

Philosophical Plumbing

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Is philosophy like plumbing? I have made this comparison a number of times when I have wanted to stress that philosophising is not just grand and elegant and difficult, but is also needed. It is not optional. The idea has caused mild surprise, and has sometimes been thought rather undignified. The question of dignity is a very interesting one, and I shall come back to it at the end of this article. But first, I would like to work the comparison out a bit more fully.

Plumbing and philosophy are both activities that arise because elaborate cultures like ours have, beneath their surface, a fairly complex system which is usually unnoticed, but which sometimes goes wrong. In both cases, this can have serious consequences. Each system supplies vital needs for those who live above it. Each is hard to repair when it does go wrong, because neither of them was ever consciously planned as a whole. There have been many ambitious attempts to reshape both of them, but existing complications are usually too widespread to allow a completely new start.

Neither system ever had a single designer who knew exactly what needs it would have to meet. Instead, both have grown imperceptibly over the centuries, and are constantly being altered piecemeal to suit changing demands, as the ways of life above them have branched out. Both are therefore now very intricate. When trouble arises, specialized skill is needed if there is to be any hope of locating it and putting it right.

Here, however, we run into the first striking difference between the two cases. About plumbing, everybody accepts this need for specialists with painfully acquired technical knowledge. About philosophy, people—especially British people—not only doubt the need, they are often sceptical about whether the underlying system even exists at all. It is much more deeply hidden. When the concepts we are living by function badly, they do not usually drip audibly through the ceiling or swamp the kitchen floor. They just quietly distort and obstruct our thinking.

We often do not consciously notice this obscure discomfort and malfunction, any more than we consciously notice the discomfort of an unvarying bad smell or of a cold that creeps on gradually. We may indeed complain that life is going badly—that our actions and relationships are not turning out as we intend. But it can be very hard to see why

this is happening, or what to do about it. This is because we find it much easier to look for trouble outside ourselves than within. It is notoriously hard to see faults in our own motivation, in the structure of our feelings. But it is in some ways even harder—even less natural—to turn our attention to what might be wrong in our ideas, in the structure of our thought. Attention naturally flows outwards to what is wrong in the world around us. To bend thought round so that it looks critically at itself is quite hard. That is why, in any culture, philosophy is a relatively late development.

When things go wrong, however, we do have to do this. We must then somehow readjust our underlying concepts; we must shift the set of assumptions that we have inherited and have been brought up with. We must restate those existing assumptions—which are normally muddled and inarticulate—so as to get our fingers on the source of trouble. And this new statement must somehow be put in a usable form, a form which makes the necessary changes look possible.

That is the need that philosophy exists to satisfy. It is *not* just a need felt by particularly highly-educated people. It can spoil the lives even of people with little interest in thinking, and its pressure can be vaguely felt by anyone who tries to think at all. As that pressure becomes fiercer, people who are determined to think particularly hard do sometimes manage to devise a remedy for this obscure discomfort. Time and again in the past, when conceptual schemes have begun to work badly, someone has contrived to suggest a change that shifts the blockage, allowing thought to flow where it is needed.

Once this has happened, the bystanders tend to heave deep sighs and say, 'Aha—of course. I knew that all along. Why didn't I happen to say it before?' (Sometimes indeed they think they have done so . . .) These new suggestions usually come in part from sages who are not full-time philosophers, notably from poetry and the other arts. Shelley was indeed right to say that poets are among the unacknowledged legislators of mankind. They can show us the new vision. But to work the new ideas out fully is still a different kind of work. Whoever does it, it is always philosophical business. It needs, not just a new vision, but also the thorough, disciplined articulation of its details and consequences.

Much of this work is boring, and it can sometimes prove astonishingly long and difficult, but it is absolutely necessary. Any powerful new idea calls for a great deal of change, and the more useful that idea is going to be, the more need there will be to work out these changes fully. For doing this, it really is very helpful to be acquainted with other visions and other sets of changes, to have some background training in the way past conceptual developments have worked. There have been some self-educated philosophers who did not have the advantage of this

background—Tom Paine was one—but the work is much harder for them.

Great philosophers, then, need a combination of gifts that is extremely rare. They must be lawyers as well as poets. They must have both the new vision that points the way we are to go and the logical doggedness that sorts out just what is, and what is not, involved in going there. This difficult balancing-act is what has gained them a respect which is of a different order from the respect due to either kind of work on its own. It accounts for the peculiar prestige which philosophy still has, even among people who are extremely vague about what it is or why they might need it.

Bringing these two functions together is desperately hard. Where philosophy is salaried and professionalized, the lawyer-like skills are almost bound to predominate. (You can examine people to test their logical competence and industry, but you cannot test their creativity.) These skills are then no longer being used to clarify any specially important new vision. Philosophy becomes scholastic, a specialized concern for skilled plumbers doing fine plumbing, and sometimes doing it on their own in laboratories. This happened in the late Middle Ages; it seems to have happened in China, and it has happened to Anglo-American philosophy during much of this century.

This self-contained, scholastic philosophy remains an impressive feat, something which may well be worth doing for its own sake, but it leaves a most dangerous gap in the intellectual scene. For it cannot, of course, prevent the other aspect, the poetic aspect of philosophy, from being needed. The hungry sheep who do not get that creative vision look up and are not fed. They tend to wander round looking for new visions until they find some elsewhere. Thus, a good deal of poetic philosophising has been imported lately from Europe and from the East, from the social sciences, from evangelists, from literary criticism and from science fiction, as well as from past philosophers. But of course, this poetry comes without the disciplined, detailed thinking that ought to go with it.

The living water flows in, but it is not channelled to where it is needed. It seeps around, often forming floods, and it finally settles in pools where chance dictates, because the local philosophic practitioners will not attend to it. In fact, the presence of these alien streams merely exasperates them. They are convinced that the public has no business to ask for visions at all, and that unlicensed merchants have certainly no business to supply them.

So we get a new version of the old 'quarrel between philosophy and poetry', a demarcation dispute embittered by modern professional territorialism and by modern academic specialization. Philosophers are tempted to imitate other academic specialists by defensively narrowing

Mary Midgley

their subject. They follow the specialized scientists who claim that nothing counts as 'science' except the negative results of control-experiments performed inside laboratories, and the specialized historians who insist that only value-free, non-interpreted bits of information can count as history. Ignoring the philosophic howlers that are so obvious in these claims, philosophers in their turn also rule that only technical, purely formal work, published in learned journals and directed at their colleagues, can count as 'philosophy'.

Do they still do this? Much less so, I think, than they did a little time back. In the last few decades, the absurdity of over-specialization, the emptiness of the heavily defended academic fortresses, is certainly becoming more clearly realized in many quarters. But unfortunately, these absurdities are built into hiring and firing and promotion procedures that will take a long time to change, even when the need for change is widely understood. Meanwhile, it needs to be loudly and often said that this contracting of territories, this defensive demarcation-disputing among professionals, is not just misguided. It is thoroughly unprofessional and extremely harmful.

Learning is not a private playground of the learned. It is something that belongs to and affects all of us. Because we are a culture that values knowledge and understanding so highly, the part of every study that can be widely understood—the general, interpretative part—always does seep through in the end, and it concerns us all. The conceptual schemes used in every study are not stagnant ponds; they are streams that are fed from our everyday thinking, are altered by the learned, and eventually flow back into it and influence our lives.

This is not only true of philosophy. In history, for instance, ideas about the nature of social causation, about the importance or unimportance of individual acts or of economic and social factors, are constantly changing. Historians cannot actually be neutral on these questions, because they have to pick out what they think worth investigating. Selection always shows bias, and cannot be prevented from having its eventual influence. All that specialist scholars gain by refusing to attend to this bit of philosophy is ignorance about their own thinking, ignorance of their own commitment and of the responsibility it carries. The same thing is true of science. One has only to think of the part that concepts like 'relativity' or 'evolution' have played in our thought during this century to see this.

But of course, philosophy is the key case, because it is the study whose peculiar business it is to concentrate on the gaps between all the others, and to understand the relations between them. Conceptual schemes as such are philosophy's concern, and these schemes do constantly go wrong. Conceptual confusion is deadly, and a great deal of it afflicts our everyday life. It needs to be seen to, and if the professional

philosophers do not look at it, there is no one else whose role it is to be called on.

Ought we all to be able to do this ourselves, each on our own, on a do-it-yourself basis? This attractive idea probably lies at the heart of British anti-intellectualism. We do sometimes manage this do-it-yourself philosophising, and there is, of course, a great deal to be said for trying. But it is exceedingly hard to see where we need to start. Indeed, as I mentioned, often we find it hard to imagine that anything definite is wrong with our concepts at all.

This is the crucial paradox. Why are we not more aware of our conceptual needs? The difficulty is that (as I have mentioned), once this kind of work is done, conceptual issues drop out of sight and are forgotten. Systems of ideas which are working smoothly are more or less invisible. (This, of course, is what provoked my original comparison with plumbing, another service for which we are seldom as grateful as we might be.) While there are no actual explosions, we assume that the ideas we are using are the only ideas that are possible. Either (we think) everybody uses them, or, if there are people who do not, they are simply unenlightened, 'primitive', misinformed, misguided, wicked or extremely stupid.

It is time to mention some examples. But we need the right ones, and this raises a problem. Our disregard of our conceptual schemes is so strong, so natural, that in order to pick on an instance of what I am talking about, we need to choose a notion that is already making too much trouble to be disregarded. I considered discussing the Machine Model here, but it is now wallowing in too many kinds of difficulty to deal with in this article. Let us instead open a related manhole, and look at the idea of the Social Contract.

That was the conceptual tool used by prophets of the Enlightenment to derive political obligation from below rather than from above. Instead of saying that kings must be obeyed because they were appointed by God, philosophers suggested that the only reason for obeying any kind of government was that it represented the will of the people governed and served their interests. At last, unsatisfactory kings were expendable. The only possible source of civic duty was tacit agreement among rational citizens, each concerned for their own interest—an agreement regularly tested through voting.

After fierce disputes and much bloodshed, this startling idea was quite widely accepted. Once this had happened, questions about it largely ceased to be noticed and vanished under the floor-boards of many Western institutions. On the whole, we now take contractual thinking for granted, and we are not alone in doing that. The authority of contract is, for instance, treated as obvious by the many oppressed and misgoverned peoples all over the world who are now demanding

Mary Midgley

something called 'democracy'. Yet difficulties about that notion do still arise, and indeed they are on the increase. Lately, distinct patches of damp have been arising round it, and there have been some very dubious smells.

For instance—if we rely heavily on the notion of contract we have to ask, what about the interests of non-voting parties? What, for a start, about the claims of children, of the inarticulate and the insane, and of people as yet unborn? What about something that, till recently, our moralists hardly mentioned at all, namely the non-human, non-speaking world—the needs of animals and plants, of the ocean and the Antarctic and the rainforests? There is a whole great range of questions here which we now see to be vital, but which we find strangely hard to deal with, simply because our culture has been so obsessed with models centring on contract. Again, too, even within the set of possible contractors, we might ask who is entitled to a voice on what? What happens to the interests of people in one democratic country who suffer by the democratically agreed acts of another? What, too, about minorities within a country, minorities who must live by decisions they did not vote for (a question which Mill worried about profoundly in his *Essay on Liberty*)? And so on.

Plainly, social contract thinking is no sort of adequate guide for constructing the whole social and political system. It really is a vital means of protection against certain sorts of oppression, an essential defence against tyranny. But it must not be taken for granted and forgotten, as a safe basis for all sorts of institutions. It needs always to be seen as something partial and provisional, an image that may cause trouble and have to be altered. It is a tool to be used, not a final decree of fate or an idol to be worshipped. It is, in fact, just one useful analogy among many. It must always to be balanced against others which bring out other aspects of the complex truth.

This provisionality, in fact, is a regular feature of conceptual schemes. None of them is isolated; none of them is safe from the possibility of clashing with others. All of them, if they are successful in one area, tend to expand and to be used on different material. (One can see this happening all the time with intellectual fashions.) Sometimes the expansion works well, but its success is never guaranteed. The cluster of ideas that centres on the image of contract has been very expansive, generating powerful ideas of rights, autonomy, interests, competition, rationality as self-interest and so forth. It has strongly influenced our whole idea of what an individual is—again, something that we take for granted and rarely think to alter when we run into trouble.

Contractual thinking makes individuals look much more separate than most cultures have taken them to be—more separate, surely, than

they actually are. It says that there is really no such thing as society, that the state is only a logical construction out of its members. By contrast with older organic metaphors such as 'we are members one of another', contract-talk portrays people as essentially distinct beings, free to make just what contracts each of them chooses and to abstain from all others. It opens the way for thoroughgoing individualism.

This is, of course, particularly revolutionary about personal relations, and it has been meant to be so. The defence of individuals against outside interference has been personal as well as political. It has been seen as a deliberate emancipation from all non-chosen obligations, in particular, from allegiance to parents and from lasting marriage-bonds. Because these institutions really had been used for tyrannous purposes, the axe was laid to them too. Systematic contract thinking makes it possible to rule that personal relationships, like political ones, can only arise out of freely negotiated contracts, and that what is freely negotiated can at any time be annulled.

This conceptual move certainly did make possible much greater social freedom, and thereby a great deal of self-fulfilment. Yet it has some extremely odd consequences. Unfortunately, personal relations, such as friendship, do normally have to be relied on to last, because they involve some real joining-together of the parties. Friends share their lives; they are no longer totally separate entities. They are not pieces of Lego that have just been fitted together for convenience.

People are different from Lego. If you have been my friend for years, that friendship has changed both of us. We now rely deeply on each other; we have exchanged some functions, we contain elements of each others' lives. We are quite properly mutually dependent, not because of some shameful weakness, but just in proportion to what we have put into this friendship and what we have made of it. Of course any friendship can end if it has to, but that ending will be a misfortune. It will wound us. An organic model, which says that we are members one of another, describes this situation far better than a Lego model. And what is true of friendship is of course still more true of those personal relationships which are of most importance in forming our lives, namely, our relations to our parents and to our children. We did not choose either parents or children; we never made a contract with either. Yet we certainly are deeply bound to both.

Is this binding a tragic infringement of our freedom? Some twentieth-century theorists, such as the Existentialists, have said that it is, that any mutual dependence, any merging of individual lives, is bad faith. Freedom itself is (as Sartre told us) the only fixed value, the ideal against which all others must be judged. Here, of course, the concept of freedom too has been radically reshaped. Freedom, here, is no longer being viewed as a necessary condition of pursuing other ideals, but as

Mary Midgley

being itself the only possible ideal. It is seen as consisting—not in ability to do things which we independently know to be important—but simply in heroic solitude. In fact, freedom itself becomes, in this vision, almost synonymous with solitude, the undisturbed life of the Lego-piece that has retired under the sofa, existing according to its own chosen principles without interference.

Now no doubt this is a possible ideal. There are hermits who seem to live by it, though they are not many and, of course, it is not very easy to find out whether that is really what they are doing. But this impregnable solitude is certainly a very *odd* ideal, and there seems no reason why the rest of us ought to adopt it. What has made it look impressive is surely something that very often happens over conceptual schemes. A pattern of ideas has been extended from the political field—where it was quite suitable and successful—into the private one, simply because of its success.

Resistance to tyranny, and resistance to the dead hand of tradition, had proved invaluable weapons in the public context. They obviously had some application in the private one as well, so they began to look like an all-purpose remedy there too. Countless parricidal novels were shaped round them, from Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* and the novels of revolt about the First World War on to the present day. But the negative, destructive recipe always needs to be supplemented with something more positive, if people are not simply to give up in despair.

This is what limits the value of the individualistic pattern. It tells us how to reject what we have—which may be very helpful—but it has not the slightest suggestion to make about what we should look for instead. In actual living, we normally do not follow such negative patterns beyond the rebellions of adolescence, to which indeed they properly belong. Left to ourselves, without moralistic propaganda, we quite quickly find that the hand of tradition is *not* always dead, but can sometimes be life-giving, nor are all close relations tyrannous. But we are not left to ourselves, because the morality of our age runs so strongly in destructive channels more appropriate to politics.

Individualistic moralities can make nothing of these cheerful discoveries about benign traditions and good relationships. They merely denounce them as disgraceful symptoms of moral cowardice, and because we are prone to guilt, we readily try to believe them. We cannot, however, easily find alternative ways of thinking to replace them. Organic models, which would probably help us, have for some time been treated with great suspicion because, on the political scene, they had been misused for the defence of tyranny.

With the rise of concern about the environment, this taboo on organic ways of thinking may now be lifting. It may even become possible for our species to admit that it is not really a supernatural

variety of Lego, but some kind of an animal. This ought to make it easier to admit also that we are not self-contained and self-sufficient, either as a species or as individuals, but live naturally in deep mutual dependence. Of course these organic models too will need watching, of course they too can be abused. But if we can once get it into our heads, that a model is only a model, if we can grasp the need to keep correcting one model philosophically against another, then some sort of social life begins to look possible again.

Where is all this taking us? I have mentioned the social contract model as an example of the underlying conceptual schemes that we rely on, and I have so far said two things about it.

First, that this model is merely an indicator of much wider and deeper structures. It is exceptional because it is already making visible trouble, so we are more aware of it than we are of many others. What we chiefly need to notice is the unconsidered mass that lies behind it. I am sorry if that sounds like a rather paradoxical demand to notice what one is not noticing, but really it makes quite good sense—compare the plumbing. The point is, of course, that we need to remember how large and powerful the hidden system of ideas is, so as to be ready to spot any particular elements of it when they do make trouble. People who simply do not believe that that powerful system is there at all really are in a situation much like those who do not believe in the drains and the water supply. The alternative to getting a proper philosophy is continuing to use a bad one. It is not avoiding philosophy altogether, because that is impossible.

Second, I have been saying that this social-contract model, along with all other such models, is partial and provisional. Even the most useful, the most vital of such patterns of thought have their limits. They all need to be balanced and corrected by one another. The strong unifying tendency that is natural to our thought keeps making us hope that we have found a single pattern which is a theory of everything—a key to all the mysteries, the secret of the universe . . . Hard experience has shown that this cannot work. That realization seems to be the sensible element at the core of the conceptual muddle now known as Postmodernism, though it is often obscured by much less useful excursions into the wilder shores of relativism.

This discovery that truth is not monolithic does not really leave us in a sceptical, relativistic welter, because the various patterns overlap and can be related to each other. But it does mean that we need to view *controversy* very differently. An immense proportion of academic time, paper and word-processing power is used on battles between models both of which have their place, instead of on quietly working out what that place is and how to fit them together. Academic imperialism is constantly setting up unnecessary tournaments. Attempts at takeover

Mary Midgley

are very common where scholars are not specially trained to avoid them, and of course these attempts are encouraged when there is a vacuum of serious, wider theorizing. Philosophers themselves may have stopped imitating Hegel, but sages from other disciplines are still at it.

I am, then, using this parallel with plumbing to say that the patterns underlying our thought are much more powerful, more intricate and more dangerous than we usually notice, that they need constant attention, and that no one of them is a safe universal guide. What more should be said about these patterns? Chiefly, I think, that to understand their power we need to grasp their strong hold on the imagination—their relation to myth.

Myths are stories symbolizing profoundly important patterns, patterns that are very influential, but too large, too deep and too imperfectly known to be expressed literally. Sometimes myths are actual stories—narratives—and when they are, these narratives do not, of course, need to be literally true. Thus the social contract myth tells a story of an agreement that was once arrived at, but no-one supposes that this ever actually happened. The story can indeed sometimes be an actual lie, like the forgery of the ‘Protocols of the Elders of Zion’ and the lie will not be nailed until the essence of the myth—the meaning that has gripped the imagination of myth-bound people—is somehow reached and defused.

Examples like these led Enlightenment thinkers to denounce all myths and to proclaim, in Positivistic style, a new age free from symbols, an age when all thoughts would be expressed literally and language would be used only to report scientific facts. But the idea of such an age is itself a highly fanciful myth, an image quite unrelated to the way in which thought and language actually work. The notion of dispensing with symbols is a doomed one. All our thinking works through them. New ideas commonly occur to us first as images and are expressed first as metaphors. Even in talking about ordinary, concrete things immediately around us we use these metaphors all the time, and on any larger, more puzzling subject we need constantly to try out new ones.

Strictly literal talk is in fact quite a rare and sophisticated activity, a late form of speech, hard to produce and useful only for certain limited purposes. It is not by any means the only language used in science. Scientists constantly use fresh models and analogies drawn from outside their subject-matter, and they need to do this all the more vigorously where they are not doing ‘normal science’, but generating new ideas. Whole books have been written about Darwin’s metaphors, and probably about Einstein’s too.

Is all this symbolizing dangerous? Of course it is. Everything fertile and unpredictable is dangerous. Imaginative talk makes it impossible to disinfect thought by confining it in libraries for the use of licensed academics. Thought is incurably powerful and explosive stuff, not safely insulated from feeling and action, but integrally linked with both of them *We think as whole people*, not as disembodied minds, not as computers. All ideas that are of the slightest interest to anybody can have unexpected emotional and practical consequences—consequences that cannot possibly be spelt out in advance. And, without this constant flow of ideas, life would grind to a halt.

Here, if you will believe me, is something more that has made the imagery of water haunt me as suitable for philosophy. Useful and familiar though water is, it is not really tame stuff. It is life-giving and it is wild. Floods and storms have appalling force; seas can drown people, rivers carve out valleys. Then, too, rivers produce fertile plains and forests. Water works at the heart of life, and it works there by constant movement, continually responding to what goes on round it. Thought, too, ought to be conceived dynamically, as something that we do, and must constantly keep doing. The static model shown us by Descartes, of final proofs to be produced by science, proofs that will settle everything, is one more model that has very grave limitations.

So too, of course, does this talk of water. All analogies are imperfect, all of them have faults, all of them do only limited work. I am not suggesting that this one is any exception. I have tried to explain the work that it does do. But to be quite clear about it, we need to look (finally) at the question I raised in starting, the question about dignity.

Is the approach I have been suggesting undignified? The reason why it can seem so is not, I think, just that it is unfamiliar and domestic, but that it postulates *needs*. It treats philosophy, like food and shelter, as something that we must have because we are in real trouble without it. We are perhaps more used to the thought that philosophy is splendid but gratuitous, and that it is splendid because it is gratuitous—something grand and exalted, which people could quite easily live without, but ought to pursue all the same. On this view, intelligent people philosophise because they can see a special kind of supreme value in doing so, and perhaps everybody is capable of seeing this. But this taste is seen as something a bit removed from the rest of life, and independent of it. It is felt that our regard for philosophy ought to be a disinterested one, that there is something mean about dependence.

There really is a point in both these ways of talking, and it is not easy to balance them properly. The idea of disinterested detachment does have its point, but there is a difficulty about it here rather like the one that arises in the case of Art. This talk can sound as if we were describing a luxury, a hobby, an extra. When Socrates said that the

Mary Midgley

unexamined life is unlivable to man, I do not think that he meant just that our species happens to have a peculiar taste for understanding, an unaccountable and noble impulse to philosophise.

That is the way people often do interpret this kind of claim, and it is particularly often brought forward as a reason for doing science. But Socrates was surely saying something much stronger. He was saying that there are limits to living in a mess. He was pointing out that we do live in a constant, and constantly increasing, conceptual mess, and that we need to do something about it. He knew that the presence of this mess, this chronic confusion, is something we do not much want to think about because it indicates the thoroughly undignified fact that we are inherently confused beings. We exist in continual conflict because our natural impulses do not form a clear, coherent system. And the cultures by which we try to make sense of those impulses often work very badly.

So—(said Socrates)—unless we acknowledge the resulting shameful confusions and do something to sort them out, none of our projects, whether grand or mundane, is likely to come to much. This means that we have to look at the confusions where the problems are actually arising, in real life. The kind of philosophy that tries to do this is now called Applied Philosophy. This suggests to some people that it is a mere by-product of the pure kind—a secondary spin-off from nobler, more abstract processes going on in ivory towers. But that is not the way in which European philosophy has so far developed.

Socrates started it by diving straight into the moral, political, religious and scientific problems arising in his day. He moved on towards abstraction, not for its own sake, but in a way that was designed to clear up the deeper confusions underlying these primary messes. The same is true of Kant's preoccupation with freedom, which shaped his whole metaphysic. The direction of metaphysics has always been determined by considerations which are practical as well as theoretical, substantial as well as formal. Metaphysicians who claim to be free from these considerations certainly have not really got shot of them. They are merely unaware of their own motivations, which is no gain at all.

Granted, then, that the confusions are there, is abstract philosophical speculation really a helpful remedy? Are the plumbers any use? Obviously this kind of speculation cannot work alone; all sorts of other human functions and faculties are needed too. But once you have got an articulate culture, the explicit, verbal statement of the problems does seem to be needed.

Socrates lived, as we do, in a society that was highly articulate and self-conscious, indeed, strongly hooked on words. It may well be that

other cultures, less committed to talking, find different routes to salvation, that they pursue a less word-bound form of wisdom. But wisdom itself matters everywhere, and everybody must start from where they are. I think it might well pay us to be less impressed with what philosophy can do for our dignity, and more aware of the shocking malfunctions for which it is an essential remedy.