Reintroducing Philosophy: Thinking as the Gathering of Civilization

According to contemporary, Islamicate and ancient sources

Anthony F. Shaker

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Shaker demonstrates a profound erudition in different philosophical traditions, ancient and recent, Western and Eastern. I particularly admire his insights into Islamic philosophy, or Ḥikma, and his precise grasp of the doctrines of Qūnawī and Mullā Ṣadrā, pivotal for this tradition. Delving deep into the history of different branches of Islamic thought, he reveals the paradigmatic role which the Islamicate civilization played in relation to western Europe, which can justly be described as both its heir and antagonist. Another merit of Shaker's book is its eloquent style and colourful language which makes reading it a highly enjoyable experience for specialist and non-specialist readers alike.

Dr. Janis Esots
Institute of Ismaili Studies, UK & University of Latvia

Anthony Shaker's book is an ambitious attempt to show the contemporary social and political relevance of ancient Greek, Islamic, and modern German philosophy. Addressing global concerns with a view to the timeless relevance of the classics of world philosophy, Shaker is not content with an exercise in the historiography of philosophy or comparative philosophy but aims to draw from his adopted traditions to develop something novel that is capable of addressing problems endemic to our time. At the same time, his conviction is that the capacity for renewal in the three philosophical traditions can only be actualised by thinking anew, and thereby making our own, the problems, and the constitutive insights that lie at their roots.

Prof. Jari Kaukua
Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

In many ways, "Reintroducing Philosophy" is a postcolonial work that moves far beyond the theoretical confines of academic post-colonialism. Drawing on his knowledge of the Chinese, Indian, Greek, Islamicate, and modern German traditions of philosophy, Shaker's bold and creative work is a meditation of sorts on what philosophy should look like in a post-Western world...

Prof. Atif Khalil
University of Lethbridge, Canada

Shaker sees, like many others, the closure of an era of global Western dominance. But while we normally discuss that in terms of politics and economics, he is looking at its ramifications for philosophy and the 'decolonization' of knowledge. Clearly, though, the sheer depth and breadth of the author's philosophical knowledge allows him to imagine these in a much deeper, positive sense than perhaps the comparatively more shallow, reactive sense in which they are usually discussed...For the 'neo-traditionalists', this book challenges their fixation on the past by directing focus on the post-Western future...backed by formidable scholarship.

Prof. Edward R. Moad
Department of Humanities, Qatar University, Qatar

Anthony Shaker provides interesting arguments about the treasure of 'human inheritance', which is not to be found in the physical world, since this vanishes in time...Academics of all faiths and none will find this a thought-provoking text to contemplate.

Dr. Charles Morris Lansley FLS
Author of Darwin's Debt to the Romantics

Stressing the responsibility of the thinkers/philosophers in the post-Western World, Shaker seeks ways of introducing a thinking proper to philosophy, away from what he calls the "tribal ideologies" of our age...His tour de force of the history of philosophy from Ancient Greece to the Islamicate and Western worlds rests on an objection to Western-centric history-telling. But if he is correct in his assessment of modern positivism and reductionism and their truncation of philosophy in the name of science, how is humanity to return to its "natural course of history", as no serious thinking about existence can miss its relation to God?

Dr. Tuncay Başoğlu
Turkiye Diyanet Foundation, Centre for Islamic Studies, Turkey

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Acknowledgments

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I cannot express the joy I felt finally meeting the bright graduate students at ISAM in Istanbul, who patiently received and debated the ideas I presented. *Asitane*, the Farsi name of that magnificent city, means "threshold" and not just a gateway from one continent to another. These young people alerted me to a hope, apparently still clinging foolishly on, that new thresholds are possible for our troubled humanity. Such a hope finds its own threshold maybe once in a generation. It was palpable at that venue.

I wish to thank Mr. Argiris Legatos, the publishers and all the staff at Vernon Press. Finally, no words can describe the depth of gratitude I feel toward my wife, Françoise Deschênes, for her sensible advice and constancy.

Preface

The tectonic shifts witnessed in the international "order" during the last decade or so offer a unique opportunity to look beyond the antiquated hierarchy of nations of the last century-and-a-half, all told, and the "Western"-centric myths that have sustained it.

This is how I had planned to begin the preface, before a pandemic abruptly changed our world. The last straw that broke the camel's back? The storm clouds had been gathering since the Second World War, that earlier calamity that had disgorged the so-called Postwar order. If, in the interim, Chancellor Angela Merkel had at last found it propitious to vocalize the widespread awareness of this order's demise, one may rest assured that something historic had already been in the offing. *L'ancien régime* was unnatural and unsustainable. The fact is that the unipolar dominance that three core states (England, France and America) have been exercising over the rest of the world, a clear anomaly of history, is well on its way to being one of the shortest imperial enterprises in history. On a historical timescale, it arrived in the last few seconds on the coattails of human civilization and unparalleled breakthroughs at every level in the rest of the world. Yet, as the late Janet L. Abu-Lughod said, "The usual approach is to examine ex post facto the outcome—that is, the economic and political hegemony of the West in modern times—and then to reason backward, to rationalize why this supremacy *had* to be."[1]

Far from explaining the past, reasoning back from a temporal outcome has the intended or unintended effect of quickening the dead weight of the present, like an old magical trick. Abu-Lughod's observation is striking because it shreds the logic behind Western-centric view of history.

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[1] Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony. The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 12.

Specialists in the field of International Studies are already ridding us of that "usual approach", and even lower-level educational institutions have been taking notice. But the correction has not penetrated evenly everywhere. Could it be that the department of philosophy is now so aloof that intellectual realism has barely penetrated its insularity? Neatly managed considerations of "non-Western thought", topicality and dumbing down have certainly not slowed its marginalization next to other departments.

The present book is a study in philosophy, not a study of the politico-historical circumstances under which philosophical debates take place. However, I would like the reader to keep the following circumstantial question clearly in mind: What do the dissolution of "Western" hegemony and the possibility of a return to a more natural course of history signify for humanity's inheritance and civilization?

Although the "West"—a term I shall continue to use for quick reference to a very recent cultural and political group of alliances dominated by three Atlantic powers—now appears little more than a moribund project for world domination, no one can assume that from this point onward a return to that course will be automatic or orderly. The damage to ourselves and to our living environment is considerable, and unlike the hollow virtual world into which humanity is being herded, nothing in life is automatic. Ever in quest of wisdom—as one hopes they still are—philosophers simply have the responsibility, in this post-Western world, to pose old and new questions with an eye to this experience. But they have the privilege of doing it more independently than in the past in relation to our human inheritance, which includes the natural environment that sustains us. I have no desire here to rehash the saga of misery and mayhem brought on by foreign imperial domination. Let us calmly consider, instead, the millennial *civilizing* role that "the pursuit of wisdom"—as philosophy was understood to be in the old learning traditions—has played and that one hopes will be resumed in a decisive manner.

I describe this role as "millennial" for two reasons. One, the conscious pursuit of wisdom is indeed that old; and two, the last fourteen hundred

years, in particular, have seen every new generation pose anew the question of human civilization. This period coincides exactly with the advent of the first truly global, Islamicate civilization, though here again I do not wish to imply that the world is either the product or the oyster of any single branch of humanity.

The pursuit of wisdom brings the question of truth into play in a way that has allowed philosophers to seek *completion* in knowing and being rather than one-sidedly, starting with the early modern period, for "subjectivist" reasons or for the sake of an "objectivist" conception of the ontic world. It is hard to imagine how the question of being could have been avoided, especially on the question of man's being in the world. In Heidegger's understanding of *Dasein*, the existence of man in the world is such that man is in but not *of* the world. *Dasein*, in short, is man's *manner and way of being* (*seiner Art und Weise zu sein*),[2] his mode of being. Heidegger takes this as implying man's *being-already-by* the things in the world that concern him, not his indifference when passing them by casually. One thesis he advances in support of this is that when a statement is "true", it signifies the fact that it is *revelatory* (*Enthüllensein*). The second is that being true is not primary for propositions, if truth is founded on the revelation of being-by (*Enthüllen des Seins-bei*); and the third, that to-be-true qua revelation (*das Wahrsein als Enthüllen*) belongs to the existence of the *Dasein* as such.[3] The fact that a proposition is not originary (*ursprüngliche*), assuming that grounding (*Grund*) stands at all in relation to truth by essence, therefore, implies that the original problem of grounding should not be taken merely as a truth-statement.[4]

The question is, then, in what sense are we to take the completeness of *man*, not just the thinking about him or his every thought? Every tradition

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[2] Martin Heidegger, *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Logik. Band 26. Gesamtausgabe II. Abteilung: Vorlesungen 1923-1944* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2007), 159.

[3] Ibid., 160.

[4] Ibid.

has asked this in one form or another. But we shall take our first cue from one of the Analytic school's most prominent figures, the late Dr. Hao Wang, who has pursued this question to some extent. After all, who is better placed than a member of this school to explain the importance of this question to the "antimetaphysicians" in his camp?

We "moderns" like to think of ourselves as uniquely civilized and therefore entitled to certain privileges. On this logic, rationalism naturally would never allow modern society to descend into new forms of barbarism. But this is pure fiction, and a dangerous one at that. The war in Vietnam and Southeast Asia was prosecuted by some of the most rational technocratic minds, and I have not even mentioned the two *world* wars. Maturing as a young adult in the 1960s and 1970s, thankfully, has allowed me to witness the aspirations of the youthful critics of modernity first-hand and to compare their aborted experience in "freedom" and "liberation" with today's orthodoxies.

Experience is necessary for the judicious exercise of free choice, an especially valuable companion to have in moments of social disarray. It figured prominently—as we shall see—in Aristotle's understanding of wisdom, just as it did in Islamicate philosophy (henceforth, Ḥikma), which saw in experience both the prospect of knowledge and a paradigm for civilized life. But alas, it was wanting in those relatively innocent decades of war, pop music, and chronic impatience for shorter routes to wisdom, whether through drugs or utopian dreams. What young people lacked in experience they made up in spirit. In the end, however, the social glue that once held unstable social institutions together dissolved into a radical form of individualism in the glisten of unprecedented affluence. The loss of England's and France's empires after World War II had just catapulted the United States into the role of foremost superpower. As unfamiliar as this role was to Americans, the idea of "leading" the world invigorated the politicians and a consumer society quickly adjusting to such a role. The United States had been the uncontested entertainment leader for some time, shaping people's minds, socializing their behavior, and instilling very particular views about the world and themselves.

This civilizational outcome is not the handiwork of any single actor, however, as I have argued in *Modernity, Civilization and the Return to History*. And its crushing rollback today has proved that humanity and the world are still too large to be controlled by the most recent arrival on the world stage. Moral arguments aside, the passing of unipolarity presents us with a unique opportunity to approach humanity's inheritance and civilization with as few preconceptions as possible. My main expertise lies in Islamicate, German and Greek philosophy, so I hope that those more knowledgeable in other traditions will ponder the philosophical questions of our age critically *and* in the light of those other traditions.

Although this book is not about the United States or international politics, I find the particular case of "America" irresistible in this preface for a reason similar to that Aldous Huxley discovered through personal experience. After pining for a job as a Hollywood screenwriter and a brief sojourn in Chicago before that, it dawned on him that "America" was a "grotesquely garbled account of our civilization".[5] From Hollywood, he presciently and grimly wrote, "I dread the inevitable acceleration of American world domination which will be the result of it all [...]. We shall all be colonized; Europe will no longer be Europe."[6] By "colonization" he was obviously referring to something akin to a cultural infestation: America appeared to him as the future of Europe. Like other intellectuals, he saw the unsavory aspects of contemporary life through the lens of "America" and its perverse wedding of "wild hedonism" and "Puritanism". In Chicago, shortly after the First World War, he wrote, "The thing which is happening is a revaluation of values, a radical alteration (for the worse) of established standards [...]. This falsification of the standard of values is a product, in our modern world, of democracy, and has gone furthest in

[5] Nicholas Murray, *Aldous Huxley. An English Intellectual* (London: Abacus, 2003), 184.

[6] Ibid., 107.

America."[7] Huxley did not entertain authoritarian ideas; on the contrary, it was the yawning gulf between what people aspired to in a "democracy" and what they actually built that frightened him.

Never beholden to any fixed tradition to begin with, American society by the 1960s was already in the advanced stages of social breakdown, its cities burning in race riots or simply decaying. Yet, the mentality then was like that of an adolescent suddenly discovering bodily agility and the "far out" things one could *do* with it after a long and frustrating childhood. Anyone who listens to the music that rang around the world in those years will immediately be struck by its energy. Every lyrics, sound and color summoned youth to get on with the *doing* instead of just lamenting the inequities of the present. And how young people yearned *to do* things! At their lead was a whole new crop of student and community leaders and educationists all poised to unknot a tantalizingly near future. Many of them aspired to cultural, not just political and institutional, "change"—a hugely popular word. While few of them fathomed the future they were conjuring up, even the mainstream—especially the large record companies and the high-tech sector—thought it marvelously exciting.

Still, the manner in which educated young people, especially, questioned things impelled them to *action*. Posing questions is not always a harmless mental exercise, or exclusively about a truth that must be discovered "out there", as even a scientist investigating natural phenomena will concede. *How* one formulates questions and thoughts can have great bearing on human relations. Most of us understand, of course, that the power of a mental image cannot bend a spoon; yet, the beliefs and ideas we hold do inspire actions that have the potential to mold human life. The expression of ideas affects our dealings with each other in countless ways. It can make the difference between cooperation and breakdown in interstate, as well as interpersonal, relations.

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[7] Ibid.

Classical social scientists tell us that ideas can even crystallize into powerful, transforming forces. Propaganda techniques and the advertising industry, which predate WW II, attest to the power of suggestion and certainly to its profitability. But do the social sciences constitute "wisdom" just because they possess this knowledge? Do astronomers with their Hubble telescopes? In what sense does wisdom suffuse the soul with things "higher" and "nobler" than the worldliness of selling and buying?

Earning a living is the most natural thing in the world, but what is one to do when the lure of worldliness is great but wisdom dictates caution? Few lived situations are as dramatic as this and, most of the time, living them—as opposed to just analyzing them—can make all the difference. But picture a person who is able to grasp the gist of this moral dilemma in an instant, and another who must cogitate lengthily about it before acting. In this book, unfortunately, we are the second person. Yet, what will interest us is not, so to speak, the moral puzzle represented by this hypothetical example, but that the same dilemma should yield two types of understanding and still arrive at the same conclusion or comparable ones. It may well be a case of the same person facing the same dilemma at different stages of his or her life, only this person perhaps has become wiser—or more self-interested.

Clearly, there are intervening factors. I do not believe that philosophy is in the business of investigating them. Its task is more basic than this. While not every human being may be up to it, learned or not, how is one expected to choose with no conscious or guiding purpose? Without a philosophical grounding, the informed reflection to which all of us ought to aspire is liable to travel in circles. I believe, however, that much of contemporary philosophy is labyrinthine and fatally incomprehensible, certainly to the untrained eye, a situation that seems more congenial to logicians with interests in artificial intelligence than to the educated person, to whom certain strains of philosophers have also been working hard to endear themselves since at least the 1960s.

Philosophy by tradition was not meant to be primarily a problem-solving enterprise with only specialized interests to showcase. In the Islamicate

period, it proceeded as a questioning; that is to say, it poses a *suʾāl* (question) or *ṭalab* (request) on the basis of something given beforehand through reason, experience or a higher source. We shall question Heidegger on a similar issue, but I have no desire to be seen either as a Heideggerian or as the follower of anyone else among our contemporaries. Few academics who debate his work take an interest in much besides the methodological consequences of their own interpretations and nuances. Although part of my objective is to convince the skeptical reader of the undiminished relevance of philosophy to our own times, I—like a growing number of people—also look forward to a more productive dialogue across cultural boundaries than is evident today. I emphasize "productive" because it would plainly be overkill to reconnect with wonderful ideas just to compare notes across "traditions" in the interest of "tolerance". I shall later explain my use of the words "tradition" and "traditional".

How we resume our human journey has become paramount, it seems to me, given the scale of the upheaval and the challenges now before us. Gathering our thoughts for that eventuality would be a significant advance. It would be more productive, in my view, than rummaging ceaselessly through what contemporary philosophers argue, self-containedly, about logic, subjectivity, objectivity and myriad other "problems". In philosophical terms, being and knowing were not explored exclusively through what is *other* than man. This particular "other" is how traditional philosophy described the material being called man when he chooses worldliness as his abode. Man relates to the seen world as he does his body, but this has never *defined* our humanity by tradition. By the same token, a voice that speaks only on behalf of philosophy as a *disciplinary* body does not necessarily speak on behalf of man. It may be speaking on behalf of man's *other*, even if its focus is plainly on something called "man". That this voice, too, consists of man speaking to himself by other means will not ensure the health of our discipline. The same world that the scientist must analytically break down, that the consumer passively consumes, and that philosophy must comprehend is no longer the same when measured by these methods of approach.

We shall explore this problem from various angles, and why the voice that *questions* cannot be the literal voice by which we go about our daily routine. The rule still holds that nothing is generated from its own matter. All the romantic, self-adoring illusions that have been telling us differently about the workings of the world are partly responsible, so far as ideas can be, for placing *our world* in its present quandary. They are no longer needed from this point onward.

Anthony F. Shaker
May 2020

The leaf of this tree, that from the East has been entrusted to my garden, gives a secret meaning to savour as it gladdens those who know.

Is it One living being that divides itself within itself? Is it two that have chosen each other so as to be seen as One?

To answer such questions I have discovered the correct sense: do you not feel that in my songs I am both double and One?

– Johann Wolfgäng von Goethe
"Gingko Biloba" [1]

[1] Goethe, *West-Eastern Divan*, trans. Eric Ormsby (London: Gingko, 2019).

Introduction

Wanting to understand a thinker from himself, writes Heidegger, means something distinctly different from the *attempt* to pursue a thinker's questioning through to the *problem-worthiness* of his thought (*die Fragwürdigkeit seines Gedachten*)—namely, to pursue the line of questioning that led to the original problematic (*das Fragwürdige*) that once preoccupied that thinker.[1] Success is improbable in the first case, he says, for how could one claim to understand a thinker "when no thinker has understood himself"? Although the second approach is "rare and the hardest" of all, the "attempt at thinking", with only the thinker's *thinking* as the source, signals that one's own thinking is already on that path of questioning by which the problematic has been taken up as that unique region where "thinking sojourns"—*als der einzige Aufenthaltsbereich des Denkens übernommen ist*.[2] Every worthwhile questioning opens up a unique region in a manner that allows the thinking parties to enter a community of thinking.

With this, Heidegger was not advocating for intersubjectivism, or claiming further that serious questioning was somehow self-contained in its own questioning. Simply put, thinking is not the exclusive property of the thinker under study, the interpreter or even the object-problematic they both purport to share. I submit this interesting reflection on two approaches—depending on the interpreter's proximity either to the thinker or to the open path of thinking—before we embark on our own inquiry into philosophy, partly in order to alert the reader to a certain incongruity between the philosophies we shall study and what is read or learned about their authors in the classroom. We shall make every effort to think about the

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[1] Martin Heidegger, *Was heisst Denken?* (Tübingen, Germany: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1997), 113.

[2] Ibid.

"problematics" *with* their expositors, and as openly as they did. But openness to what? In what sorts of *things* do philosophers take interest?

In the second chapter, we shall examine this very basic question in some detail. The formulaic answer to it is: *the beingness of things*. The trouble is, first, that there is no consensus that beingness is or should be the central problem of philosophy; and second, that a formulaic answer may lead one to confuse the posing of being as a technical problem with the "openness to being", which openness we shall regard as essential to a philosophic attitude, or worse, to mistake it for an empirical investigation. The uncertainty surrounding thinking's relation to what exists has far-reaching implications. Not all thinking is "open", and empirical scientists try to rectify its shortfalls with evidence and a method for verifying the particular "truths" they seek to unearth.

Consequently, the original question of being has fructified over the centuries into specialized areas of inquiry focusing, for example, on the historical and social dimensions of human existence. Historiographers rely on documents and other *historical* evidence, since no empirical science is concerned with "beingness" in the same way that a philosopher purports to be open to being in the first instance. I do not at all mean to imply that philosophers have had to ignore the positive sciences or the practical side of human existence just to make headway. That would be gratuitous, especially today when practical matters are so much on everyone's mind and thoughtful young people wonder about the practical usefulness of earning a degree, much less debating philosophical ideas. Nevertheless, human beings instinctively use their minds not just to solve immediate practical problems, but also to ponder the consequences of their thinking, "practical" or not.

Anxiety about future consequences did not begin yesterday or uniquely during periods of collective chaos. The difference today perhaps is *eight billion souls*. This is the approximate population of a single mammal species—a primate *sub*species with an unusually long reproductive cycle, at that. Thanks to this demographic explosion in the miniscule space of a few centuries, all things good and bad about human beings seem magnified to

menacing proportions. This is the scale on which the challenges are today faced and relative to which any new *philosophic* thinking has to find its proper place. Calling this thinking "philosophical" would push us back into the embrace of a *discipline* called philosophy before ever having to exercise a thinking open to Being, as philosophers arguably have been seeking to do down the ages. I construe "philosophical", too, as entailing openness, as far as it is possible for a discipline to be open. "Philosophic", on the other hand, stresses openness as an essential condition for purposeful *human* thought, as opposed to being any particular's property.

One need not be a Heideggerian to think in a philosophic vein, for instance, about the last few moments of creation during which our intelligent but strangely self-alienated subspecies has made its grand entrance into being. Heidegger has contributed some of the most penetrating, most significant philosophic insights of our time, many of them seemingly closer to past learning traditions than to his own interpreters. But I do not want to be mistaken for a Heideggerian like the self-styled experts of hermeneutics discussing his work. I have almost omitted all phenomenologists falling under the rubric of empiricism, which I deal with in more general terms. This omission should not be taken as implying that no one there deserves our attention, or that Heidegger's own thinking is free of similar intellectualist strictures. His reflection on the two interpretive approaches above tells us nothing at all about ends. Though occasionally, in his writings, he glimpses the ends to which human beings generally seek to acquire knowledge, this is not his first concern. He vexed the English Analytic current, in particular, whose main complaint centers on the alleged vagueness and confusion of his thinking, perhaps because they shared few of his references, assumptions or objectives.

What, then, is the purpose of knowing anything? To be knowledgeable? For career advancement? To survive? These are legitimate motives but hardly sustainable as ends beyond private life; whereas the question, as it stands, pertains to something other than merely a particular thing. "Anything" in the question indifferently refers to "things" in the relation to

knowing that we are trying to understand. Rhetorically, on the other hand, the question appears to throw doubt on the very act of knowing. Maybe the person has found a good reason to doubt the efficacy of his or her thought, or nothing is worth knowing.

The interrogative we shall derive from our question is: *Why* is it important to have a purpose at all in knowing? Given the thematic scope of this book, it would be useful to begin directly with a preliminary exploration of the purpose of *philosophic* knowing. In other words, not just the knowledge acquired inside a discipline called philosophy. Few philosophers would quibble with the notion that every "path of questioning", including one as large as a discipline, must have a beginning and an end (or purpose) appropriate to it. Aristotle comes readily to mind. However, thinking is complete only when it fulfills the purpose set for it. But what does this necessary closure represented by beginning and end, its two limits, signify for philosophic thinking besides the limits of its identity?

Aristotelian logic was first to make the requirment of closure explicit, for sheer intelligibility, on behalf of "metaphysics" in the thought process. But what is it that makes philosophic thinking so special that it can range the whole of human existence and its history unimpeded by facts or temporal sequences, yet is able to take full cognizance of the rational order of things? This is the range typical of the traditional philosophies. The *being* encountered in the world is already "presented" to us as oneness and multiplicity before an idea crystallizes in our rationalizing mind in the form of a new thought, the same mind that investigates ontic beings. The priority evident in this *pre*-presentation of what is pregiven is purported to hold true for all thinking. By tradition, thinking *about* anything, empirical or otherwise, is not a state of mind whereby a rational, speaking mortal called "man" may simply be said to find his true destiny. "About" technically implies distance and thus movement—to philosophers, specifically the *negative* movement toward human perfection—rather than the closure of a circle in a perfect logical identity. Consequently, about the nature of completion or perfection for man philosophers have been the least indifferent.

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