alternative hypothesis. The putatively great philosophers were just intelligent individuals who had the right ideas at the right time. They are worth reading not because of their intellectual genius but rather for their creativity and insight, offering novel solutions to certain problems and noticing implications others had missed. Accordingly, my position does not entail that the "great" figures are of no philosophical interest. However, we should do away with the idea of a "great philosopher." Philosophy might then come to resemble other disciplines that seek the truth, which generally do not revere their historically important predecessors.
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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The "great figures" in the canon of western philosophy include Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Mill, and Nietzsche, among others. As we draw closer to our own time, matters become more contentious. Perhaps Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Arendt, and Kripke deserve to be considered great, but I take the initial list to be fairly uncontroversial. Many teachers and writers present these great philosophers as towering intellects whose like is rarely seen. They are viewed as geniuses and treated sometimes with a kind of reverence. When a great philosopher seems to have said something foolish or to have offered a bad argument, he is often granted a very generous benefit of the doubt. Surely there is more to the argument than first appears!

The main claim of this paper is simply that these great philosophers aren't all that great. First, the works of these philosophers are full of bad arguments, confused concepts, falsehoods, implausible claims, lack of clarity, and systematic gaps. I will offer examples of each of these below. We can consider these examples using a "peer-review test," which asks us to evaluate these claims and arguments as if they were submitted to us as

anonymous work. Of course, this peer-review test must allow for differences of style and knowledge across the centuries. We cannot dismiss Plato simply because he wrote dialogues rather than journal articles, nor can we blame Kant for being ignorant of evolutionary biology, but we can ask whether (say) the arguments for immortality in the *Phaedo* are any good. I will argue that, in many cases, reviewers would not hesitate to recommend rejection of the great philosophers, provided they have been suitably anonymized. Second, and independent of the first set of arguments, I make the case that canonizing some philosophers as great is damaging to what we might call the "philosophical project," which is to seek truth regardless of its source. Affording an aura of greatness to some thinkers discourages criticism and may incline some scholars to search for convoluted and implausible defenses of their favored thinkers, both of which are inimical to the philosophical project.

I suggest an alternative hypothesis. The putatively great philosophers were just intelligent individuals who had the right ideas at the right time. They are worth reading not because of their intellectual genius but rather for their creativity and insight, offering novel solutions to certain problems and noticing implications others had missed. Accordingly, my position does not entail that the "great" figures are of no philosophical interest. However, we should do away with the idea of a "great philosopher." In this particular way, philosophy might then come to resemble other disciplines that seek the truth, such as the natural and social sciences, which generally do not revere their historically important predecessors.

## 2. TEST FOR EVALUATING PHILOSOPHICAL WORKS

As a discipline, philosophy has come to accept anonymous peer-review as the appropriate means for evaluating contemporary philosophical work. Imagine that we applied a similar idea to works in the history of philosophy:

> The Peer-Review Test: Experts consider the merits and deficiencies of some past philosophical work independently of its authorship or historical importance, as if the work was under anonymous review.

A few words about what this test does and does not entail. In practice, there will be imperfections in virtually any application of this test. In assessing the philosophical merits of Kant's metaphysical deduction, for example, we cannot simply forget about the great influence of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, nor the high esteem many philosophers have afforded it.

Nonetheless, we can attempt to discount those factors and focus on the content of the work itself, paying attention to clarity and quality of argumentation. On the peer-review test, our question for Kant's metaphysical deduction should be: Is this high quality philosophy?

My reliance on this test does not imply that the social practice of peer-review is not without its problems, but all the complaints about peer-review I have heard concern alleged bad practices: a failure to maintain anonymity, careless or incompetent reviewers, long wait times, and so on. I am not aware of experts who object to peer-review as such, provided it is carried out in the appropriate way. What I am suggesting here is that the peer-review test can offer a useful means to assess the quality of a work's philosophical substance. As mentioned above, we shall need to make some allowances for changing conventions, but the core arguments of ancient, medieval, and early modern philosophers remain intelligible to us, and they are subject to the same standards of logic that govern all arguments. We are therefore able to assess them, and the peer-review test offers a clear way of doing so.

## 3. SOME FLAWS OF THE GREAT PHILOSOPHERS

In this section I offer some examples of flaws in the great philosophers. These include bad arguments, implausible ideas, confused concepts, falsehoods, and lack of clarity. Obviously, any such survey must be brief and partial, but I have chosen cases that are widely considered to be significant in the history of philosophy, rather than drawing upon obscure texts.

### 3.1. Bad Arguments

Let us begin with some bad arguments in the history of philosophy. In his *Utilitarianism*, which is the standard text used to introduce students to consequentialist ethical theory, Mill purports to give a "proof" for his "principle of utility," which is closely tied to the hedonistic claim that pleasure is the sole good (Beaumont, 2021). Mill writes:

> We have now, then, an answer to the question, of what sort of proof the principle of utility is susceptible. If the opinion which I have now stated is psychologically true—if human nature is so constituted as to desire nothing which is not either a part of happiness or a means of happiness, we can have no other proof, and we require no other, that these are the only

> things desirable. If so, happiness is the sole end of human action, and the promotion of it the test by which to judge of all human conduct; from whence it necessarily follows that it must be the criterion of morality, since a part is included in the whole.
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> And now to decide whether this is really so; whether mankind do desire nothing for itself but that which is a pleasure to them, or of which the absence is a pain; we have evidently arrived at a question of fact and experience, dependent, like all similar questions, upon evidence. It can only be determined by practised self-consciousness and self-observation, assisted by observation of others. I believe that these sources of evidence, impartially consulted, will declare that desiring a thing and finding it pleasant, aversion to it and thinking of it as painful, are phenomena entirely inseparable, or rather two parts of the same phenomenon; in strictness of language, two different modes of naming the same psychological fact: that to think of an object as desirable (unless for the sake of its consequences), and to think of it as pleasant, are one and the same thing; and that to desire anything, except in proportion as the idea of it is pleasant, is a physical and metaphysical impossibility.
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> So obvious does this appear to me, that I expect it will hardly be disputed…" (Mill, 1879), chapter 4)

How does Mill's argument fare under the peer-review test? We must imagine that we are assigned to review an anonymous paper containing this argument. It seems obvious that reviewers would not be very impressed. As Bertrand Russell remarked, this is "an argument which is so fallacious that it is hard to understand how he can have thought it valid." From the controversial claim that human beings desire only pleasure, Mill somehow infers that pleasure is the only good thing, moving from a descriptive to an evaluative claim without providing any justification for it. Russell continues:

> [Mill] says: Pleasure is the only thing desired; therefore pleasure is the only thing desirable. He argues that the only things visible are things seen, the only things audible are things heard, and similarly the only things desirable are things desired. He does not notice that a thing is 'visible' if it *can* be seen, but desirable if it *ought* to be desired. Thus 'desirable' is a word presupposing an ethical theory; we cannot infer what is desirable from what is desired" (Russell, 1967).

Even if one is sympathetic to the possibility of inferring values from facts, Mill does nothing to explain how that inference functions in this case (Barker, 2023; Fox, 2021). One bad argument may not be enough to sink an entire book, but given the centrality of this particular issue to Mill's overall theory, a revise-and-resubmit would seem to be in order.

It might be tempting to shore up Mill's argument, and perhaps a version of it could be salvaged. But we must review what has been submitted rather than what the author might have intended. As written, the argument is clearly flawed.

Let us take another example from a frequently taught text. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes offers a novel argument for the existence of God by starting with some rather suspect claims:

> Now, it is manifest by the natural light that there must at least be as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in its effect; for whence can the effect draw its reality if not from its cause? And how could the cause communicate to it this reality unless it possessed it in itself? And hence it follows, not only that what is cannot be produced by what is not, but likewise that the more perfect, in other words, that which contains in itself more reality, cannot be the effect of the less perfect; and this is not only evidently true of those effects, whose reality is actual or formal, but likewise of ideas, whose reality is only considered as objective.

He then argues as follows (Ciccarelli, 2024). I have an idea of an infinite substance (God). The cause of that idea must have as much "formal" reality as the idea has "objective" reality. But I am merely a finite substance, so I cannot be the cause of that idea. The idea of an infinite substance must be caused by an infinite substance. Because I have that idea, an infinite substance must exist, and that infinite substance is God.

The principle that the cause of an idea must have as much "reality" as its effect comes out of nowhere. Although it is supposed to be evident from the "natural light," a move like this seems hardly permissible in a work like the *Meditations*, in which Descartes applies hyperbolic doubt to all beliefs in order to see what, if anything, can be known with certainty. If it is possible that an evil demon might deceive us regarding the basic principles of arithmetic or geometry, then surely it might deceive us regarding the quantity of "reality" that must be in causes and effects. Yet Descartes depends upon this and similarly questionable arguments when it comes to rescuing many of his prior beliefs.

I ask the reader to consider this argument independently of its historical significance and the stature of its author. Is it any good? If we examined the argument under anonymous peer-review, what would we say about it? It seems clear that reviewers would not be impressed. This is not to say that the *Meditations* is not worth reading. It certainly is a valuable work (Cottingham, 2023), but some of its central arguments are deeply flawed. It might be pointed out that anyone, now matter how intelligent, can make a bad argument. Indeed. In this respect, Descartes was just like the rest of us.

There are other notorious examples we might review: some of Plato's arguments for the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo*, Aquinas' "five ways" to prove the existence of God, Moore's open question argument, and so on. There are also many cases in which argumentation is simply lacking, providing little reason for the reader to assent to certain claims: Plotinus' *Enneads*, Schopenhauer's speculative metaphysics of the will, and many of Nietzsche's aphorisms, for example.

### 3.2. Implausibility

Some of the most important ideas in the history of philosophy are deeply implausible. Consider Plato's forms, Leibniz's monads, or Malebranche's occasionalism. These are rather outlandish ideas, which pretty clearly clash with common sense. Of course, there are reasons that these authors appealed to those ideas, for they offer potential solutions to problems regarding causality, knowledge of universals, and so on. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to suppose that such implausible claims require powerful evidence, presumably in the form of strong arguments.

Do we find such arguments in Plato, Leibniz, or Malebranche? I do not think so. Often these historically important but implausible ideas are introduced in a speculative or *ad hoc* fashion. Perhaps Malebranche's occasionalism is true, but that does not appear likely. Again, let us ask how we would evaluate these ideas under peer-review. It is simply not credible to think that an expert reviewer would encounter such implausible claims without having objections. The paper might simply be rejected for being too outlandish or insufficiently defended. Why should the reader entertain the anonymous author's strange speculations? At the very least, the reviewer will demand that the author address the implausibility in their revisions.

The point here is not that implausible ideas are grounds for rejecting a work in its entirety, but rather that such implausibility is readily viewed as

problematic. We should take the same stance when encountering implausible ideas in the allegedly great philosophers of the past.

### 3.3. Confused Concepts

Philosophy is difficult, and it is not uncommon for a philosopher to adopt some view that runs into problems at some point down the road. The philosopher then has two obvious options. They might simply bite the bullet and live with the problematic implication, or they might attempt to show that the apparent problem is actually no problem at all. The latter route often involves some complex intellectual maneuvers and invites bemused smiles from readers and auditors, but sometimes it can be successful. Other times, however, the philosopher ends up espousing some confused or even incoherent concept in their attempt to sidestep the initial problem.

The Stoic idea of "preferred indifferents," which is easy to state but difficult to comprehend, provides such a case see (Aikin, 2022; Gill, 2022). If virtue is the only thing that matters, as the Stoics say, then it seems that we should be indifferent toward anything else, including health, honors, wealth, the well-being of friends, and so on. But it seems implausible to hold that such things do not matter at all. To deal with this, the Stoics say that, although health is something toward which we are to be indifferent, it is nonetheless to be preferred over illness. This gives us some reason to pursue health in practice. If we should nonetheless fall ill, it does not matter, for only virtue matters (Sherman, 2023).

On the fact of it, this doctrine appears confused and perhaps even incoherent (Vazquez, 2023). How is it possible to maintain both indifference and preference regarding the same thing? It would seem that my preferring health over illness entails that I am not indifferent regarding health. Likewise, it would seem that my indifference regarding health entails that I do not have a preference for health over illness. The Stoics have long been criticized (e.g., by Plutarch) for this seeming incoherence (Klein, 2015). Although some contemporary scholars have sought ways of saving the doctrine of preferred indifferents, there is little evidence that the Stoics themselves had a clear understanding or defense of this doctrine. Instead, it very much looks as if the Stoics were backed into a corner and, rather than biting the bullet and saying that we should not care about health and the rests, relied on a confused concept in order to have things both ways, exactly the sort of maneuver that invites a smile from the peer reviewer.

### 3.4. Falsehoods

Sometimes the "great" philosophers make claims that are simply false, often regarding empirical matters. In *On His Own Ignorance and that of Many Others*, Petrarch, who is often overlooked in the history of philosophy (Celenza, 2022; Haley, 2021), makes fun of Scholastic authorities for their many mistaken beliefs about non-human animals, some of which are traceable to Aristotle:

> Therefore, he has much to tell about wild animals, about birds and fishes: how many hairs there are in the lion's mane; how many feathers are in the hawk's tale; with how many arms the cuttlefish clasps a shipwrecked man; that elephants couple from behind and are pregnant for two years; that this docile and vigorous animal, the nearest to man by its intelligence, lives until the end of the second or third century of its life; that the phoenix is consumed by aromatic fire and revives after it has been burned; that the sea urchin stops a ship, however fast she is driving along, while it is unable to do anything once it is dragged out of the waves; how the hunter fools the tiger with a mirror; how the Arimasp attacks the griffin with his sword; how whales turn over on their backs and thus deceive the sailors; that the newborn of the bear has as yet no shape; that the mule rarely gives birth, the viper only once and then to its own disaster; that moles are blind and bees deaf; that alone among all living beings the crocodile moves its upper jaw (Petrarch, 1948).

This is an exaggerated litany, of course, but Petrarch is right to criticize both the false beliefs of past thinkers and the inclination of some of his contemporaries to accept these falsehoods on the basis of authority. This is not to say that past thinkers were fools simply because they espoused some false beliefs. It is to be expected that Aristotle would hold some mistaken views in zoology and biology, given his unreliable access to the evidence and the like. Nonetheless, false statements in a work of philosophy clearly count as flaws. In some cases, they might constitute major flaws, say if those false beliefs inform premises in the work's central arguments.

### 3.5. Lack of Clarity

It is no doubt a virtue of any philosopher to be clear in the presentation of her ideas and arguments. If this is lacking, then one spends much effort

trying to decipher the meaning of a text, which leaves fewer resources of time and energy for evaluating the ideas or arguments themselves. Some of the most celebrated philosophers in the western canon, such as Hegel and Heidegger, are frequently unclear and sometimes simply obscure. In my experience, texts and seminars on such figures are chiefly devoted to figuring out what in the world they were trying to say, rather than examining whether what they say is true, justified, or valuable in some way.

Hegel offers perhaps the most notorious example. Regarding the "Hegelian pseudo-wisdom," Schopenhauer says "that its content is the most shallow, meaningless verbal rubbish of which blockheads have had their fill, and that its delivery in the works of the author himself is the most repulsive and nonsensical gibberish, indeed reminding us of the rantings of madmen" (Schopenhauer, 2014). Perhaps Schopenhauer is unfair to the substance of Hegel's philosophy, but it is hard to disagree that its presentation is problematic. It is safe to suppose that the average reviewer would be rather annoyed by Hegel's writing.

### 3.6. Summary

When we survey the work of the important figures in the history of philosophy, we certainly find interesting ideas, novel insights, and even some powerful arguments. We also find bad arguments, implausible ideas, confused concepts, falsehoods, and lack of clarity. Like intelligent human beings in general, the supposedly great philosophers are flawed thinkers who commit some enormous blunders. Briefly put, they aren't that great.

## 4. THE TIMING HYPOTHESIS

If the "great" philosophers of history were not geniuses who occupy a superior intellectual space compared to the rest of humanity, then what were they? On my hypothesis they were just intelligent people who happened to be in the right place at the right time in the history of thought. We may call this the "timing hypothesis." As it happens, the figures in the history of philosophy who are universally acknowledged as important are typically those credited with presenting and defending novel ideas that turned out to be influential. Examples include Aristotle's appropriation into Scholastic thought, Locke's rejection of innate ideas, Hume's noticing some problems with alleged knowledge about causal relations, and Kant's transcendental idealism.

These ideas have undeniably been of great intellectual influence, and this

is so even when the foundations of those ideas are shaky. Take Kant's "Copernican revolution," for example. As he says,

> Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to find out something about them a priori through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this presupposition, come to nothing. Hence let us once try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition, which would agree better with the requested possibility of an a priori cognition of them, which is to establish something about objects before they are given to us (Kant, 1998).

This is no doubt an interesting and original idea, but the account that Kant develops in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is full of problems: the arbitrariness of the categories, the mysterious nature of the schematism, the apparent circularity in both the refutation of idealism and "solutions" to the antinomies, to name some of the more famous issues.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant conveniently discovers that we are acquainted with the moral law via a supposed "fact of reason," effectively begging the question against those who might take this alleged acquaintance to be the product of sentiment or education. The fact of reason is crucial to Kant's argument, so it is rather problematic that he does not really defend it. In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant claims that the various formulations of the categorical imperative he offers are ultimately equivalent, even though one would never guess that from reading the formulations themselves. A great deal of scholarship has gone into attempts to show that, contrary to all appearance, Kant was correct in this claim, as if he had a clear account of their equivalence in mind but just did not communicate that to his readers (Geiger, 2015). This matter has given rise to an extensive discussion in the literature, with various authors providing competing accounts of what Kant actually means (Aikin, 2022; Bagnoli, 2021; O'Neill, 1989; Rollin, 1976; Stratton-Lake, 1993; Von Platz, 2016). But here is a more plausible take: Kant had a vague idea that those several formulations should come to the same thing, but he had no clear account of how they actually were equivalent. Perhaps Kant was just mistaken, and perhaps there is no exegetical use in torturing the text until some sort of equivalence is produced.

Finally, we might consider Kant's racism, which is especially virulent in his pre-critical work, such as his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and*

*the Sublime*. Sometimes it is asked how someone so brilliant could have believed such stupid things. This is indeed puzzling if we suppose Kant to have been a special genius, removed from the category of other educated individuals of his time. Surely such a person would notice that racist beliefs are unjustified. If we instead suppose that Kant was no genius but just another smart person of his age, his defense of racist conventions is not surprising.

Why is Kant considered to be such an important philosopher? According to the timing hypothesis, Kant is important because he was the person who first presented certain interesting ideas in the history of thought, such as transcendental idealism, the categorical imperative, and a new notion of teleological judgment. The timing of his ideas was opportune, offering potential solutions to debates between rationalists and empiricists, for example. Many of the issues addressed by Kant remain relevant to us, so many philosophers remain interested in Kant. He rightly receives a great deal of credit for originating some interesting ideas. In short, he had the right ideas at the right time. This is why Kant is of philosophical importance, not because he was intellectually great. Now it might be countered that Kant's greatness lies precisely in what I have just acknowledged, namely his propensity to discover original ideas. There may be some truth to that, but this is not the sense of greatness that philosophers seem to have in mind when they praise Kant and other thinkers as geniuses or towering intellects.

## 5. PROBLEMS WITH THE GREATNESS HYPOTHESIS

Why prefer the explanation of the timing hypothesis to that of the greatness hypothesis? First, the former fits better with the relevant facts. As we have seen, the important philosophers of history can be charged with offering poor arguments, confused concepts, and implausible claims, among other problems. We find these issues in those philosophers' most important and influential works, not just in unpublished notes or juvenalia. The greatness hypothesis has difficulty accounting for these flaws. Why would brilliant individuals commit such fundamental blunders? As we shall, a proponent of the greatness hypothesis has little choice but to engage in a kind of special pleading, offering excessively charitable interpretations for the favored thinkers. The timing hypothesis does not have this problem. Indeed, its proponents would expect historically important philosophers to blunder like everyone else.

Second, the greatness hypothesis encourages some philosophical and scholarly vices, such as applying special standards to some ideas and arguments simply because of their authorship. Often, scholars who study the "great" figures do not treat them as deeply flawed thinkers. Instead, such specialists tend to bend over backwards to find ways in which, despite all appearances, the favored thinker's claims are plausible and their seemingly bad arguments are defensible. This practice might involve appeals to very fine distinctions or to obscure texts, for example. Of course, sometimes such appeals are helpful and appropriate. Perhaps we can better understand what some philosopher was trying to express by attending to some now-forgotten debate in their own time. Often, however, these appeals are strained, especially when the issues are of a logical nature, such as invalid arguments or inconsistent claims. In such cases, we learn little about the history of philosophy, and the exercise of defending the author in question risks becoming merely sophistical.

The fairly standard view that the "great" philosophers occupy their own intellectual league invites strained, implausible defenses that amount to special pleading. Rather than acknowledging that these figures were sometimes unclear, confused, unconvincing, or simply wrong, many scholars employ something like the following:

> The Principle of Excessive Charity: Interpreting a text in a manner that is most favorable to its author, even when this requires deeply implausible exegetical maneuvers.

Anyone who has been to a conference on some specific figure or historical period in philosophy should recognize this. Many talks point out an apparent problem but immediately assume that there is more to the story, often requiring extensive detours and very charitable interpretations or assumptions. The possibility that some philosopher just made a mundane mistake is almost never even considered.

Yet much of the time, the most plausible explanation *is* mundane: Kant was inconsistent and *ad hoc*, Hegel did not quite know what he wished to say, some of Mill's arguments were ill-considered, and so on. Why shouldn't such unflattering things sometimes be true of the "great" philosophers? They are certainly sometimes true of the rest of us. The answer might be that these figures are not like the rest of us, but we have just sampled a variety of problems that can be found in their work. There is a great deal of evidence that the important figures in the history of philosophy were flawed thinkers, and thus the application of a special standard of interpretation to them seems unwarranted. The peer-review

test offers a way to avoid such special pleading, because it requires us to attempt to consider the ideas and arguments of the "great" figures on their own merits.

## 6. THE VALUE OF STUDYING THE "GREAT" PHILOSOPHERS

Nothing I have said implies that we should abandon study of major figures in the history of philosophy. There is obviously much of interest in Plato, Locke, Kant, Nietzsche, and the rest, both philosophically and historically. However, we should engage in that study with a more realistic understanding of those figures, guided by the timing hypothesis. This would have several implications for how we study and teach these figures.

First, we would place more value on the creativity of philosophers than is usually the case. If the timing hypothesis is correct, then the important figures in the history of the discipline are those who proposed new ideas that have proven interesting and influential. It takes a great deal of creativity to produce new ideas, but creativity is not something that philosophers tend to value highly in comparison to, say, intellectual rigor. If the timing hypothesis is adopted, then we should start to place more emphasis and value on the creativity of past thinkers. Presumably, we should do the same for contemporary thinkers, but that is beyond my scope here.

Second, after adopting the timing hypothesis, we would be less credulous when it comes to reading the "great" philosophers. Again, Kant seems to say that all his formulations of the categorical imperative are equivalent, but that certainly looks to be false. Instead of thinking that Kant must have had something consistent in mind, and then using the principle of excessive charity to find what that might be, we would be more open to the possibility that Kant was simply inconsistent. After all, on this hypothesis, we are supposing him to be someone who had interesting ideas at the right time, and there is no reason to think that such a person would not make false and inconsistent claims.

Third, with the timing hypothesis we would be more open to piecemeal appropriations of the great philosophers, accepting some of their ideas and rejecting a great many more. Some will bristle at this suggestion, believing that we ought to comprehend and either accept or reject a thinker for the totality of their thought, or at least that we ought to treat that as a regulative ideal. After all, many of the great figures were systematic thinkers. Yet it is extremely unlikely that any single philosopher got everything right. Given the many incompatibilities among the various philosophers, it is virtually

certain that almost all of them are mistaken about some things, probably a great many things. Again, this is to be expected on the timing hypothesis. If the important figures are to be accepted or rejected for the totality of their thought, then we will have to reject all of them, or nearly so. That would be a shame, for it would abandon a great many interesting ideas along with the rest of those bodies of work. On a piecemeal approach, conversely, we would be free to pick and choose what we find valuable, interesting, or defensible. Of course, this should not be arbitrary, and the appropriator would need to offer some argument as to why the borrowed idea is worthwhile once extracted from the "great" thinker's work.

One might ask whether the various imperfections of the "great" philosophers undermine their philosophical contributions. I do not think so. In fact, a more modest estimation of these historically important figures should allow us better to appreciate their genuine contributions. In keeping with the piecemeal approach, we might recognize certain positions, questions, and arguments as important and interesting while discarding others. Perhaps, for example, elements of Mill's political philosophy remain valuable, even if his argument for the principle of utility is best left behind. This would not involve dismissing Mill entirely. Instead, philosophers who take this approach would attempt to appreciate Mill for his genuine contributions. Of course, there will be disagreement over just which arguments are good or bad, or which ideas are interesting or trivial, but the approach I am advocating would be open to rejecting some, and perhaps much, of any philosopher's work. This would open a new area of research in the history of philosophy, a kind of critical project in which scholars seek to winnow the most valuable aspects of past figures' thought.

Finally, it might be objected that on the piecemeal approach we would not "really" be Platonists, Kantians, Hegelians, or whatever. So what? If the timing hypothesis is correct, it would seem ill-advised to follow any particular philosopher, for they were flawed thinkers. Instead, we should seek to learn what we can from these imperfect, highly fallible minds.

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