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"Space and Air in the Mind"

Anthony Weston

> Philosophic study means the habit of always seeing an alternative, of not taking the usual for granted, of making conventionalities fluid again, of imagining foreign states of mind… Touchstone's question, "Hast any philosophy in thee, shepherd?" will never cease to the one of the tests of a well-born nature. It says, is there space and air in your mind, or must your companions gasp for breath whenever they talk with you?
>
> --William James[1]

> I never knew that Philosophy could be like this!
>
> --A college philosophy-major friend of my daughter's

1. "Space and air in your mind"? Please don't read the epigraph from William James as standard boilerplate. Read it again a few times. It's actually – I say – *radical*. Philosophy is the habit of "always seeing an alternative"!? Really, literally? "Space and air in your mind"!? *What is this?*

2. Reframing the question. Is there perhaps a hint of essentialism in the question "What and Who is Philosophy for?"? In any case I don't propose to debate over a correct answer on the assumption that Philosophy must have a single, fixed or necessary character.

[1] William James, "The Teaching of Philosophy in our Colleges", originally in *Nation* 21 Sept. 1876, p.178, reprinted in James, *Essays in Philosophy* (Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 4.

The question I propose to answer instead, anyway, is: *What can (or even, must?) Philosophy be today?* For: who says that Philosophy's possibilities are used up – or are even yet fully imagined? Especially now, in a world so desperately on edge and at the same time with so many new possibilities, both evident and unsuspected? I prefer to ask something juicier, like: *What can free-spirited, inventive, and full-hearted young philosophers (like…you?) do at this moment in the life of the culture?* What might we help to *emerge* in the current and mutually-accelerating *emergencies?*

3. "Space and air in the mind." James speaks of the kind of thinker who leaves their "companions gasp[ing] for breath whenever they talk with [them]". You know the type: it's not just the level of abstraction, but something more relentlessly dismissive, as well as self-preoccupied, in their attitude and methods. That attitude really *can* suck all the space and air out of the room, out of our minds. I am going to assume that readers of this journal fervently wish *not* to be or become that type. We *do* want "space and air in our minds", and (hopefully?) also a sense of welcome, a certain fascination with the world's endless *frisson*, and an eye for possibility everywhere, a spirit of openness and spontaneity rather than self-sure (or rather, truly, underneath, self-*un*sure) insistence on closure. — And further suppose this is not just a disposition, but an achievement, a project, something we can (must) also specifically train and teach for? It doesn't just happen… and even if it sometimes does, why wouldn't we systematically and energetically teach for more? Yet how many teachers in the profession today deliberately design their classes with "space and air" as the explicit, designed-for goal and, yes, touchstone? Have we even begun to imagine what such teaching could look like?

4. Socratism. Philosophy, supposedly the study of "the eternal questions"? For me the very suggestion almost makes the leaves flutter back up onto the agora's trees (did it have trees?), and calls forth Socrates himself, marching in again to waylay and cross-examine those who think they know… what really is virtue, or the essence of justice, or how to die.

Still… really? It may also be that "the eternal questions" are far more culturally and historically contingent than the tradition assumes. Only the smallest shift of focus and we can see that even Socrates, who we usually think of as out there limning Philosophy itself, was in truth utterly a creature of his place and time. Overweening Athens, finally defeated after a grueling and improvident war, narrowly escaping utter destruction, looking back at a democracy that veered into imperial adventurism, now weighing a new set of would-be leaders whose claim to "know" was at least as flimsy as the previous generation of over-confident demagogues… sure, Athens needed gadflies. And Socrates's way of gadflying, with its apparatus of abstract definitions and argument by counterexample and all the rest, was

probably not the worst way to proceed. But the *best* – even then? Even close? Does every age – ours, for example – need such gadflies? (Does anyone think democracy needs undercutting today?) Or is it possibly Socrates himself to whom is James slyly referring when he speaks of "leaving your companions gasping for breath whenever [you] talk with them" – for even Plato's dialogues sometimes give hints of that. That is, maybe *not* what Philosophy really ought to be? After all, can it really be said that Socrates *succeeded?*

5. Essentialism and all that. Greek ethics, from Plato's Republic to Aristotle's theory of virtue, telling us that virtue is living true to your nature and "function" – it *is* obvious, isn't it, that this is an ideal rooted in one tiny and temporarily ascendant subclass in Athens, the very model of a one-off ancient city-state? Some latter-day free spirit might ask: what if a system of social classes with determinate and fixed enough "functions" to license this kind of derivation actually ought to be *overthrown*, rather than ever more lovingly or exactly "applied"? Even the idea that the Good is something to have a theory about, or a phenomenon (even, thing) in the first place, is arguably culturally and historically contingent. Other times and cultures – including even our own culture, European I mean, for most of its history – have conceived a whole range of specific goods or principles of proper action, rooted in a manifold of specific relationships and situations, with no necessary overarching, theoretical unity. Despite its deliberate Platonic/essentialist echoes, the project of ethical theory as presently understood by philosophers is actually not "eternal" at all, but was more or less invented by the Victorian-era utilitarian Henry Sidgwick.[2] Not that we were ever told this in graduate school, where the theoretical project just *was* ethics. Though today it is typically read back into the whole history of ethics, may I say that I have my doubts about this as well? Mill and Kant, for example, might be better read as engaging the question of the individual in mass society – a specific phenomenon, emergent with the mass democracies, and not necessarily the only or key question any more of our own times. And perhaps already the age of Sidgwickean and maybe even utilitarian ethical theories likewise is passing.

6. Old questions and new. It may helpfully unsettle us to remember that for a good millennium or more – far longer than any of the currently-familiar questions have lasted – the prime and seemingly "eternal" philosophical question in Europe was the nature of God. Not God's existence – that was a given – but how God's foreknowledge and omnipotence could be compatible with evil, free will and the like. For most moderns these problems have become just curiosities. Not "solved" – they just ceased to matter. Meantime new questions come to

[2] For a sharp critical account, see Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics* (Routledge, 1998), p. 35ff.

the fore. Today we are only beginning to conceive of Earth as a whole, fabulously complex and interconnected system that is also deeply imperiled. At the same time and for much the same reasons we are also beginning to understand Earth as one planet among literally billions of others just in our galaxy that may bear life. Who of our philosophical predecessors could have imagined these deliverances of modern ecology or astronomy as anything more than idle fantasies? Or the new questions they pose – how must we live in such a place, as part of such a system? These questions are so far from "eternal" as to be barely be acknowledged (if not actively avoided) by the profession even today. They seem remote from any world Philosophy's founders knew. Yet surely they pose the most pressing and wide-angled contemporary questions. Again it seems we need a radically different frame for "Philosophy".

7. How it all hangs together. According to the mid-century Pragmatist Wilfrid Sellars, Philosophy aims to "understand how things, in the broadest possible sense of the term, hang together, in the broadest possible sense of the term".[3] It is not defined by or limited to any specific questions or kinds of ideas, but by the project of making our leading ideas coherent with each other, in some all-inclusive and overarching picture of things. An ambitious and indeed elegant conception of Philosophy, I must say. The work is vital, especially when it seems that things "in the broadest possible sense" are also prone to falling apart (don't we know), also in the broadest possible sense. Nevertheless I argue that there remains a profound epistemic conservatism in the very idea. Serving the coherence of our leading ideas pushes us toward caution and epistemic self-protection. Philosophy too readily becomes a mode of *resistance* to change. The imperative is to try to assimilate the new to the old, to shift the epistemic center of gravity as little as possible, normally… while what does not assimilate naturally remains an outlier, dubious and marginal. *But what if, sometimes, what does not cohere in this way is actually where the philosophical action is?* Or, ought to be…

8. The disruptive imperative. Maybe an entire cultural project is built around the supposed superiority of a culture and people. Its religion, art, (alleged) history, and even its science may be bent to the purpose of bulwarking and extending what at the extremes becomes a supremacist worldview. Thus it seems that a deeply problematic set of ideas can nonetheless "hang together" all too well. We don't want to be invited to celebrate the coherence of such a world. We don't even want merely to try to unglue it only slowly and from within. The primary philosophical impulse *could* be to make ourselves more insistent and

[3] In "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man", *Science, Perception and Reality* (RKP, 1963), p. 1.

imaginative epistemic disrupters, advancing an alternative non-supremacist vision that firmly and energetically breaks with that all-too-coherent fantasy of supremacy.

— That alternative picture had better be coherent too, for sure, but we have learned from Thomas Kuhn's account of scientific paradigm-change[4] that initially it probably will *not* "hang together" as well or as thoroughly as the reigning but possibly failing one, which after all has the advantage of intellectual and other investments by generations of previous thinkers. So necessarily the *first* steps have to be more venturesome, edgy, disruptive. "Space and air" may come as a shock, even as kind of leap into the uncertain and unknown…

9. This story is about us. Supremacist culture may seem an extreme and forced case. Arguably, though, it is precisely our situation with respect to the most pressing issue of all today. Today we may have the uneasy sense that *human* supremacism is not only squeezing the natural world dry but also has cut us off from our own deep natures. Yet as to the sheer cultural center of gravity, human supremacism (more politely called *anthropocentrism* in the philosophical literature) still rules. And how could it not? We inherit two-plus millennia of art, religion, science, a self-reinforcing and deeply ingrained self-distinction from and domination of all of Earth's other creatures and the entire natural world. Today, not surprisingly, despite widespread unease and despite the struggle of some to think beyond it, it is *not* coming unglued from the inside, anyway fast or widely enough. That venturesomeness and imaginative initiative of which we were just speaking, then – mustn't we conclude that *here* above all it is desperately needed?

10. And the fuller story is still worse. The problem, again, is not just reticence. It is that philosophy too readily becomes a mode of *resistance* to change – at its most notable, leading the resistance to ungluing, gumming up the works with ever more elaborate or desperate rationalizations of anthropocentrism. On a coherentist model, alas, this can actually look like good practice. The cautious, moderate, responsible thing to do is to try to sustain the comfortable coherence of long-established ways of thinking and acting. Resist any drastic changes! Let the wheels turn slowly. I can't tell you how many times philosopher-colleagues over the years have said, in the most well-meaning or pointedly puzzled way, things like "let's just make a little more room for valuing nature without going so far as overthrowing anthropocentrism." That is, let's preserve human supremacy while being a little nicer to, or just a little more prudent with, nature. The phrases "let's just… without going so far as…" give it all

[4] Famously in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 1962).

away. It's a lower-profile form of circling the wagons, maybe, but it is still defensive and fundamentally dismissive at its core.

11.Yet so fundamentally defensive a response would not be acceptable in defense of, let's just say, white supremacy. We already understand at least sometimes that sharper breaks are needed… and we might just want to save our agile philosophical footwork for something more worthy as well … like working out serious *alternative* possibilities, both conceptual and practical. I do not claim that James himself had something as dramatic as this in mind when he declared that "Philosophic study means the habit of always seeing an alternative", but *we* may nonetheless reread him in such a way for our times, now. Thus we begin to glimpse a Philosophy willing, even eager, to *move*: a Philosophy with an exploratory, imaginative, possibilistic strand missing in Sellars's picture. *Sometimes "going so far as…" is exactly what we should or must do – and it can be the job of Philosophy to lead the way* (because who else?) or at least to open some ways.

— Add to this that the very roots of our world-estrangement arguably trace back to Plato's dualistic and world-rejecting metaphysics, insistently taken over into Christianity, so as to almost constitute the armature of philosophical thought itself, even today – a common lament in the environmental literature. It's clear that Philosophy has a lot to live down. Let's get on with it, shall we?

12. Puzzle Philosophy. When I began professional training in Philosophy, we knew what Philosophy was *really* for: conceptual clarity, sharpness, argument analysis. The field was emphatically not supposed to be about Eternal Questions, and we certainly weren't encouraged to much care how things in any broad sense hung together or not either. Taking up an issue meant clarifying the key concepts involved, forming theories or making generalizations to be tested by "application" and (especially) counterexample… a philosophical industry in itself. This last method – the invention of bizarre kinds of puzzles – has become a leading strand in the profession. Certainly it sometimes seems that high-level, intellectually stimulating, and inventive puzzle-solving (or, even better, *-posing*), sometimes with some received theory on the chopping block, though not necessarily – is the most prized professional method and skill. Whole research programs are driven by this model: those in the know might think of "Gettier problems", "grue", Bostrum's Simulation Hypothesis (likely we are just living in some kind of computer simulation), or highly tailored moral dilemmas such the apparently ubiquitous "Trolley Problem":

> A runaway trolley is rolling down toward five people on its tracks. You – yes, for some reason, you – are standing at a switch that could switch the trolley to another track on which there is

only one person, saving five though killing one. Should you pull the switch?

Does it make a difference how many die, or how implicated you are in "acting" as opposed to merely letting something happen?[5] This kind of "Dilemma Ethics" brings a whole family of related puzzles into play, like sinking ships without enough lifeboats (who lives, who dies?), or stealing lifesaving drugs from greedy pharmacists (ye olde "Heinz Dilemma").

13. Staying on track. But the aim of this "puzzling" is emphatically *not* to open up any sort of space and air in practical problems either. Instead, the upshot is every bit as conservative as Sellars's coherentism – epistemically conservative, I mean, though it turns out that a notable form of political conservatism is not far behind.

— First point: The moral dilemmas that get the most attention barely bear on the real challenges of moral life. When was the last time you were in charge of offloading the *Titanic*? …as opposed, say, to trying to figure out how to honor family loyalties when they conflict with others, or reduce racial biases of our own and that are all around us, or any of the dozen or two other ways that ethical questions come up for us daily. In fact, the typical move is to impatiently foreclose any expansive or creative practical thinking by simply adjusting the puzzle… often while hinting, if not declaring outright, that even thinking about such moves shows a basic misunderstanding of "the" question itself (and I know, I have been there). Suggest running down the trolley tracks to move the five off, say, and you'll be told *no, you just have to pull the switch or not.* How about yelling to warn them? *Well, suppose they're deaf…or tied to the rails.* (I know this sounds like a parody of old Westerns – and in fact it turns out that it was almost *only* a movie trope – but I am not making it up: it is actually one standard way of varying The Trolley Puzzle in the "experimental philosophy" literature). The aim *is* to keep the two supposed options alone in focus, starkly distinct and the only options, and pre-adapted to prevailing ethical theories. Thus even the puzzle-posing mode of Philosophy proper is still imagined to mostly stand apart from the turbulent and tangled concrete world, only occasionally stooping down into actual moral life in search of a little flesh to put on its abstract philosophical bones.

14. Looking upstream. There is a deeper problem with Dilemma Ethics' resolute impracticality too, and here is where the politics also come in. Fundamentally Dilemma Ethics takes the puzzles themselves as givens, rather than themselves open to challenge and change. Yet, I argue, *the givenness of the puzzles themselves is often precisely what really*

[5] Judith Jarvis Thomson's "Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem", *Monist* 59:204-17 (1976), is the article that started it all.

needs to be questioned and re-imagined. Sure, ships under-equipped with lifeboats *do* sink sometimes, and pedestrians or children *could* conceivably wander onto trolley tracks just at the moment that you *could* conceivably be standing by the trolley switch. But every useful question about these set-piece scenes is left unasked – and, typically, disdainfully deep-sixed (and again, I've been there) – by this usual framing of "the" problems. *Titanic* did not have enough lifeboats because the laws regulating passenger liners were written at the behest of the passenger lines' lobbyists, making the most of their access to power as well as the hubristic fantasy of an unsinkable ship… which also emboldened the pilots to steam full speed through a known iceberg field in the middle of the night. To see (or see *through*) any of this, though – and to "see alternatives" – we need to "look upstream", probe into the "problem behind the problem" and make the most of the "the give beyond the givens" – all phrases from activist sociology, where (despite, or maybe because of, sociology's origin *as* philosophy) many of the more critical political types seem to have migrated. Or to just plain activism. And of course, once this door is open, what we have is a challenge to the same kind of hubris on a far wider scale today: the onrushing and massive industrial experiment with the entire planet's climate, likewise steaming full speed into the unknown, as it were, while regularly citing the very unknownness of the unknown as itself an excuse for not slowing down. Except of course there are *no* lifeboats if Earth itself goes down.

15. Changing the world. Do we get it yet? If so, wouldn't you suppose that something like a radical Precautionary Principle would be absolutely front and center for philosophy to insist upon? But of course it very likely means *changing the world*… or at least raising that question. The imperative thus inevitably becomes political, social, probably transformative, potentially revolutionary. Not for nothing do some thinkers speak of a coming ecological paradigm-shift or "Great Turning"[6] – the great wheels of change turning *faster*. This is uncomfortable, for sure, but it is also an invitation to far wider exercises in imagination and reconstruction. Yet today those avatars of a "Turning" are regularly and insistently pushed to the fringes of official Philosophy… or beyond… while the professional field is still far more exercised by sorting out the moral complexities of hypothetical runaway trolleys than by the actual runaway climate. Fundamentally rethinking runaway anthropo-industrial-modernism isn't on the agenda. But wouldn't that be the most vital work of our times? …not to put too fine a point on it…

16. The real Trolley problem. Oh, and the Trolley Puzzle? Alright-y then: Why are

[6] Most notably Joanna Macy and David Korten. Cf. Korten's *The Great Turning* (Berrett-Koehler, 2007).

people on the tracks in the first place? What can be done about *that?* More broadly, how did the system and the city get built so that the tracks are so accessible to random people or children? More broadly still, might we imagine cities that do not need massive transportation infrastructures in the first place? After all, there is little *intrinsic* value in transport *per se*: it is just a means of getting places we need to go. So you want a *real* Trolley Puzzle? How about this: *Why do we build cities that so insistently subordinate life to infrastructure?* Or, more constructively: How can we design cities that are different?

— Another good candidate for a *real* Trolley Problem: why are there so few trolleys any more? That one has a very interesting answer, too – but here I'll leave it as one of those proverbial exercises for the reader.

17. The shift. So: disrupting human supremacism; systematically "looking upstream" to re-imagine the making of the everyday world; slowing down today's equivalent of the *Titanic* and taking the outcry of the lookouts seriously – what do you think? Do not prospects and projects like these require deeper breaths and demand real risk-taking, some venturing, in both thought and action, in part precisely *as philosophers?* Correspondingly we may recognize, maybe even with a shock, what spectacular imaginative limits we learn to place on ourselves as a condition of being professionals, or exegetes of a basically professionalized history, and so thoroughly and for so long that in the end we don't even notice. But no more "gasping for air", then… not for you, not for me, not for our professional or might-be compatriots so often tempted to resign themselves to such small-bore or oxygen-starved expectations for Philosophy. Or for students who might not even enter the field in the first place for lack of air. What would a Philosophy *Un*limited look like? *What if Philosophy's great task today is instead to open up a new sense of possibility?*

18. Now to flash a fuller hand. Our opening question became: *What can free-spirited, inventive, and full-hearted young philosophers (like…you?) do at this moment in the life of the culture?* With prospects and projects like these we can begin to glimpse an answer. I now want to briefly sketch some more – to flash, as it were, a little fuller a hand. Of course, all I can offer here are the briefest outlines of sketches – but enough, I hope, to suggest the *possibility* of some seriously spacious thinking across a range of topics…

— *De*-construction reveals how deeply the social, ethical, even ontological conditions that we so often take as "given" are in fact social and historical constructions. The "skin-encapsulated ego", for one. Or "nature". Or Gender roles. The very idea of race. But too often the profound promise of this critical move is immediately betrayed (I say) by the thinnest of

follow-ups. Of course, critique is safer – you don't propose anything forward-looking – and more, well, "academic". But *what becomes possible when we give the same attention and energy to the re-construction of genuinely better alternatives in the new space of freedom that broadly deconstructive moves create?*

— Is Egoism – a prime bugbear of ethical philosophers today – truly a given, a fact of human nature? It's an old debate, of course, but it certainly also can be asked how much of our selfishness (which is by no means the whole story even now, of course) is due instead to the culture's relentless atomization and juvenilization of our lives. And how much is just a passing developmental stage of college-aged young people – paradoxically (or not) also the amusingly unreceptive captive audience for classroom "refutations" of ethical egoism. If so, then *isn't our real challenge not to "refute" egoism but to reconstitute more connected and mature selves and communities… to literally help each other grow up?*

— "Security", as in "Social Security": mustn't it mean more than having the money to scrape by in old age (vital as that also is)? Surely it *should* also mean having a community and family life in which you have a place and a contribution, and in which others take care of you in turn as a matter of course. *How can we reconceive and reconstruct community and sociality to make this possible?*

— Speaking of "security", why do we allow "Homeland Security" to be reduced to airport frisking and universal paranoia? Even progressives speak fearfully of "attacks on our soil", meaning terrorism at home, forgetting how aggressively "our soil" is under intense attack *already*. Organic farming, watershed and wildland preservation, de-automobilizing cities, and again, rebuilding actual communities and community – *there's* Homeland Security for you![7] *What if philosophers thought systematically about how to actually protect and enrich our home-land? deptof HS has a phil division!*

— Threats of terrorism underscore a massively unwelcome unpredictability in life. But do we wish merely for the absence of unpredictability? A futile quest, in any case but even if we could, why settle for so little? *Couldn't we work out some ever-present disruptive possibilities in the direction of delight?*

—The world has immense capacities for self-augmenting change and reorganization. Sometimes the result is a downward spiral: what I call "self-validating reductions", as when animals are more and more efficiently reduced to living meat, so that any other ways of relating to them and any other capacities to honor in them are ever more thoroughly erased…

[7] Cueing Wendell Berry here, in any number of works starting with his classic *The Unsettling of America* (Counterpoint, revised edition 1996). Agree or disagree, another profoundly relevant philosopher (as in philosopher-*farmer-poet*) who is entirely ignored among professional philosophers and even largely among environmental philosophers.

leaving them open to even more reduction (the latest: headless chickens!). On the other hand, approached by an offering or invitation upfront, a creature may come alive in utterly unexpected and also self-augmenting ways – spiraling "upward". *Imagine at the forefront of animal ethics not better-retrofitted ethical theories but open-ended invitations to new forms of larger-than-human companionship, community, collaboration…*

— Many cities today sit on the edge of the rising seas. What to do? Keep raising the dikes and investing in billion-dollar floodgates? Instead, what if we begin to conceive *wonderful* cities basically *in* the water — indeed, cities that are wonderful *because* they are in the water? Imagine adding the waterborne grace of Venice to, say, the sass of New Orleans. Venice, with its canals and gondolas everywhere, its iconic plazas bordering its lagoon, its bridges and floating festivals. Water need not be feared, and not merely be tolerated or neutralized, but can be embraced as essential to a city's beauty, romance, loveliness. — More broadly: *Who says the possibilities of cities are exhausted?*

— Could we even imagine making our exposure to weather extremes an attraction – even a philosophical attraction – rather than merely a threat endlessly to be regretted? The overwhelming forces that now threaten us ecologically might nonetheless also be occasions for – yes – a kind of embrace. Even hurricanes might be occasions for "extreme" experiences — on analogy, maybe, to "extreme" surfing. Imagine some of us, once in our lives, seeking to experience the great whirlwinds in the raw: the lashing of the wind, the skyscraping walls and reams of cloud, the sublime stillness of the cyclonic eye. Not necessarily the hardiest of us, either, but surely the most susceptible, resolutely heading *into* the great storms, hearts glad, just as others flee. Certain kinds of buildings would help, structures that could allow one to feel the full force of the storm: philosophers could write the first drafts of the design programs…[8]

19. No lack of things to do, then, eh? And adventurous and forward things at that. But.. philosophical? — Well, yes, if you have followed, or even are just willing to countenance, my argument so far. Philosophy is "the habit of always seeing alternatives", says our friend William James. Its touchstone (!) is "space and air in the mind". It must address new and sometimes unprecedented urgencies; its imperative is at least sometimes disruptive rather than preservative (but still… "delightism"!? what *is* this!?[9]) ; it must look to the "give behind the givens", not just raising radical questions but bringing forth radical alternatives, taking today's emergencies as opportunities and challenges to serve emer*gence*. And all of this is *possible* – so

[8] On these last two points, a provocative treatment is Anthony Weston's *Mobilizing the Green Imagination* (New Society, 2012).

[9] 'Fraid I'm serious, though. For instance, what might a (more) philosophical equivalent of Improveverywhere look like? Cf. https://improveverywhere.com/

I hope the last section has persuaded you, even if not all the particulars appeal. Indeed, perhaps, *gloriously* possible. Above all, a spirit of possibility, inventiveness, systematic full-hearted engagement with the aim of making a difference. *Space and air, my friends, space and air!*

20. "Experimental philosophy". The research program in professional philosophy that today calls itself "experimental philosophy" uses social-psychological research methods to try to discern "ordinary people's" intuitions about moral responsibility, free will, and other subjects. One project, for example, is to figure out what kind of difference it actually makes to people whether someone dies because you switched the trolley, as opposed to dying because you didn't. What we learn from this isn't so clear: one might have thought that the aim of moral philosophy is to tell us how we *ought* to think about such puzzles, not just how we *do*. More striking, though, is how spectacularly narrow is the ambition of this kind of "experiment". I know, I know: it employs the official methods of the empirical social sciences. But literally, in a broader sense, an "experiment" is a *venture*. To experiment is to *try something* with the idea of making an empirical difference and learning from the consequences. Not long ago I was reading about John Dewey's Laboratory School at the University of Chicago and I found myself laughing from sheer relief to read Dewey refer to that school – the whole school, its pedagogy and curriculum and even its physical structure, ultimately hugely influential (though misapplied) across the world, for, oh, the next century or so – as a philosophical experiment.[10] *There,* I say, is an "experiment" actually worthy of our field! Redesigning, in practice, some essential part of life, trying it out, paying close attention as you go, revising and rethinking all the time, while making the whole process as visible and as open as possible… — So what might be worthy of (or desperately in need of) this kind of "experimental philosophy" today? How to live on a damaged but resilient planet, for one thing. New gender roles – fluidities and composites of what for so long we took as fixed and singular identities. New ways to learn (still!). New kinds of governance (or other) structures that might only be possible in a wired world. For me personally, the prime "experiment" of the last ten years has been planning and beginning to build an agrarian ecovillage in the North Carolina Piedmont… a work in progress…

[10] "If philosophy is ever to be an experimental science, the construction of a school is its starting-point". Letter to Alice Chipman Dewey and the children, 1 Nov. 1894. Cited in Louis Menand's magisterial history of pragmatism, *The Metaphysical Club* (FSG, 2001), p. 320. Cf., of course, Dewey's *School and Society* (University of Chicago Press, 1991).

21. Beyond James. Again, I don't claim that James himself had in mind something as adventurous or enterprising as the vision of Philosophy outlined here. But we live in different times – maybe even times of greater philosophical opportunity. A century and half later, we can sing something like his song, so to say, but at a different pitch and with overtones he couldn't be expected to have anticipated. I also don't claim that James meant "seeing alternatives" as a definition of Philosophy, exactly. Technically I don't care to argue that it's either a necessary or sufficient condition for a kind of thinking to be "philosophical". Clearly other disciplines and thinkers "see alternatives" too, for example, though I suspect that on the whole they don't have *quite* the same potential for free-spirited and systematically inventive re-imagination, the chance for such a *radical* sense for possibility. But maybe. Who needs to be exclusive about it? — There are also other kinds of Philosophy, then and now – remember, according to me there's no essentializing "Philosophy" itself …though I *would* argue that if we revisit the history of philosophy, broadly speaking, with the conception proposed here in mind, new contours would emerge. Plato could be remembered more for his attempt to design a more functional and stable city-state than for his doctrine of recollection, for example, and correspondingly the long track of utopian thinking, right into the present, might be recognized and embraced as a central strand in a re-imagined philosophical canon.

22. Susceptibility. I know, the hand I am flashing also carries with it an almost embarrassing susceptibility, even vulnerability. — But why not? I ask. *Shouldn't* we be susceptible? *Aren't* we vulnerable? Enough with the usual self-entrenchment and elaborately fortified "positions" and the launching of more dreadnoughts onto the philosophical waters… methods that do not even work as effective means of warfare anymore. Come to the work as whole persons! Besides, working on the edge of despair seems to be in the nature of the times. We shouldn't feel it? On the contrary, the urgency drives the engagement. And in fact the ever-readiness of despair gives extra potency, I argue, to the attitudes and moves that we may be able open up *beyond* despair.

23. Possibilism. By the way, I am not recommending optimism. Not that I am a pessimist either – as Winston Churchill famously said in favor of optimism, there isn't much point in anything else. My own self-categorizing is as a *Possibilist*. My working hypothesis is that there are usually far more alternatives than we think in seemingly highly constrained and limited situations. I don't say that there always *must* be so many, or even any, alternatives, but I absolutely *do* say – what is far more practically important – that we can't know unless we look for them. And to look for them requires a whole roster of skills, plus persistence. Possibilism is not the conviction that things *will* change for the better, but the commitment to working out

newly compelling ways in which they *could*. It also makes much of the fact that in a world so full of hidden possibilities, we cannot read any kind of final answers off the world as it *is*. "Realism" itself may be only a well-disguised form of self-fulfilling prophecy or self-validating reduction. Imagination and invitation must come before knowing – or, to put it more precisely and suggestively: imagination and invitation are necessary *ways* of knowing.

24. Pragmatism? I'm reluctant about labels. Once some crude categories come into play, too much of our energies go to resisting and reconstructing them. In Pragmatism's case the drawback is not just that the usual journalistic stereotype – crass and short-sighted thinking – completely misses the point, but also that Pragmatism is not at bottom a *doctrine*, like most other "philosophies", at all. I do embrace it – after all, I've made much of James and Dewey – but do not construe Pragmatism as a system or a set of propositions about the world. It is, again, an *attitude* or mode of bearing – a *habit of seeing*, just as James says. It is the persistent practice of finding or creating or expanding "space and air" in problems and scenes that seem closed-down and all too fixed. It's inventive and re-imaginative. *Re*constructive (a fine Deweyan term!) rather than primarily *de*constructive. Venturesome and *ad*venturesome. It's about starting schools, rebuilding cities, and creating ecovillages… — And by the way, this is *not* "applied" philosophy. There is nothing *a priori* to "apply". The conceptual work is not somehow done or doable before we even turn to "practice": only *in* the "practice" will we find out what "works", even as (yes) our standards for "working" also develop and change. It is *Philosophy itself*. The attitude is only crass if you make it so, and if it seems rather dramatically open-ended, well, so is the state of the world, my friends, especially right now. Which ought to make Pragmatism our philosophy of choice, wouldn't you think?

25. In the end, the largest and most pressing invitation is just this: to make a free-spirited welcome, call it what you will, toward possibility itself – toward the extraordinary moment at which we stand and into the unique imaginative spaces that embracing our moment opens up. Talk about "seeing alternatives"! There are elegant and audacious possibilities not yet even on our maps. You honor Philosophy first and foremost by putting yourself among the ones bringing them forward.