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THE METHOD OF PHILOSOPHY: MAKING DISTINCTIONS

ROBERT SOKOLOWSKI

It is notoriously difficult for philosophers to explain, to people unfamiliar with their discipline, what it is that they do. "I teach." "What do you teach?" "Philosophy." If we were to say "physics" or "history" or even "psychology," our interlocutors would think they had no problem in understanding our profession, but the answer "philosophy" almost always provokes incomprehension and unease. We can evade the issue by saying that as philosophers we study and explain the works of writers like Plato, Aristotle, and Descartes, but this clarification merely puts off the reckoning by one step; what is it that those people have written about?

One reason for this difficulty is that philosophy does not have an identifiable, partial domain as its subject matter. It attempts to think about the widest context, that which is not differentiated as one part from other parts. If it were a partial discipline, it could at least be vaguely comprehended as being something other than, say, mathematics or sociology, something that studies this domain as opposed to that. Philosophy does not define itself by such partialization, however. It leaves nothing out, and hence leaves us without the contrasting foil that would allow us to say what it is. People who are unfriendly to philosophy suspect that it is inflated, presumptuous, and nonrigorous; this feeling is an inadequate but understandable way of recognizing the fact that philosophy is not defined by being partial.

A second reason for the difficulty in saying what philosophy is lies in its method. The method of philosophical thinking is not obvious; we think we have some idea of the manner in which, say, physicists or linguists proceed in their inquiries, but how do philosophers proceed in theirs? It is hard to say; philosophy appears to be an

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arcane intellectual discipline, a form of thinking whose ways are esoteric and obscure. How does it come to know what it thinks it knows?

I wish to help clarify what philosophy is by discussing its method. I will suggest that the form of thinking proper to philosophy is extremely simple: philosophy is the intellectual activity that works with distinctions. Its method is the making and the questioning of distinctions. Philosophy explains by distinguishing. This does not mean that philosophy just asserts distinctions and lets it go at that; rather, it works with distinctions, it brings them out and dwells on them, dwells with them, showing how and why the things that it has distinguished must be distinguished one from the other. Furthermore, since it essentially works with distinctions, philosophy sometimes will show that a certain distinction that has been proposed or taken for granted is unreal or invalid. Philosophy sometimes obliterates distinctions. Such rejection of distinctions, however, is the negative and refutational aspect of philosophy’s work; its positive success consists in achieving a distinction that clarifies a situation or a controversy, a distinction that brings out the nature of a thing. Furthermore, even when denying a distinction, philosophy proceeds by making other distinctions that allow it to deny the one in question.

Let me give some illustrations before proceeding to my argument. My claim is that philosophy does not just discuss and define, say, human freedom; rather, it will examine how responsible action is to be distinguished from the nonresponsible. It does not just talk about politics; it will distinguish the political from the economic and from the familial. It does not just examine the nature of numbers; it will show the distinction between the mathematical and the physical, between the mathematical and the logical, between the numerical and the merely collected. Philosophy does not just investigate substance; it develops the difference between the substantial and the coincidental. It does not simply investigate what propositions are; it clarifies the distinctions between propositions and states of affairs, and between propositions and the mental activities that grasp them.

When we look at what philosophers actually do, we find that distinctions are at the nerve of their argument. Kant distinguishes between sensibility and reason, and then distinguishes imagination from both of them; he distinguishes between moral maxims, rules of skill, and counsels of prudence. Husserl begins the first of his Logical Investigations by making what he calls “the essential distinctions” be-
between expressions and indication-signs, and later between empty and filled intentions. Oakeshott distinguishes between an enterprise association and a civil association; Hobbes distinguishes between the state of nature and civil society; Locke (after denying any real distinction between innate and acquired principles) distinguishes between ideas and the objects that cause them, as well as between ideas of sensation and reflection, simple and complex ideas, and many other forms. Aristotle continuously provides arrays of distinctions, such as those among the virtuous, self-controlled, weak, and vicious, between opinion and wish, between activities sought for their own sake and those sought for some end, and the like.

The way philosophy brings out what it is discussing is by distinguishing it from things that are like it, things with which it is commonly confused. This is how philosophy proceeds, this is the method that it follows. Philosophy does not just make claims; it makes claims based on distinctions that provide the argument for the claims. In medical practice, one speaks of a “differential diagnosis,” in which symptoms of one illness must be distinguished from those of another that resemble the first. The term would be very appropriate for what is done in philosophy: philosophy is the art of differential diagnosis, done for its own sake. I will begin by saying something about distinctions and by showing how pervasive they are in human thought and experience.

I

Most of our thinking presupposes distinctions. When we make an inference, for example, we draw a conclusion from premises, but in doing so we have to take many distinctions for granted: we must presuppose the distinction between the premises and the conclusion we draw from them; we must also distinguish between the subjects and predicates in both the premises and conclusions. These are all different distinctions. When we draw our conclusion, our attention is directly focused on the conclusion and marginally focused on its relationship to its several premises, but a whole series of distinctions has to be functioning in the background. These distinctions are at work even though they are not being explicitly made at the moment we draw our inference.
Indeed, just to say anything at all we have to take distinctions for granted. If I say, "You are tired today," I have to presume a distinction between yourself and your being tired, another between the way you are today and the way you were yesterday or will be tomorrow, another between you and me. I also have to presume a distinction between being tired and being energetic, being rested, and being exhausted. These are not just verbal distinctions, because my statement does not just engage words. In my use of words, I register and display the way you are. For you to be registered as tired, you have to have been differentiated from other things, being tired has to have been differentiated from other ways of being, and you and your being tired have to have been differentiated from one another. The use of any word just to name a thing brings along with itself a halo of distinctions.

Now, what happens in philosophy is that we interrupt our focus on what is being said and we turn to the distinctions that permit the things and states of affairs we are concerned with to appear. We turn to what normally remains latent. We foreground what was in the background. These background distinctions had been made by us at some time in the past, but in all likelihood they would have been made only vaguely; until now, they would not have been fully appropriated by us. We had never made them truly our own (think, for example, how long we made inferences before we explicitly drew the distinction between a premise and a conclusion). Now, in our philosophical reflection, we try to make these distinctions our own in a new and different way.

Philosophy gives the impression of saying things that are both obvious and archaic, things that we have known from way back, even from the beginning. Philosophy tries to get at the things that must be already behind us if we are to know anything at all, things that we apparently have to take for granted. Indeed, the classical parody of philosophy is to make it assert platitudes: philosophy will inform you that it is the soporific power of a certain substance that will put you to sleep, or that it is our humanity that makes us human. The parody implies that philosophy tells you what you know already, while pretending to tell you something you do not know, and that it masks this pretense by making use of exotic words, such as "soporific" instead of "sleep-causing."
This parody has some plausibility because philosophy does bring to the fore things we already know and take for granted; however, it brings them forward in a manner different from what the parody suggests. It brings them forward in a way that illuminates, not one that pretends. Thus, in order to clarify what philosophy does, we will set out to distinguish the genuine activity of philosophy from the parody that we have called to mind.

Suppose I draw a distinction between acting and making, between praxis and poiēsis. This is an old philosophical distinction, found in Aristotle and confirmed and elaborated more recently by Hannah Arendt. Making is the activity in which the maker or fabricator produces a product that outlasts the activity of making. Fashioning a table, a sweater, or a poem are examples of making. When the activity of making is over, the product remains. The point of the activity is to engender the product, which can then be used in various ways. Action, in contrast, does not as such engender a product. It is an activity in which a personal relationship is established or changed, but no tangible and permanent thing need come from it. An insult is an action, and so is an act of generosity, such as giving someone your time or your encouragement when it is needed. Actions do change the way the world is: the insult establishes me as the one who insulted you and you as the one who has been aggrieved, and it leaves us as related in that way from then on; the encouragement establishes me as one who was generous and you as the beneficiary. However, such changes, such adjustments in human relationships, are not products. They are another kind of thing brought about by agents in the world, a kind that must be distinguished from products.

The distinction between making and acting is not like the distinction between something soporific and something that induces sleep. It is a distinction between two kinds, not a distinction between two words for the same kind. To state the distinction between soporific and sleep-causing is to play a shell game with words, but to distinguish acting and making brings out something that is both deep and interesting, even though we as listeners may realize that we knew this distinction all along, and that this difference has to exist, that this is

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1 See Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). Chapter 4 of this book deals with making (which Arendt calls "work"), and chapter 5 deals with action.
how the things in question always had to be. We do not learn anything new through this distinction, but we do learn something important. When this distinction is made, we feel that we have been reminded of something that needed to be called to mind and clarified. Such a distinction is something that we enjoy clarifying and thinking about, even apart from any use we may have for it in clarifying a perplexity we may have at the moment. Philosophy tells us old stuff, but it is interesting and valuable old stuff.

I should mention that the refutational work of philosophy, the denial of a presumed distinction, amounts to showing that what we thought was a legitimate distinction is in fact merely a verbal difference—what we thought were two things are only one thing with two names. One of the branches of the distinction is shown to be absorbed into the other. For example, some writers now claim that the personal is the political; that is, they claim that even though many people have thought that the personal and the political were two different dimensions of human existence, the distinction between the two is not real but only verbal. I disagree with this contention about the personal and the political, but the very debate shows that philosophy works with distinctions and that it tries either to establish or to refute them.

To distinguish between, say, the soporific and the sleep-causing is illegitimate, but to distinguish between making and acting is valid. One way of bringing out the difference between illegitimate and legitimate distinctions is to consider the phrase, “a distinction without a difference.” One might dismiss the contrast between soporific and sleep-causing by saying that it is a distinction without a difference. Let us discuss the meaning of this expression.

2The philosophical force of distinctions, as well as the power of distinctions to illuminate, are best brought out when we consider distinctions that are new to us. The historian John Lukacs, for example, distinguishes between patriotism and nationalism, xenophile and xenologue, public opinion and popular sentiment, international finance and economics. These distinctions prove to be useful in Lukacs’s analysis of current and historical events, but they could also be the theme of independent philosophical reflection; indeed, the presence of such distinctions in his work gives his writing a philosophical as well as a historical tone. See his book, The End of the Twentieth Century and the End of the Modern Age (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1993), 19, 34, pp. 149–51, 161, 181, 209–15. In a psychoanalytical context, the distinction between negation and denial would be a provocative theme for philosophical thinking.
The phrase "a distinction without a difference" is used to disparage a distinction that has been drawn. The phrase signifies that the speaker made a distinction but that the distinction was not genuine. Its invalidity comes from the fact that there was nothing, there was no difference behind it. The distinction was merely a matter of words, or it was based merely on the way things happened to appear to the speaker at the time. The phrase "a distinction without a difference" ontologically elevates differences, which it takes to be solid and real, and it denigrates distinctions, which it suggests are merely apparent.

We should go slowly in dismissing distinctions, however, even in the light of this phrase; the phrase does not imply that all distinctions are without backing. It states that a particular distinction was without support, but it implies that other distinctions could indeed be supported by differences. If one can encounter a distinction without a difference, a distinction that is merely verbal, one can also encounter a distinction with a difference. What are differences and distinctions, that they can be related in this way? How are distinctions distinguished from differences? How do they differ? Would it ever make sense to use the phrase, "a difference without a distinction?"

Deirdre Bair, in her biography of Samuel Beckett, describes the manner in which Beckett directed his plays: "He rehearsed tirelessly, striving for the slightest nuance that would make the difference in his eye between perfect characterization and abysmal failure, a difference usually impossible for others to discern. In this passage, the two instances of the word "difference" could not be replaced by the word "distinction" without a loss of meaning. Why not? What is a distinction?

To put it simply and bluntly: a distinction is a difference that is explicitly displayed. A difference exists between two things, between two kinds, between a thing and its feature, or between a theme and its background. When such a difference is registered or reported by someone, a distinction is made. This contrast is brought out by two statements that a person might make. On one occasion, a person might say, "I want to make a difference," while on another he might declare, "I want to make a distinction." In the first case, the speaker

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wishes to achieve something that then can be displayed, while in the second he wishes simply to make the display. (In the first case he speaks as a man of action, in the second as a philosopher.)

Sometimes a difference is there ready to be displayed, but it may not succeed in coming to light, or it may not come to light for everyone. The difference that Beckett could see between one way of doing something on stage and another way of doing it may not have been discerned by others—indeed, Bair says that it was usually impossible for others to discern it—but it was a difference nonetheless. Beckett was able to make the distinction that was that difference displayed, but others may not have been able to do so. For these others there was a difference without a distinction.

Yet sometimes we are mistaken in our attempt to display a difference. We think we are displaying a difference, to ourselves or to others, but we fail. We try to make a distinction but it misfires; it is not a genuine distinction, only an apparent one. I might, for example, say to someone, “I didn’t call you a fool; I only said you didn’t know what you were doing.” The aggrieved person may well reply that I have made a distinction without a difference, because in the context in which the words were spoken, to say he did not know what he was doing was equivalent to calling him a fool. I pretended to display a difference but there was no difference to be displayed. One branch of the distinction is shown to be absorbed into the other. The lack of a difference shows up when we try to manifest the difference. The presence of an identity asserts itself against our attempt to disclose a difference.

So the difference between a difference and a distinction lies in the fact that a distinction is a difference displayed. What does this mean? What is a difference displayed? Can we clarify this distinction more fully? It is easy for us to misunderstand this issue, and there is one false interpretation I want to exclude right from the start.

The incorrect interpretation I wish to prevent is the claim that differences are “out there” in being, while distinctions are “in here” in our minds: differences are ontological, distinctions are merely psychological. This interpretation is wrong because it improperly subjectivizes distinctions. It makes them to be merely things in the mind. Instead of reducing them in this way, we must learn to think of distinctions, as well as other forms of display, as belonging to the being of things. Distinctions are out there, but in a way different from the

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4 To use Heidegger’s terminology, there is an “ontological difference” between differences and distinctions, just as there is between Seiendes and Sein.
way things and differences are out there; distinctions are differences when they are taken precisely as being displayed by someone to someone.

The point is that we can be concerned with a difference in two ways: first simply as itself, as a difference, and secondly as being displayed, as being manifested by someone, and in this second case we are concerned with it not simply as a difference but as a distinction. Usually this display is achieved through speech. If several people are engaged in a particular situation and you say about one of them, "not greedy but envious," you are manifesting a difference, you are making a distinction. I can either simply see the difference, naively and straightforwardly, or I can take the difference as something that is being displayed by you, as something that is being brought to light by you, and when I do so, I see it as a distinction (not, strictly speaking, as a difference). Yet it is the envious human conduct that is being distinguished from greed, it is not two "ideas in the mind" that are being distinguished one from another.

Two ways of being, two forms of conduct, greed and envy, are being distinguished by you, and I take them as such, as being distinguished by you here and now in this situation. We do not turn away from things to an inner, private mind when we turn from differences to distinctions. We stay with things and with being all the time, but we see these things under a new slant. Everything is public, nothing is just mental.

A distinction is energetic. Since a distinction is a difference displayed, we have to have someone there who displays the difference and also a dative for the display, someone for whom the display happens.\(^5\) The need to have these agents and receivers of disclosure around does not subjectivize or psychologize or mentalize distinctions, no more than pictures are made purely subjective by the fact that they cannot be pictures except for someone who takes them as such. Distinctions remain out there with the differences, but they could not be out there unless datives were around as well.\(^6\)

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\(^5\) The agent and dative for display are what Heidegger calls *Dasein*.

\(^6\) If we accept Husserl's definition of propositions, distinctions would be like propositions. According to the Husserl of *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, a proposition is a state of affairs taken as supposed or proposed by someone. See *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), 122: "Thus a distinction arises occasionally, even for the judge, between the supposed objectivities as supposed... and the corresponding *true* or *actual* objectivities." Formulated in these categories, a difference would be to a distinction as a state of affairs is to a proposition. We can go on to ask the inevitable reflexive question: is the otherness between difference as such and distinction as such a difference or a distinction?
Now, just as we can sometimes say that an object is yellow when it is really green, we can also project a difference when none is there. In such a case we have a distinction without a difference. If I contrast soporific with sleep-causing, or if I say "I don't want to call you a fool, but you really don't know what you're doing," I pretend to display a difference but do not succeed. This does not mean that a distinction is floating around somewhere "in the mind" and that it has no difference "in the world" to back it up. It just means that I tried to display two where there is only one. It is my attempt that fails, it is not a mental entity that fails to have a backing.

III

Having taken some steps to clarify what a distinction is (by distinguishing it from a difference), I want now to turn back to the theme of distinguishing as proper to philosophy, as the method of philosophy. The activity of making distinctions always has something contemplative about it. Whenever we make a distinction, we become somewhat disconnected from whatever practical or rhetorical activity we may be engaged in. Suppose, for example, that I tell you the following story about a husband and wife: "John and Helen were at odds with one another. They had had a terrible quarrel and were both very angry. But anger is not hatred, and even though their coolness toward each other was obvious, we knew that they would work things out."

In this story, I simply narrated one fact after another, but the phrase, "Anger is not hatred," stands out in the middle of my narration. It interrupts the flow of information. It makes a more detached, general point. It is somewhat philosophical. It does not add one more bit of information to my account, but calls a distinction to mind. It may be a distinction that my listeners are quite well aware of, but it may also be a point that they had not adverted to before I made it. Not everyone realizes that anger is not hatred; many people think that if they are angry with someone they must also hate him, but this is not the case, and it is often helpful to draw this distinction for people caught in a difficult personal situation.7

Such a distinction may not be deeply philosophical, but it is moderately philosophical. It is somewhat detached and contemplative. It may be pressed into practical service in the course of this narration of
mine, but to some extent it is done just for its own sake. If you or I were to be intrigued by this phrase, and if we began to ponder the fact that anger is not hatred, we would disconnect much more radically from our process of providing information and begin to speculate more deeply about how and why anger is not hatred. We would begin to "mine" the distinction. We would become more explicitly philosophical, but we already brushed up against philosophy when we stated the distinction in the course of our conversation.

In the example I have just given, the distinction was called for by a confusion that either arose, or that I had good reason to suspect would arise, in the conversational setting in which I was engaged. It was what we could call an occasional confusion or a situated confusion, a confusion arising from the circumstances of my speech. This confusion called for an ad hoc distinction. However, the difference between anger and hatred is of rather general import; it is the type of thing that we could well imagine being discussed in a treatise on the emotions or in a course in philosophical anthropology. We could imagine other distinctions that are even more ad hoc, even more situated than that between anger and hatred. Suppose, for example, that we are engaged in a conversation and I am disparaging one of the participants and you reprimand me by saying, "Be more careful about how you talk; you're not just being ironic, you are getting sarcastic; sarcasm is not irony." It is not likely that one would explore the distinction between sarcasm and irony in a philosophical treatise; it is more limited in scope than that between anger and hatred, but it is still a somewhat philosophical move in the conversation, a slightly contemplative move in the flow of argument. Whenever we make a distinction we come to the edge of philosophy.

Let us say that the distinction between irony and sarcasm is slightly philosophical and that the distinction between anger and hatred is moderately philosophical. There are still other distinctions that are yet more philosophical, very deeply philosophical. They would not just range over a small area of human emotion, nor would they

7 Much psychological counseling consists in helping the client to make distinctions in regard to highly charged emotional relationships. For another concretely situated distinction, imagine a discussion in which one participant becomes very aggressive and the other says, "I thought we were carrying on a conversation and not a debate." His remark brings out a distinction that sheds light on what is going on.
only range over all human conduct; they would range over all discourse and being. The distinction between the essential and the coincidental, or that between something stated and something quoted, or that between a thing and the thing as being intended, or that between a difference and a distinction, are instances in point. Such distinctions are deep because almost all other distinctions take them for granted. If we are to say or do anything at all, these distinctions have to be working in the background, whereas the distinction between anger and hatred does not need to be activated for us, say, to solve a nonlinear equation or a problem in solid-state physics. To reflect on these very deep distinctions seems most obviously to be a contemplative activity, because almost nothing practical can be done with distinctions like those, say, between the essential and the coincidental, or the past and the present. These deep distinctions are what we would most readily call the subject matter of philosophy, but the other distinctions are philosophical as well.

All these distinctions, whether very deep or only skin deep, are provoked by confusions. The skin-deep ones are provoked by rather situated confusions, confusions that surface in the course of a particular argument or exchange. The moderately deep confusions are those that are typical of human affairs generally. People very often confuse anger with hatred, or courage with rashness, or the good with the pleasant, or the political with the economic. The very deep confusions are those that lie in the background of all our speech and action, all our engagements with being.

It is because these confusions hover behind all that we do that philosophical clarifications are called for. Without the confusions we would not need philosophy. If we were just to state a distinction apart from any context that calls for it, we would seem to be expressing a platitude; it is the confusion that gives a philosophical statement its bite. For this reason philosophical observations that are made in the thick of situations that call for them are easily appreciated as insightful, whereas those that are made simply by themselves seem to have no point. They say what everyone seems to know (“Of course the present is not the past; of course anger is not hatred”). Yet perplexing situations provide the confusions that philosophy is to overcome by bringing a distinction to light, by lancing the confusion and showing that one thing is not another—that one thing necessarily is not another. Philosophy needs confusion in the way that virtue needs
vice or, more accurately perhaps, the way virtue needs moral weakness (akrasia) and moral obtuseness. My claim is that whenever we make a distinction, even in the heat of a practical or rhetorical argument, we are edging into the philosophical stance, and when we become rather explicitly philosophical, what we do is to work out distinctions in a careful, thematic, and sustained way.

There are, furthermore, two kinds of confusion. There is the naïve kind, the kind we are blissfully unaware of, and there is the kind that bothers us, the kind in which we know we are confused; we know that something has to be distinguished from something else, but we do not know what. This kind of confusion is very much like trying to remember something we know we have forgotten. This is the kind of confusion that troubles philosophers. Things that other people do not worry about at all are sources of great perplexity for philosophers: what are numbers, what is virtue, what is the accidental? All such issues call for definition, but the basic way in which we get the resources to define them, the basic method by which we get to see what these things necessarily are, is by distinguishing them from something with which they are being confused, something with which we are confusing them. Philosophy is the perpetual struggle to get clear on such issues.

IV

I have made the essential moves in trying to explain what I mean by my claim that the method of philosophy is primarily the making of distinctions. I want now to address a few issues that are still left over, both in order to confirm what I have said and to open up further avenues of inquiry.

First, it might seem that distinctions are too simple a thing to qualify as the method of philosophy. Making distinctions is something we do all the time; surely, philosophy ought to be more radically distinguished from such quotidian activities. In response, I say that there should also be some sort of continuity between our prephilosophical and our philosophical thinking. It is hard to say what this continuity is, but I think that distinctions serve very well to allow philosophy to have roots in the prephilosophical without being reduced to it. The first stirrings of our thinking are found in the activity of distinguishing,
between ourselves and others, between the near and the far, the pleasant and the painful, the consoling and the terrifying, and these distinctions remain unexplored and undeveloped deep down inside us and our worldly engagements. To turn back to them, to bring them to light, is continuous with what we are and with what has manifested itself to us, but it is also discontinuous and new, since we come to possess these things in a new and focused way.

Second, there is a kind of necessity and obviousness in distinctions. There is a kind of self-evidencing that is brought to a very high pitch in the making of a distinction. When we see or are made to see that the political is not, as such, the economic, or that the past is not the present, each of these items stands forth as a kind of vivid necessity. Each could not be the other, and hence each necessarily is what it is. I think that this is where we can legitimately speak of intuition. We intuit a thing, we see a thing in its immediate necessity, not just by looking at it by itself—that would be a kind of misleading metaphysics of presence—but by seeing it both in itself and in its not being something else. An intuition is not a simple grasp of a "one," but of a "one" in the context of a "two." Because we are dealing with a distinction, we are not left with mysterious glimpses that we either have or do not have; instead, we have a kind of reasoning, a kind of complexity and articulation that can be conveyed to someone else through the use of words. The manyness of a distinction allows the simplicity and unity of each item to stand forth in a rational and communicable way. Making a strategic distinction is a form of argument.

There can, of course, be controversies about distinctions, but this does not weaken their force; on the contrary, it shows that they can be reasoned about, but not in the way that we argue and reason when we draw conclusions from premises. Distinctions are not derived from anything else; they are immediate and bear their evidence in themselves. We do not need premises for them as we do for conclu-

\[\text{\footnotesize \textsuperscript{8}}\] Aristotle, Metaphysics 9.10.1051a17–33. Aristotle speaks about incomposites and says that truth in regard to them is like simple contact or touching (\textit{thesisin}). The image he uses makes it look as if we simply absorb a simple thing. I would suggest that in fact incomposites are the branches of a distinction. Each branch at the moment of distinction is incomposite both in itself and in regard to its opposite. As held in contrast it is incomposite. We "touch" one branch not just by itself but in contradistinction with the other. Seeing incomposites as so related to distinctions helps us avoid taking them as floating by themselves and as the targets of a mysterious sort of viewing.
sions, and yet they can be discussed and publicly established or destroyed. To make distinctions is the most elementary form of thinking, and it gets to a level of understanding and being that underlies the making of syllogisms and propositions.⁹

Third, the very ability of a thing to be distinguished from something else is a kind of warrant for its being. Distinctions provide a kind of “ontological argument” for the things distinguished. There are no purely verbal distinctions, except those that are distinctions without a difference. In some cases we may find, after our argument, that we have been dealing with two words for the same kind of thing, but in other cases, when we do make a real distinction, one that holds up with a difference behind it, we find that we know that each thing truly is something precisely because it is not, and is capable of not being, something other.¹⁰ To support this point, try to imagine a distinction between two entirely unreal things. Try to imagine, say, the distinction between kiazos and glubs. If a distinction between fictitious things holds up at all, we will find that what keeps it alive is the surreptitious inclusion of real beings that we have merely dressed up as fictional entities. We can distinguish between Martians and Plutonians, or between Batman and The Penguin, but we can do so only because these imaginary entities draw on many real distinctions. Fictitious and imaginary things can be distinguished from one another because they are at their core parasitic on real things and real kinds. If we were to be able to concoct two truly and wholly unreal things—and this is not as easy to do as the words might suggest—they would, I claim, collapse into one. They both are “the unreal.” There is nothing to distinguish one from the other. I think that the rather low ontological esteem in which we hold distinctions comes from the fact that we think we can easily contrive merely verbal distinctions, that our dictionaries give us loads of distinctions that have nothing to do with things, and that therefore distinctions have little to do with being as such. I

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⁹ The modalities of necessity, impossibility, and negation are present in distinctions; it would be interesting to examine the way in which the modalities of predication can be traced to the modalities of distinctions. I am grateful to John Havens for bringing this issue to my attention.

¹⁰ Instead of saying “capable of not being something other,” we could have said “not capable of being something other.”
think this is a philosophical mistake, and that distinctions are much more involved with being than we commonly realize.\textsuperscript{11}

Fourth, one might object that I have placed too much emphasis on distinctions as the method of philosophy and not enough on what seems to be an equally important activity, the activity of looking for unity, of projecting sameness.\textsuperscript{12} Thales, after all, did not begin by distinguishing; he projected a unity when he said that all things are water. In more general terms, the very search for a comprehensive grasp of things, the attempt to find what is first and greatest, is certainly part of the philosophical effort, but it seems to be more a matter of unification than distinction.

I have two remarks in response to this objection. First, the insistence on unity where others have seen diversity is itself a way of working with distinctions. It calls into question distinctions others have accepted and claims that they are merely apparent or merely verbal, distinctions without differences. Secondly, the move toward unity itself remains incompletely philosophical until it is soldered into place by new distinctions. We must show in what sense the unity we project must be understood, and we do this by distinguishing. Until Thales showed how the water that all things are is different from the water that we commonly know, he was as much a poet as a philosopher. It is only when the kind of unity we are seeking has been distinguished from other kinds of unity that we can say we have made a philosophical point. The search for unity establishes a genus, but until distinctions are made within that genus, full philosophical thinking has not occurred.\textsuperscript{13} What we do when we live the philosophical life is to make distinctions.

Fifth, I would like to address an objection that has often been made by scholastic philosophers to my proposal about distinctions as

\textsuperscript{11}Two further issues concerning distinctions are the following: (1) What is the relationship between historical contingency and essential necessity as regards distinctions? Certain historical circumstances may call for a particular distinction, but the distinction itself transcends the historical situation. How is this possible? (2) What is the difference between contraries and contradictories as two forms of distinctions? It would seem that the contrary is more basic for intuition, and the contradictory more important for logic.

\textsuperscript{12}I am grateful to Karsten Harries for raising this objection against my argument.

\textsuperscript{13}Thus, Thomas Hobbes says that observing the similitudes of things is the work of "fancy," while observing their differences and dissimilitudes is the work of good judgment. See \textit{Leviathan}, part 1, chap. 8.
the method of philosophy. They observe that, classically, philosophy has been understood as the search for ultimate causes. Metaphysically, this search leads us to God as the cause of beings and the soul as the cause of human actions. In contrast with such a search for ultimate causes, the activity of making distinctions seems rather thin as the work of philosophy; it does not seem to furnish explanations in the way that philosophy ought to do.

I have two remarks in response to this objection. First, the activity of distinguishing is indeed a manifestation of a cause; it brings to light the formal cause of the things we are dealing with. The formal cause is the most difficult of the causes to grasp; Aristotle observes, in his survey at the beginning of the Metaphysics, that his predecessors were least successful in regard to the formal cause. By contrasting what a thing is with what, specifically, it is not, we highlight the formal causality of things, we reach the form that defines what the thing in question is. By making distinctions, philosophy does reach ultimate causes by disclosing the defining cause of the thing in question. Second, when we argue to the first cause for the being of the world or to the soul as the explanation of human actions, the crucial point in the argument lies not in the inferences we make from the effects to the causes, but in our ability to bring out what it is in the things we experience that requires such a cause. What is it in things that calls for a cause of their being, and what is it in human behavior that calls for something like the human soul? We need to establish first the phenomena that call for such causes, and the establishing of such phenomena is done precisely by making distinctions: by showing what dimension in beings requires a cause for their existence, and by bringing out the specifically human aspects of the conduct of this living thing we call man. These manifestations are done through the activity of distinguishing: existence is distinguished from essence, and specifically human conduct is distinguished from the animal. The decisive

14 Metaphysics 1.7.988a18-b22: Aristotle’s complaint against his predecessors is that they only vaguely and imprecisely (amudrōs, mentoi kai ouden saphōs) grasped the various causes, that is, that they did not sufficiently distinguish them one from the other. See Metaphysics 1.4.985a13, and all of chapter 10. Aristotle does not move from sheer ignorance on the part of his predecessors to something entirely new, but clarifies what they confusedly know.
philosophical move is made by distinctions, not by reasoning from effects to causes.\footnote{At the start of this paper, I said that there were two reasons why it is difficult to explain what philosophy is: first, because philosophy does not mark off a partial domain as its subject matter; second, because the method of philosophy is obscure. My essay has attempted to discuss the second of these reasons, but what I have said is relevant to the first as well. The way philosophy attempts to think about the widest context, about the whole, is by distinguishing how the concern with the whole is different from a concern with any of the parts, how speech about the whole differs from speech about a part, and how the whole itself is different from any part. Thus, even in thinking about the whole, philosophy proceeds by distinguishing. Earlier versions of the present essay were given as lectures at Yale University, at a regional meeting of the American Catholic Philosophical Association at Fordham, at The American University as the Hurst Lecture, and at The Johns Hopkins University. I am grateful for questions and comments made at all these forums.}

Sixth and last, making distinctions should be related with another strategy often used in philosophy, the argument by retorsion, in which one shows that a speaker who denies something must affirm it in his very action of denying it. The classic example is Aristotle’s demonstration, in Metaphysics 4 4, that the person who denies the principle of noncontradiction must concede the principle if he is to say anything meaningful (including his denial). This strategy also rests on a distinction, because it shows how one and the same item arises in two modes of presentation: as stated explicitly in what the denier says, and as affirmed implicitly by what he does.

To close this essay, I would like to quote from a letter I once received from Philip Davis, a mathematician at Brown University. We had had a conversation in which I expressed my idea that philosophy essentially works with distinctions. He later wrote to me about it, and included the following sketch of a dialogue that had occurred to him:

R S. Philosophy is the making of significant distinctions.
P D. Why isn’t that just taxonomy?
R S. Your question proves my point.

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