

CHARLES HOMER HASKINS  
PRIZE LECTURE FOR 2017

*A Life of Learning*

Harry G. Frankfurt

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## ON CHARLES HOMER HASKINS

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Charles Homer Haskins (1870–1937), for whom the ACLS lecture series is named, organized the founding of the American Council of Learned Societies in 1919 and served as its first chairman from 1920 to 1926. He received a PhD in history from Johns Hopkins University at the age of 20. Appointed an instructor at the University of Wisconsin, Haskins became a full professor in two years. After 12 years there, he moved to Harvard University, where he served as dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences from 1908 to 1924. At the time of his retirement in 1931, he was Henry Charles Lea Professor of Medieval History. A close advisor to President Woodrow Wilson (whom he had met at Johns Hopkins), Haskins attended the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 as chief of the Division of Western Europe of the American Commission to Negotiate Peace. He served as president of the American Historical Association in 1922, and was a founder and the second president of the Medieval Academy of America in 1926–27.

A great American teacher, Haskins also did much to establish the reputation of American scholarship abroad. His distinction was recognized by honorary degrees from Strasbourg, Padua, Manchester, Paris, Louvain, Caen, Harvard, Wisconsin, and Allegheny College, where in 1883 he had begun his higher education at the age of 13.

## HASKINS PRIZE LECTURERS

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2017	Harry G. Frankfurt
2016	Cynthia Enloe
2015	Wendy Doniger
2014	Bruno Nettl
2013	Robert Alter
2012	Joyce Appleby
2011	Henry Glassie
2010	Nancy Siraisi
2009	William Labov
2008	Theodor Meron
2007	Linda Nochlin
2006	Martin E. Marty
2005	Gerda Lerner
2004	Peter Gay
2003	Peter Brown
2002	Henry A. Millon
2001	Helen Vendler
2000	Geoffrey Hartman
1999	Clifford Geertz
1998	Yi-Fu Tuan
1997	Natalie Zemon Davis
1996	Robert William Fogel
1995	Phyllis Pray Bober
1994	Robert K. Merton
1993	Annemarie Schimmel
1992	Donald W. Meinig
1991	Milton Babbitt
1990	Paul Oskar Kristeller
1989	Judith N. Shklar
1988	John Hope Franklin
1987	Carl E. Schorske
1986	Milton V. Anastos
1985	Lawrence Stone
1984	Mary Rosamond Haas
1983	Maynard Mack

## BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HARRY G. FRANKFURT

Harry G. Frankfurt was a member of the department of philosophy at Princeton University from 1990 to 2002 and is now professor emeritus of philosophy. He taught at Yale University, where he chaired the philosophy department from 1978 to 1987. He also taught at Rockefeller University, State University of New York at Binghamton (now Binghamton University), and Ohio State University. He obtained his BA in 1949 and his PhD in 1954, both from Johns Hopkins University.

Professor Frankfurt is one of the most influential contemporary philosophers, having made major contributions to the study of Descartes and Hume, the philosophy of action, moral psychology and philosophy, and political philosophy. He is best known for elaborating his own view of Hume's compatibilism (the idea that determinism is compatible with human freedom). Using his concept of "higher-order volitions," he developed what are known as "Frankfurt cases" or "Frankfurt counterexamples": thought experiments designed to show the possibility of situations in which a person could not have done other than he/she did, but in which our intuition is to say nonetheless that he/she acted freely.

His 1986 essay "On Bullshit," a philosophical investigation of the concept of bullshit and an analysis of its applications, was published as a book in 2005. It became a surprise bestseller, leading to media appearances including on Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*. In 2006 he authored an analogous book, *On Truth*, which explores society's loss of appreciation for truth. His latest book, published in 2015, is *On Inequality*. Other of his publications include *Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen: The Defense of Reason in Descartes's "Meditations"*; *The Importance of What We Care About*; *Necessity, Volition, and Love*; *Taking Ourselves Seriously and Getting It Right* (edited by Debra Satz); and *The Reasons of Love*, in which he argues that love is the most authoritative form of caring and self-love the purest form of love.

Frankfurt is a past president of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association. He has received fellowships and grants from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, among others. He was a visiting fellow of All Souls College, Oxford University, and is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences as well as a member of Phi Beta Kappa.

## INTRODUCTION

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Professor Harry G. Frankfurt's 2017 Charles Homer Haskins Prize Lecture is the 35th in an annual series named for the first chairman of the American Council of Learned Societies. The Executive Committee of the Delegates of ACLS selects the prize winner and lecturer from the many worthy nominations put forward by our community.

Haskins lecturers are asked "to reflect on a lifetime of work as a scholar, on the motives, the chance determinations, the satisfactions (and the dissatisfactions) of the life of learning; and to explore through one's own life the larger, institutional life of scholarship. We do not wish the speaker to present the products of one's own scholarly research, but rather to share with other scholars the personal process of a particular lifetime of learning."

Professor Frankfurt's intellectual pursuits as a moral philosopher make him ideally suited for this kind of reflection and examination. As the letter nominating him for this honor noted, he is "largely to be credited with the emergence of serious philosophical work on the topic that is so often jokingly attributed to philosophers—the meaning of life." It goes on to praise his wide-ranging work on moral agency, care, and love as "among the most deeply humane philosophical works, concerned with how things matter to beings like us."<sup>1</sup>

In many ways, Professor Frankfurt's curriculum vitae includes a roster of achievements that is altogether typical of an eminent scholar: he has been awarded fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities and is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; he has published scholarly monographs with Cambridge, Stanford, and Princeton University Presses and articles in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, the *Journal of Philosophy*, and other top journals in the field; he has delivered prestigious lectures, including the Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Stanford University and the John Dewey Lectures at the American Philosophical Association; and he has been on the faculty of Ohio State University, the State

University of New York, Rockefeller University, Yale University, and, most recently, Princeton University, where he has been professor emeritus of philosophy since 2002.

In other ways, however, his resume includes accolades (and vocabulary) that are exceedingly rare for a serious scholar: his 2005 book *On Bullshit* spent 26 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, where it reached the number one slot, and was translated into more than 25 languages. This book led to his first invitation from Jon Stewart to appear on *The Daily Show*, and his next book, *On Truth*, led to the second. Harry Frankfurt is not just a renowned scholar—a “luminary” in the field, as his nomination letter put it—but, dare one say it, famous!

While Professor Frankfurt’s work has caught the attention of the popular culture in the last dozen years or so, in his field he remains best known for his earlier work on free will and his deep engagement with Descartes, Hume, and other early-modern philosophers. His “Frankfurt counterexamples” are in dialogue with centuries-old philosophical debates about moral agency and moral responsibility. His work on Hume’s compatibilism has inspired a range of contemporary work on the topic. From these questions, Professor Frankfurt turned to some of the deepest elements of human connection: care and love.

Described as “undeniably brilliant,” “resourceful,” and “provocative,” Professor Frankfurt’s work has been lauded also for its “famously lucid, compelling prose,” and for the “density of its ties to other philosophical questions.” A review of his *The Reasons of Love* commented that the book’s “glimpses of meshing gears are deeply satisfying, and they confirm the reader’s sense of a fully wrought system”—in other words, a complex but well-oiled and ingeniously engineered machine that helps us understand the human condition.<sup>2</sup>

Professor Frankfurt’s scholarship has broad implications not only for the field of philosophy but, much more importantly, for humankind. His work helps us understand human introspection, personal relationships and interconnections, and our ability to care about the greater good and act morally. A review of Frankfurt’s collection *The Importance of What We Care About* praised the title

essay's broader implications: "In an age when ideals often appear on the wane, and when it may become increasingly important to care about the environment and the larger world in which we live," the reviewer wrote (in 1990), "perhaps our ideals and what we care about should receive greater philosophical attention; [Frankfurt's work] is an excellent place to begin."<sup>3</sup>

Which brings us back to bullshit. In the past two years, the distinction between truth and honesty, on one hand, and falsehood and misrepresentation of facts and history, on the other, has become vitally important to the health of our democracy. Professor Frankfurt, whose *On Bullshit* was originally published as an essay nearly 30 years ago, possesses the uncommon ability to produce work that is both timely and timeless and that speaks at once to the academy and the broader public. His recent books in particular—*On Bullshit*, *On Truth*, and *On Inequality*—exemplify how deep humanistic inquiry helps to forge the tools that allow us find our way in an intricate world, aids us in understanding ourselves as human beings and as a civilization, and fosters a more democratic society. His life of learning is an example to us all. We are extremely pleased to bring his 2017 Charles Homer Haskins Prize Lecture to a wider audience.

Pauline Yu  
President  
American Council of Learned Societies

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cheshire Calhoun and Amy Ferrer, nomination letter, August 27, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Niko Kolodny, review of *The Reasons of Love*, by Harry G. Frankfurt, *Journal of Philosophy* 103, no. 1 (Jan. 2006): 43–50, accessed 5/9/2017, [www.jstor.org/stable/3655712](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3655712); Clancy W. Martin, review of *On Bullshit*, by Harry G. Frankfurt, *Ethics* 116, no. 2 (Jan. 2006): 416–21, accessed 5/9/2017, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/498546](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/498546).

<sup>3</sup> Carl F. Cranor, review of *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays*, by Harry G. Frankfurt, *Ethics* 100, no. 4 (July 1990): 886–87, accessed 5/9/2017, [www.jstor.org/stable/2381784](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2381784).

HARRY G. FRANKFURT

## *A Life of Learning*

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A life of learning! What is so special about that? Isn't every life a life full of learning? Doesn't each of us—as we *undergo*, and go *continuously through*, our experience, day in and day out—doesn't each of us spend his or her entire life learning one thing after another? Is it really *possible* for any of us to live *without* learning? Many of us, to be sure, do not learn *very well* from the experience which ubiquitously and inescapably fills our lives; most of us certainly do not learn *everything* there is to learn.

I am here this evening to deliver a Haskins Prize Lecture, in virtue of my having been selected by the American Council of Learned Societies to receive its annual honor for having led a somehow *exemplary* “life of learning.” In this context, of course, the learning to which reference is made is not the merely everyday, and more or less inadvertent, learning which pervades the ordinary course of our lives. It is focused rather specifically on a particular domain of human experience; it is deliberate and systematic, rather than casual and shapeless; it is formally defined and mindfully directed; and so it is, or at least it attempts to be, an inquiry which is well-ordered, rather than haphazard and thoughtless.

This is, to be sure, pretty vague. Perhaps that is why I have a bit of trouble grasping why I should be recognized as a person who has led a somehow notable life of learning. To lead a life of learning successfully should result, one would think, in

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Note: A video of Professor Frankfurt delivering the 2017 Charles Homer Haskins Lecture is available in the media collection on the ACLS website, [www.acls.org](http://www.acls.org).

becoming a learned person. Now, I concede that I have read, over the course of my life so far, a fair number of books—or, at least, there are a fair number of books which I have at one time or another *started* to read. Nevertheless, I am by no means *erudite*; and I am far from being what I believe would ordinarily be regarded as a *learned* person. In any case, becoming either “erudite” or “learned” are not goals at which philosophers trained as I have been trained particularly aim.

The word *philosophy* derives etymologically, as I am sure many of you are quite aware, from two Greek words meaning, together, “love of wisdom.” *Now, please do not be alarmed!* I shall not presume here to bore you with an insufferably self-congratulatory narrative concerning how I have devoted my professional life to becoming wise. But I suppose that you will in any case agree, without being offered any special proof, that wisdom and learning—whatever they may be, and however they may actually be related—are two quite *different* things. So, that leaves it still unclear how I, as a philosopher, may reasonably be construed as having undertaken to lead a life of learning. Maybe this is actually part of what explains why—at least, until now—no professional “philosopher,” as strictly understood to preclude subspecialists such as historians of philosophy or political philosophers, has ever been invited to deliver a Haskins Prize Lecture having to do with leading such a life.

But even without pursuing any very deep or penetrating investigation of the matter, it must surely be clear that both wisdom and learning pertain in one way or another to the *intellectual* life; and, also, that a life of learning—whatever it may be—is itself an intellectual endeavor, which is paradigmatically undertaken (at least nowadays) in universities. So, I will tell you something about my own intellectual development and about what I have done with my life in universities.

I was born in 1929, around the end of May. Very shortly thereafter—indeed, essentially, without any notable delay, and perhaps (I really don’t know) by prearrangement—I was adopted. That adoption made me a member of a rather marginally

middle-class Jewish family, in which I was then, and in which I subsequently remained, the only child. My adoptive father was working at the time as a telegrapher in a stockbrokerage office, receiving stock quotations from the New York Stock Exchange by telegraph (this was before the electronic quotation system had been devised) and, also by telegraph, transmitting orders to the floor of the exchange. So, when the stock market crashed a few months later, and trading consequently declined, he lost his job. Soon after that, of course, the Great Depression of the 1930s got under way.

During the years of the Depression, my family managed to get by; but we were always financially insecure. In fact, my father remained more or less continually unemployed for about eight years; and he was—understandably, of course—chronically anxious about money. I believe that he was inclined to regard me as imposing on the family a somewhat adventitious and unnecessary expense, and I recall him frequently complaining to his wife that she was spending too much money on me.

To be sure, his wife (my adoptive mother) was generous with me—perhaps improvidently generous. In any case, she was unmistakably extremely ambitious for me. She herself was a piano teacher, who had earned a diploma for having completed some sort of musical training at Temple University. In addition, her father had been a dedicated scholar, who had published certain narrow but well-received grammatical studies of the Hebrew language (one day, in fact, I discovered one of those publications listed in the catalog of the New York Public Library). In the light of these two elements of my mother's cultural formation, it apparently seemed clear to her where my own future must most appropriately lie: I was to be conscientiously prepared to follow a career either as a concert pianist or as a rabbi.

My mother therefore saw to it that, regardless of the expense, I was extensively trained to qualify for each of these possible outcomes. At first from her, when I was about four years old, and subsequently from other teachers, I learned how to play the piano. Except for about two years when I was in the army, I con-

tinued taking piano lessons for a very long time—at the Peabody Conservatory of Music, here in Baltimore (where I lived with my family from when I was about ten years old until I left home for my military service), and later with private instructors wherever I happened to be living, until I was more than 60 years old! With all of this instruction, and with the associated practice, I did succeed in becoming a moderately accomplished classical pianist; but I never reached the levels of technical proficiency and compelling artistry which would have enabled me adequately to fulfill the musical side of my mother's ambitions for me.

In order to prepare me to realize her *other* fantasy about my future—namely, that I might enter the rabbinate—she sent me, at quite an early age, to Hebrew school. I attended one Hebrew school or another from about the age of six until I graduated from public high school; and, beyond that, I continued formal Jewish studies, albeit rather sketchily, while I was in college.

The simple truth about this particular educational experience is: I *hated* all of it! There were several reasons for that. For one thing, I resented the necessity of going to Hebrew school on several afternoons weekly, after finishing days at my regular public school, when my peers were enjoying athletic and other recreational activities. For another, I disliked the programmatic content to which my Hebrew school hours were largely devoted.

This content consisted fundamentally of two elements. We studied the Hebrew language—its grammar and its vocabulary—focusing especially, of course, on the language of the Old Testament. (At one time, I could actually read the Old Testament books, and even more or less understand what I was reading, in their original language.) The other element of my Hebrew education consisted of class discussions of the stories, and other historical material, in the Hebrew Bible.

The linguistic part of my studies in Hebrew school was a rather mechanical matter (learning vocabulary and rules of grammar). That was, naturally, rather uninspiring; and, as might have been expected, I found it unremittingly boring. On the other hand, the class discussions of the texts could be very stimulating;

but they tended generally to *make me angry*. The stories recounted in the text were often quite interesting, and I was glad enough to hear about them. However, whatever the literal details of those stories happened to be, my teachers almost unvaryingly tried to impress it upon us students that the text directly conveyed, or at least implied, some high-minded moral or religious truth. I found these interpretations both tiresome and aggravatingly implausible. I wanted to stick to the facts; and I had very little patience with any effort to demonstrate that those facts carried with them some tediously edifying moral or religious instruction.

Indeed, I suspect that my early encounter with this variety of elevated hogwash played an important foundational role in cultivating within me a certain suspicion of interpretation altogether; and, by the way, it may have played a comparable role in sensitizing me to the offensive prevalence in our culture of *bullshit*, which led me much later to devote to that phenomenon a *quasi*-scholarly but (I believe) a genuinely philosophical work of analysis and reflection. In any case, that early experience rendered me generally skeptical and, as well, made me alert to the need for stubbornly taking received authority with more than a few grains of salt. Now, the prescribed professional role of a rabbi has two rather distinct aspects. One of these is the pastoral and ceremonial aspect, which is similar to the customary pastoral and ceremonial roles of other clerical practitioners: It consists in conducting weddings, and funerals, and other religious ceremonies, and in being available generally to provide advice, or comfort, or spiritual and religious guidance, as needed by members of a congregation. Doing that sort of thing did not appeal to me *at all*—*not one bit*! I especially found the prospect of devoting any significant portion of my life to pastoral activities of those sorts *utterly uninviting* and, indeed, *repulsive*.

However, I found the other aspect of a rabbi's role very appealing indeed. A rabbi is most fundamentally a presumably well-trained scholar in Jewish law and in Jewish history, who is expected to devote quite a significant segment of his professional life to studying various canonical and academic texts. This scholarly requirement for the rabbinate—to be immersed in conscien-

tious study and reading, with perhaps a little serious teaching on the side—*this* appealed to me greatly. But the pastoral and ceremonial requirement was an insurmountable obstacle. So, the second element of my mother's ambition for me was also destined to remain unfulfilled.

I suppose it is rather plausible to presume that I must somehow have been inspired by the rudimentary scholarly experience to which my Hebrew education exposed me, and that my childhood exposure to the rabbinic ideal created in me some primitive appreciation of how study and deeply focused learning could be recognized as quite natural—and as actually, at times, even satisfying—elements of a normal and good life. Still, for me to be *merely steered in that direction* was far from satisfying my mother's goal for my future life and career.

But, of course, I saved the day (one might perhaps even dare to say that I brought home the *bacon*) by *becoming a professor*. Like rabbis, professors do more or less study constantly, and, moreover, from time to time they may also even teach. Although, to be sure, what they study and teach is generally very remote from ordinary clerical preoccupations. Not close enough to her fantasies, then, for my mother to count such a path as truly a success.

But, a professor of *philosophy*! That had sufficient intellectual and even moral overtones, not to mention social prestige in some circles, to make my choice of a career as a philosopher at least grudgingly acceptable to my mother. Of course, it left my father still uneasily dubious; but that is another matter. Now, the truth is that I had no idea, until I got to college, that there even is such a subject as philosophy. Actually, that is not entirely accurate. While I was still in high school, I came across a Modern Library collection of essays by Bertrand Russell. For reasons which I do not now recall, I bought the book, took it home, and read of it what I could. Russell's intelligence impressed me as imbued with an overwhelmingly stunning dazzle; his literary style struck me as engagingly felicitous and refreshingly translucent; and I found his natural, flowing wit not only generally enjoyable but some-

times altogether hilarious. Except for the last essay in the volume, which was devoted to the definition of number, and which I could not understand at all, I eagerly gobbled everything up. Russell, a philosopher, became my first intellectual hero.

This was my initial encounter with philosophy or with anyone identifiable as a philosopher. It was only when I arrived at college a couple of years later that I learned about other philosophers, and that I came to understand that philosophy is not only a subject, but a full-blown intellectual and academic *discipline*. At Johns Hopkins University, which I attended as an undergraduate and from which I graduated, there was a quite small philosophy department. There I had two particularly forceful philosophy teachers: George Boas and Albert Hammond. Each of these men introduced me in a separate way to philosophy—to specific philosophical topics and ideas, and to distinctively philosophical ways of thinking. Each of them made a profound impression on me; and I believe—although I have only recognized this recently—that I have wanted to model myself as a scholar and teacher upon their examples. The truth is, I think, that in coming to appreciate my *failure*, in the end, to achieve any genuine success in actually becoming recognizably like either of them, it is inescapable for me to regard my professional career as having been, in a most seriously basic way, a failure.

George Boas was a very erudite man, creatively well-read in every area of philosophy as well as in several other subjects, and especially learned both in the history of early modern philosophy and in the general history of ideas. I knew him first, of course, as a lecturer. In that role, he had no equal: he knew his subjects inside and out; he talked about them with great clarity, and with captivating enthusiasm; and he was extremely funny. His lectures were superlatively informative, illuminating, and stimulating; and they were almost invariably very enjoyable. It would have been nearly impossible for an undergraduate to ask for, or to expect, anything better.

Albert Hammond was a professor of a very different sort. He gave the impression of having read quite widely, and of having

thought deeply and rigorously about the philosophical topics in which he was particularly interested. But he wore his learning lightly: from time to time, he revealed intriguing glimpses of it, but it was never especially conspicuous or intrusive. On the other hand, we students were regularly shown the philosophical depth of his thinking; and I, at least, was frequently struck by his sometimes startlingly refreshing and penetrating insight.

He did not come across to us as a particularly erudite scholar, and certainly not as a conspicuously entertaining classroom performer. If one failed or neglected to follow his reasoning with wide-awake alertness, and with a sufficiently appreciative readiness to uncover and to absorb what lay behind his spoken words, it was not at all out of the question to find his lectures rather soporific. All things considered, however, he presented to us an exemplary model of genuinely thoughtful and honest philosophical analysis and inquiry. Those of us who were eager to recognize, and to engage in, authentic philosophical thinking ourselves—to learn how to be truly philosophers—learned it from him. He was a compelling embodiment of the real thing.

I had one other memorable encounter with an inspiring philosophical model. After I completed my undergraduate education at Johns Hopkins, and after having tasted and discarded the various pleasures and temptations of careers in chemistry and in law, I went for graduate study to the philosophy department at Cornell. After extensive deliberation, I had concluded that a career as a philosopher was especially welcoming, in virtue of being less restrictive than any other; it did not tie one down to any particular subject matter, but offered legitimate entry into any domain imaginable: there is philosophy of *science*, of *law*, of *religion*, of *art*, of *history*, of *politics*—of whatever might attract one's interest. So it appealed to *me*, at least in part, because it seemed to me to require a more neutral and spacious commitment than any other specialty.

While I was at Cornell, I had the extraordinary experience of actually meeting and attending a seminar with Ludwig Wittgenstein, who was perhaps the most original and most influ-

ential, as well as the most mysterious, philosopher of the twentieth century. It so happened that the Cornell philosophy faculty included a man, Norman Malcolm, who had been a student of Wittgenstein at Cambridge University and with whom he had become a rather close personal friend. During my second year at Cornell, Wittgenstein had come to Ithaca to stay with the Malcolms while he underwent some sort of medical intervention in an Ithaca hospital. Professor Malcolm arranged for Wittgenstein to meet for an evening of discussion with the philosophy graduate students, and I attended that discussion. I have only an extremely sketchy recollection of the content of the discussion, but I have retained a very powerful impression of the man Wittgenstein himself.

Quite apart from anything he said, however insightful or convincing it may have been, Wittgenstein presented a very remarkable image of a philosophical scholar. His intense commitments to truth, to clarity, and to rigor were overwhelmingly evident as he spoke to us. In his intellectual and moral purity, as in his manifestly unrelenting concentration and devotion to the most elevated ideals of philosophical inquiry, he appeared as a person whom it was not only tempting, but unequivocally irresistible, to characterize as a *saint*. In fact, he was *incandescent*. His entire being glowed with the single-minded purity and depth of his evidently *selfless* dedication. Professors Boas and Hammond, to be sure, also provided examples which I found captivating. But I could, at least with a little effort, imagine modeling myself successfully after *them*. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, was altogether out of my league. In him, I saw someone to whom I could not imagine myself becoming even remotely alike. This was not, of course, a matter simply of intellectual capacity. I could readily concede that Wittgenstein's philosophical abilities were very far superior to my own. But what made him a model commandingly out of my reach was something quite different, and more compellingly impressive. It was his moral character as a scholar, and his practically religious devotion to his intellectual work.

In any event, Wittgenstein, along with Professors Boas and Hammond, provided me with some appreciation of what it

meant to be truly a philosopher. The truth is, however, that my more general understanding of the highest ideals of intellectual life was formed by my wider undergraduate experience at Johns Hopkins. It has been many years since I was an undergraduate at Hopkins, and I cannot say how the place may have changed since that time. But for me, in my day, Johns Hopkins provided an enduring and captivating exemplar of the highest moral conception of an academic institution and of the scholarly life.

The members of the university did not construe themselves as dedicated to social or to political reform. Many of them were indeed engaged in worthy causes of those sorts. But their most fundamental and primary commitment, as well as the most fundamental and primary commitment of their university, was to advance the boundaries of human knowledge and understanding, and to combat all versions of intellectual ignorance, obfuscation, and prejudice. Hopkins was, to be sure, an objectively great university, with quite a number of highly gifted and internationally acclaimed scholars on its faculty. But for me it was most particularly and most influentially an embodiment of the highest ideals of pedagogy and of scholarship. It formed my own indelible and indispensable conception of what a university is most essentially supposed to be.

My first quasi-professional philosophical attentions, which emerged during the post-graduate school years that I spent back at Hopkins, were addressed to the philosophy of Descartes. Descartes was preoccupied with an ambitious effort to establish the unshakeable and productive foundations of knowledge. He longed to discover *absolute certainty*, and to immunize himself from doubt. I harbored as a young man a similar ambition, so I was naturally attracted to his work. In addition, he wrote very clearly, and his most important books were encouragingly short. All of this made studying his philosophical ideas exceptionally attractive to me, and I chose his thought as my first object of extensive scholarly investigation. The result of these studies was my first book, entitled *Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen: Descartes's Defense of Reason in his Meditations* (1970).

Not long after completing my work on Descartes, I outgrew my early interest in the basic epistemological problems with which he had been concerned. Since that time, I have tried to deal exclusively with issues which have struck me as being unmistakably of centrally *personal* or of general *human interest*. Now, I was trained, as a student, to understand and to value the standards and the requirements of so-called *analytic* philosophy. Accordingly, I have attempted to deal with those issues of central human interest, always with the greatest care for precision and clarity of expression, and with particular attention to the necessity of being conscientiously *rigorous* in the development of my concepts and my arguments. I have tended to avoid being much concerned with abstractly formal approaches to philosophy, or with elaborately technical developments in the field. As a matter of fact, my concern has been mostly to *understand myself*, and to illuminate *my own encounter with* and *my own experience of life*. So, I have been rather exclusively *personal* in my interests and in my approach. My guide has been the Delphic oracle's dictum that the essence of philosophy is to "know thyself."

Most of my more mature work has been in the areas of moral psychology and the philosophy of action. I don't remember *exactly* how I became involved in those areas, but I do recall one pertinent incident. Some time after I finished writing my rather scholarly and somewhat technical book on Descartes's theory of knowledge, and, more particularly, on his defense of reason, I was one day more or less idly ruminating, in my office at Rockefeller University, about the *free-will* problem; and, most especially, I was turning over in my mind a certain familiar maxim, which was supposed to convey the impossibility of there actually being such a thing as freedom of the will. The maxim states: "A person may be able to *do what he wants*, but he cannot *want what he wants*."

It suddenly struck me, as an idea coming entirely out of the blue, that this maxim—at least when understood in a certain rather natural way—is *false*. After all, we often *want to be doing* just what *we are in fact actually doing*. Similarly, I thought, it is

surely possible that a person wants to desire what he is in fact actually desiring. And it is also possible, of course, that a person *does not want* that desire—that he does not want to want what he finds that in fact he *does actually* want.

This unexpected brainstorm led me to write an essay developing it, entitled “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person” (1971); and a bit later it led me to produce another essay, in which I promulgated the idea that, in order to be morally responsible, an agent need not actually have some alternative to acting as he does. What fulsome moral responsibility *does* require, I maintained, is just that the action which the agent performs must be an action which he not only *has a desire* to perform (which is always the case with actions that are voluntary), but also desires more or less *fully* and *wholeheartedly* to perform—that what he does be something, in other words, which he *really* wants to do. To put the matter somewhat differently, what counts is not so much whether a person originates, or is ultimately the originating *cause*, of his desires. It is whether or not the person *takes responsibility for*—that is, whether or not he fully identifies with, and thus makes truly his own—the desires which somehow or other have come to belong to him. He not only performs his action voluntarily—that is, not only does he perform it because he wants to perform it; it is also the case that his desire to perform that action is a desire by which he wants to be moved to act: *he wants to want* to perform that action.

This focused my attention on the character, and the structure, and the various roles in human life, of desire and of will. It led me to investigate their complexities, the possibilities for conflict within that structure, and the significance of inner coherence and harmony. I have been influenced in these investigations not so much by conventional philosophical discussions; I have paid closer attention to *my own* pertinent experience than to the writings of others.

I have been unable to keep up with the rather extensive scholarly literature in which discussion of my essays in moral psychology, and in the theory of action, has been carried on; and

I have on the whole refrained from responding to the often formidably complex and intricately demanding *objections* to my views which that literature has presented. The rather arrogantly stubborn fact is, I confess, that I am pretty sure my views are *correct*; and I am confident that their correctness will ultimately be generally acknowledged, without any further assistance from me. If they are actually *incorrect*, on the other hand, that too will in time become entirely clear, regardless of what more I might say.

I have also tended to pay rather little conscientious attention to developments during the last half-century or so within the analytical school of philosophy to which I generally subscribe, because they have often seemed to me to be too distant from familiar concepts of common sense, and of common experience, to be of any particularly immediate human relevance. To be sure, I know I may often have been quite wrong about this. But even mathematical logic—in the elementary regions of which I was, at one time, somewhat decently competent—has appeared to me to be philosophically more barren than many had hoped and than I myself had been led to expect. The claim is sometimes made that progress in mathematical logic has led to the construction of powerful new instruments for the clarification and resolution of philosophical difficulties. However, I do not actually know of any such instruments. Bertrand Russell's so-called theory of definite descriptions is, no doubt, effective in untangling certain problems of reference; and the first-order and second-order propositional calculi do provide occasionally useful frameworks for articulating intricate ideas unambiguously. However, it seems to me that the contribution which these resources can make to important philosophical understanding—at least in my particular areas of interest—is at best marginal.

Much of the course of philosophy in recent years has been governed by immanent developments. I mean that it has been responsive to influences which have arisen out of the results of previous philosophical inquiry. Some of these developments have been of notable, or even of historic, philosophical importance. In the central areas of metaphysics and epistemology, the most substantial influences have been generated by the contribu-

tions of Willard Quine, Donald Davidson, and David Lewis, and by the ground-breaking innovations of Saul Kripke. The impacts of various sorts of linguistic philosophy—from the commonsense analyses developed by G. E. Moore, to the “ordinary language” approach followed by certain Wittgensteinians—have been quite pervasive and noteworthy.

A notable feature of recent philosophical history has been the efflorescence of creative activity, among analytic philosophers like myself, in studies of the history of philosophy; and, I suppose even more conspicuously, in *moral philosophy* and in *political theory*. The work of John Rawls has given rise to an impressive secondary literature of its own, as well as to the establishment and success of at least one prestigious scholarly journal, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*.

I had at one time hoped to make significant contributions to issues of political and social theory. I wanted to develop a sophisticated understanding of what is going on, and of what we are up to in our social lives. In fact, however, my activity in that area of philosophical investigation has been limited primarily to some small work criticizing the widespread notion that economic equality is an authentic moral ideal. I argued that a concern with equality tends to encourage people to worry about how their lives compare with the lives of others; and, in this way, it diverts them from attending to what they themselves truly need in order to satisfy their own peculiar capacities and interests, and in order to make their own lives good. I continue to believe that this is a valid and valuable point; but my critique of the notion that economic equality is a genuine moral ideal, and my associated claim that a far more morally pertinent social ideal is the amelioration of *poverty*, has not attracted much support. In fact, one prominent legal theorist at Yale, whom at one time I deemed a good friend, told me—right to my face—that he considered my view on this matter to be “despicable.” I continue to hope that I will one day be able to accomplish something creative and worthwhile in political or social philosophy. As of the present, however, I have not really found either the boldness or the inspiration to attempt, on any large scale, to do so. Much else of what has been going on in

philosophy, however, has not been what I have called “immanent development”; rather, it has been in the mode of responses to developments in other areas of thought. Certain philosophers have paid a great deal of attention, for instance, to what has been going on in the neurosciences. Much of this particular philosophical activity has been concerned with efforts to illuminate the complexities and mysteries of the mind-body problem, by trying to figure out how mental functioning is actually related to thinking—that is, just how consciousness and thought are dependent upon, or even, perhaps, how they may be identical with, the physical functioning of our brains and nervous systems. But some of the philosophical activity related to the pertinent scientific research has been concerned with epistemological problems, and some of it even with ethics.

At one time, I believed that this approach to certain ancient philosophical puzzles was likely to be exceptionally fruitful. In fact, I used to say that any contemporary philosopher who remained ignorant of what is going on in the neurosciences would be disgracefully like a philosopher in the seventeenth century who had no idea of what was happening then in the new physics.

I now think that this was a rather blind exaggeration. Some of the neuroscientific material is indeed fascinating. But it is very unclear whether any substantial philosophical progress has yet been built upon it, or even whether any has been fruitfully and convincingly *promised* by it. And anyhow, the comparison with seventeenth-century physics now strikes me as shallow and misconceived.

Physics in the seventeenth century was not philosophically important merely because it provided valuable *new information*, as the neurosciences have certainly done and as they continue to do. It was philosophically important because it also generated a *new conceptual repertoire*, and because—in the making use of that new information and those new concepts—it offered a new way of seeing the world. Perhaps I have been missing something, but I do not believe that the neurosciences have in fact fashioned, or have even been moving in the direction of fashioning, either

any comprehensive set of new fundamental concepts or any especially innovative perspective on the nature of the world or of human experience. The emergence during the twentieth century of computers and of computer science has evoked among philosophers a response somewhat parallel to their response to developments in neurophysiology. Apart from supposing that our mental activity is connected in some still unknown but philosophically important manner with the brain and the nervous system, many thinkers have found it plausible to suppose that our mental activities can best be understood as analogous to the activities of a computer. This presumptively powerful leading “insight” has led to a considerable flurry of interest in the design of “artificial intelligence” (A.I.), motivated by the conviction that a successful A.I. design would provide an illuminating model of how our own human minds actually work. The artificial intelligence project has had some genuine success, I believe, in dealing with such matters as voice (and even face) recognition, and in robotics. But nothing of lasting *philosophical* significance has as yet, so far as I am aware, emerged from the field.

In any case, my own efforts to become sophisticated in the pertinent scientific disciplines have been quite meager, rather intermittent, and wholly unproductive. I suppose that I am still under the influence of the classic analytic and positivistic dogma that philosophy is properly concerned exclusively with *conceptual analysis*, and that for this analysis no special knowledge of empirical science is necessary. As a *deliberate* matter, I reject this dogma. I do believe, however, that I am still gripped by it and that I am now too old—and too deficient in courage—to grow out of its hold on me.

Above, I mentioned seventeenth-century physics. I suppose I should say at least something about the relationship between physics and philosophy during the period of my professional career. Einstein and Bohr, not to mention a number of others, have certainly made enormous changes in how science understands the world; and they certainly did not do so merely by providing us with startling new information. Of course, they

did do that. But far more importantly, they also brought about fundamental changes in the conceptual scheme with which physics proposes to comprehend and to articulate the nature of things.

Some philosophers have boldly confronted these changes, and have attempted to develop productive philosophical responses to them. I am afraid that I can make no judgment concerning the success, or even the general philosophical pertinence, of these attempts. Indeed, I cannot even describe them, because I am, shamefully, simply too ignorant both of the underlying natural phenomena and of the scientific theories that have been designed to focus on them. Here again, a deficiency of courage has stood in the way of my conscientiously undertaking to repair my ignorance and thus to equip myself for a competent exploration of a philosophically very inviting domain of thought.

So . . . far from being particularly learned in the discipline of philosophy, or in any other discipline, I am practically an ignoramus. Many of the great works of philosophy itself are among those books to which I referred earlier as texts which I had once *started* to read but had never finished. I have given you, I confess, an embarrassing account of what I don't know, as well as of what I am unable or unwilling to learn. I suppose that it is now about time for me to say a little something about what I have at least *attempted* to learn—about what constitutes, so far as it has gone, *my* life of learning.

My work on the problem of freedom of the will, and on issues connected with moral responsibility, led me in time to concern myself with the elucidation of certain concepts which I believe philosophers have generally tended to overlook or to neglect, but which I regard as central to the articulation of what is especially significant, as well as severely problematic, in human life. In particular, I have focused my attention on two closely related concepts: first, the concept of what a person *cares about*—in other words, the notion of what a person takes for himself, or for herself, as an authoritatively guiding ambition or goal, or ideal, or as a worthy constraint; and then, second, the concept of love—not particularly the idea either of romantic or of parental love,

but the idea of any mode of intimate concern or attachment based upon either a recognition or an attribution of essentially inherent, and thus, unconditional, value.

Accordingly, while I have generally avoided or neglected the task of becoming learned, I *have* been busy—at least, now and then—with other things. These are not just things that appear on some formal list of problems and puzzlements about which philosophers are professionally instructed and to which they are expected to devote their attentions. They are matters with which I myself am concerned personally. What I care about, and what I love, are critically important and chronically problematic aspects of my life—and, I believe, they are similarly important and problematic aspects of the lives of others as well. My own most compelling philosophical endeavor, then, has been to get as clear as I can about these personal issues.

In the end, then, what I have basically been trying to learn about and to understand is *myself*. Insofar as I might properly be supposed to have led a life of learning, it is certainly not in virtue of there being something which I have successfully learned. I have really not done that. But perhaps it might properly be said that I have, at least, *tried* to learn something about myself—about the geography and the structure of my inner life and of how it bears upon my life as an active creature—and about the meanings of concepts which attempt to grasp what I take to be the heart of my experience, not merely as a biologically defined human being but as a *person*. It may be that philosophy is, after all, the love of wisdom. Perhaps it is devoted, at bottom, then, to following the advice which I cited earlier, advice which the Delphic oracle provided for those who wish to become wise. The oracle said: “Know thyself.” In any event, that is what my life as a philosopher has essentially been.

That’s what *my life of learning* has been all about. There, you have it!