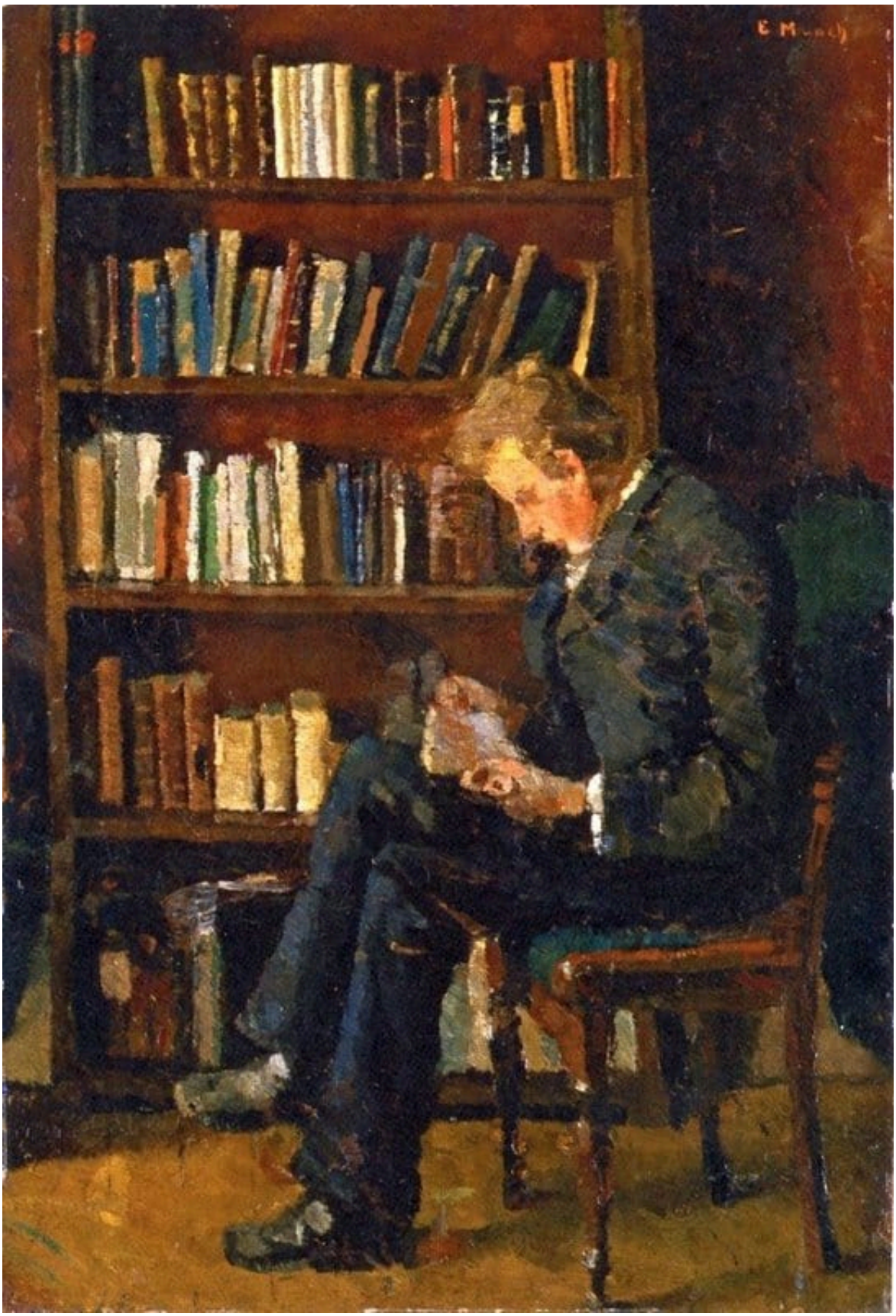
Reflections of a Philosophy Dropout

by David Solway (September 2024)



Andreas Reading (Edvard Munch, 1882-83)

One may review an actual situation by redescribing it

> *without making any mathematical or logical statement.* —John Wisdom, *Paradox and Discovery*
>
> *I cannot put the subject through his paces in my inquiries into his inclinations as I can in my inquiries into his competences.* —Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*

As a student at the university, I intended to become a professional philosopher. I took my quota of graduate courses, learned to smoke a fisherman's pipe like the one cherished by my professor, and celebrated the great philosopher Immanuel Kant's birthday by drinking his favorite Médoc or Listán Blanco. (As Kant remarked in the *Critique of Judgement*, "Sparkling wine from the Canaries is very agreeable.") Puffing and quaffing led to intense speculations on the Transcendental Unity of Apperception and the Antinomies and Paralogisms. For Kant, the time needed for lighting and smoking his briar, as Manfred Kuehn pointed out in his fascinating biography, "was devoted to meditation."

The focus on wine and highfalutin' meditation goes back to Plato's *Symposium*. The pipe in particular is indelibly associated with the pursuit of wisdom. The cigarette belongs to the poet with his nervous, sporadic inspirations—say, Dylan Thomas—and the cigar to the novelist, the verbal tycoon, with his larger and more relaxed rhythms of composition—say, Thomas Mann. But the pipe is the philosopher's congenial instrument. The amount of time and fussing it requires to be kept lit furnishes the thinker with massive intervals of unrelated activity in which to formulate his abstruse and ineffable ideas.

This was especially true of Kantian studies where what might be benignly construed as a scholarly accessory assumed the status of a rigorous prerequisite. Our sessions over the

Critique of Pure Reason, however, in which we tried to emulate our professor's Sobranie meditations, had the opposite effect on us. Smoke billowing from our intellectual chimneys, we coughed a lot and our eyes watered copiously in an enveloping atmosphere of fug and dottle. But we puffed heroically away as we gradually lost touch with the Paralogisms and saw the Axions of Intuition recede into the double obscurity of philosophical jargon and visual occlusion. We had obviously a long way to go to master the art of Transcendental scrutiny.

The seminar room presented another major problem. It had no windows. At the end of a three hour class on the Categories or the Dialectic the hallucinations came thick and fast and I would dash madly down the stairs, too desperate to wait for the elevator, just to reassure myself of the continued material existence of the ginko tree at the top of the campus. It was growing increasingly clear that although my grades were reasonably good my prospects were not, and that a philosophical career might be nothing more than a pipedream.

I attended courses in Ethics where we were taught to discriminate between the cash-value of practical conduct and the rubber cheque of theory. I was deeply impressed by my teacher in Greek philosophy, the kindly and diffident scion of a wealthy family, who had met Bertrand Russell—"good old Berty" as he called him—in his Yale days, discoursed endlessly on the Parmenidean dictum that *Whatever Is, Is*, and was chauffeured to class imposingly ensconced in the back seat of a big, green Bentley, like Plato sailing plutocratically into the court of Dionysus of Syracuse. And I was duly terrified by a lean, dry, inexorable Englishman who operated linguistically on such innocent statements as "Bismarck was an astute politician," disdained a priori concepts, and befuddled us with assertive links, ifs and cans, and illocutionary sentences.

Because the department was of the Analytic persuasion, it compensated for its bias with the occasional expensive French

import. This was how the famous commentator on Sartre, Jean Wahl, found himself scurrying frantically between library and office, classroom and coffeehouse, always on the go, as if to present a moving target or stay out of the firing range of what must have appeared to him as a cavalry of jodhpur'd Positivists. As he was scarcely five feet high, the joke made the rounds that Jean Wahl had committed suicide by jumping off a curb.

The conflict that divided us in those days and set philosopher against philosopher in crusades of internecine pettiness was that between the British and Continental schools, a hangover from the English blockade of Napoleon. Empiricists and Existentialists could not bear to be in the same faculty lounge together. There was an apocryphal story that dramatized the absurdity of the dispute. At a prestigious conference on contemporary philosophy, a British Empiricist condemned the Continentals for vagueness of phrasing and hyperbolic imprecision of thought. "Tell him," said a leading French Existentialist on hearing of this piece of defamation, "that he is a cow."

The reason I did not take sides was that they were all equally bewildering: Kantians, Neo-Thomists, Positivists, Hegelians, Phenomenologists, Ordinary Language philosophers, the "whole sick crew," as Thomas Pynchon would say. To use the choice word of Humpty Dumpty, the teetering founder of the school of Linguistic Analysis, they were of an unbreachable "impenetrability"—which meant, according to this learned arbiter, "We've had enough of that subject, and it would be just as well if you'd mention what you mean to do next, as I suppose you don't mean to stop here the rest of your life." Nevertheless, I persisted, deaf to good advice. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* left me cold. I could not get past his paragraph numerology and agreed only with his conclusion, "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence," because that at least was understandable and because it coincided with

Hamlet's dying speech. As for Husserl's *Ideas*, not a single word registered, and his *Cartesian Meditations* drove me to paroxysms of incomprehension. Switching to Willard Quine was no antidote: identity, ostension and hypostasis made one feel as if one were developing cataracts. Heidegger's *Being and Time* was a disaster and I could see him only as the reverse counterpart of his namesake in Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story *Dr. Heidegger's Experiment*: Hawthorne's doctor possessed an elixir that made people younger but the torpid prose and tortuous thinking of the German philosopher aged me overnight. Clarence Lewis was better. The only problem with *Mind and the World-Order* was trying to divine why it had been written in the first place, as it seemed no more than the unfolding of a colossal tautology. Who had ever doubted that experience was such as to be amenable to conceptual formulation? Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which I tried to breach three times, was no match for Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, which served as both a replacement and a relief.

At one point I decided the only solution was to apply to the oracle himself. Accordingly, I sent off a letter to "Berty" who was living in Wales at the time, offering my services as amanuensis, occasional chess player and loyal apprentice. I described the turmoil and confusion generated by my studies and even confessed to a certain boredom, and that I preferred its anagram, "bedroom." Praising the titan for his indefatigable brainwork, his espousal of noble causes and his legendary excesses in the matrimonial field, I promised to be a good companion, a devoted student, and to let him win from time to time at chess. The letter concluded by congratulating the old man on his longevity but reminding him that even genius as it ages requires infusions of new blood, fresh perspectives and the intellectual buoyancy only youth can provide. The aging genius did not reply, an omission which looked at first like a personal insult and only afterwards as a critical appraisal of my philosophical ambitions.

As the semesters went by, my faith began to waver with ever greater acuity. I was the only one in the class who thought that Samuel Johnson's refutation of Bishop Berkeley's principle of Subjective Idealism, namely, *esse est percipi* or to be is to be perceived, was basically sound. The perambulating doctor had kicked a curbstone and uttered the immortal words, "Thus I refute Bishop Berkeley."

One evening I visited the most brilliant student in the department who had devised a kind of Mercator projection of Hegel's *Phenomenology*. It was a road map of the Absolute, about one meter square, which resembled a cross between a genealogy table and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Everything was neatly marked in black ink. All of Hegel, the whole labyrinthine country of that cluttered and tenebrous mind, lay spread out before me, while my benefactor performed miracles of explanatory acrobatics. When I left, I was more in the dark than ever.

The time had arrived to submit my thesis proposal to the department moguls. I had decided that what was missing in philosophy, as currently practiced and taught, was the sense of wonder and delight which had presumably informed its beginnings. Thus, I proposed a return to origins to which, as a student under the age of twenty, I was manifestly closer than my teachers, who were all over forty. Basing my intentions on the models of Parmenides and Lucretius who wrote in verse, I notified my advisors that I was ready to tackle the enigma of existence in all its primeval and crepuscular splendor and, moreover, would do so in decasyllabic metrics.

Instead of a prefatory Abstract, there would be an epigraph, suitably ambiguous, taken from Milton's *Il Penseroso*: "Where glowing embers through the room/Teach light to counterfeit a gloom." The stares of incredulity and affront which greeted this proposal served merely as a mild prelude to the storm of abuse that broke over my poor, unmortarboarded, anti-philosophical noggin. My betters were both stupefied and

amazed. Philosophy, it seemed, not only began but ended in wonder. In the name of Wisdom, the presiding rota was incontinently Ryled.

Poetry, it must be remembered, operated as a rhetorical dismissive– "That's just poetry," the profs would sneer when crushing some notion or proposition advanced by their romantic catechumens. To address oneself not to the tidily articulated commonplaces of a celebrated British Analyst, preferably P.E. Strawson or A.J. Ayer, but to the richly inscrutable cosmic text authored by a nonentity and philosophical tyro like God, and to suggest verse as an appropriate medium for cognitive inquiry rather than the narrow and exclusionary technolect favored by a club of fastidious empiricists, was about as close as one could get to the kiss of academic death.

I was slowly coming to see that my philosophical career was in considerable jeopardy. Part of the trouble was that I had no Socratic *daimonion*, no inner voice that could always be counted on to tell one what *not* to do. If anything, I was possessed by its polar opposite, a contrary little devil out of Edgar Allen Poe, called the Imp of the Perverse, with a nasal twang egging me on to behave in ways precisely calculated to erect obstacles in my path, like proposing a thesis in verse on the pre-preSocratics. Nevertheless, the temptation of secret gnosis continued irresistible.

I loathed the gnarled and idiosyncratic rhetoric of the German metaphysicians as I admired the ostensibly crisp and limpid prose of the 18th century Brits. The fact that I understood little of what they wrote did not deter me from seeking the invisible grail of wisdom that surely lay at the core of their testimony. And there was always the hope that one day I might experience the moment of visionary consummation, the noematic indescribable, the Kantian *ding an sich*, the Platonic *eidos*, the Aquinian music, in short, paydirt. My little impish voice said, "Go for it." And, credulous as always, I went for it,

enduring yet another year of the Higher Bafflement.

Nothing offered to lighten my miseries, not even the occasional social encounter. I had made friends with a graduate student who intended to become a Neo-Kantian and we would regularly engage in long, pointless controversies over esoteric and insignificant questions, such as whether one could really generalize the maxim of one's conduct and whether one could do away with oneself if it violated the Categorical Imperative. Debating such deep and pressing issues, we found ourselves one evening at a Graduate Society party, smoking our pipes, wearing the obligatory tweed with leather elbows to complement the solemn expressions we assiduously cultivated, pretending to be oblivious to the fact that all the girls we secretly coveted seemed sublimely unaware of the charms of philosophical discourse and plainly preferred the company of sweet-talking literature majors and budding biochemists. Even the psychology and economics students were doing alright compared to us. It came to me in a flash that "doing philosophy," as it was then called, was tantamount to committing eroticide, and that it didn't matter one bit if one could generalize the maxim of one's conduct or not because, whatever conclusion we arrived at, whatever triumph of intellectual insight graced our speculations, there could be no consolation for enforced celibacy. "The parchment philosopher has no traffic with the night," as Elizabeth Smart told us. One might as well take Holy Orders. The doubter was ripe for reality.

Trouble was, I had read my philosophers at least well enough to know that reality was a problematic concept, but this no longer appeared to matter very much. Whether reality could be proven by kicking a curbstone—the same curbstone, in a sense, that Jean Wahl jumped off—or by doubting everything but the Cartesian *cogito* that does the doubting or by bracketing empirical phenomena or by relying on *episteme* rather than *dianoia* to furnish a link with Truth or by catching a glimpse

of the supersensual Forms and the *primum mobile* or by hitching a ride with World-Historical Reason on its way to Berlin, there was no point going it alone. This was like putting Descartes before the horse.

Condemning oneself to an existence without women was nothing short of suffering a terminal deprivation of the real Real. But even though I was by this time convinced that a man's true quest involved penetrating to the essence of muliebrity, aspiring to that condition which Ezra Pound in an early poem described as "after years of continence he hurled himself into a sea of six women," I had not yet succeeded in shrugging off a residual sense of guilt. Perhaps philosophy, like theology, subjected its candidates to harsh preliminary deficits in order to reward them at the end with the gold coin of knowledge and joy. Maybe the girls came later. Or failing that, a vision of ultimate clarity. Perhaps my thinking was still far too muddled to act upon. Should I wait just a little while longer before embarking on new ventures? Would lucidity finally arrive?

The *coup de grâce* was administered by two French professors on loan from the *Université de Montréal* who, riding in tandem, delivered a course on Existentialism and Phenomenology as part of their department's affectation of openness to a language other than French. To listen to the dual explication of Edmund Husserl in broken English and in process of constant mutual interruption was like falling under the simultaneous influence of alcohol and hashish—too drunk to see one's deliriums clearly. I retired early and did not attend another class for the rest of the term.

Learning that the final essay was due, I spent a weekend filling two examination booklets with my cogitations on philosophical luminaries Hams-Georg Gadamer and Wilhelm Dilthey, neither of whom I had ever read, in the gloriously turgid and sibylline language borrowed from Kant's *Prolegomena*. I was counting on the fact that the professors

were as foreign to English as their student was to philosophy, but I did not expect more than a *soupçon* of Gallic amusement. *Quel divertissement*! I received the second highest grade in the course. And that did it. In a blaze of sudden enlightenment, I understood the truth about the philosophical fetish with reality; that is, "reality" was a dividend of not being found out, a credible simulation of what did not exist, a function of A.N. Prior's logical operator "Tonk"—the fudge factor that allowed whatever theory of the world you were brokering to work, a kind of "runabout inference ticket." In a word, one could argue that the cerebral fixation with "reality" was genuinely inauthentic, a prime example of philosophical cathexis. And since as a pseudo-philosopher I was already there, what would be the point in prolonging the redundant? So it was I abandoned the pursuit of the higher wisdom, free at last to indulge my natural laziness and duplicity in good conscience and become a poet. And, as always, richer in memories than in knowledge.

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David Solway's latest book is *Crossing the Jordan: On Judaism, Islam, and the West* (NER Press). His previous book is *Notes from a Derelict Culture*, Black House Publishing, 2019, London. A CD of his original songs, *Partial to Cain*, appeared in 2019.

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